

THE MIRROR OF THE STATE. POWER, CHIEFDOM,  
AND EXCHANGE IN PIERRE CLASTRES

CLARA MOGNO\*

ABSTRACT

This essay starts with a review of Clastres' first article *Exchange et pouvoir: philosophie de la philosophie indienne*, analyzing both the original version published in *L'Homme* and the version reprinted as the second chapter in *La Société contre l'État*, and aims to show that this text was a milestone in Clastres' work. Second, the article examines the logic of chieftainship and Clastres' relation to structuralism and the Lévi-Straussian model based on exchange. Lastly, a critique of Clastres' conception of power is advanced, investigating in particular his use of the concept of the State and the "epistemological obstacle" that it entails, and by problematizing the Clastrian thesis with respect to the mechanisms of delegation and authorization underlying the modern definition of the State.

**Keywords:** Pierre Clastres, State, Society, Power, Exchange.

Pierre Clastres' *La Société contre l'État*, the collection of texts published in 1974 by Éditions de Minuit, caused an earthquake of sorts on the anthropological scene. As Barbara Glowczewski recalls, the book – and in particular the eponymous eleventh chapter – “caused something of a scandal in the arena of French anthropology by, among other things, calling into question Lévi-Strauss' postulate of war as the effect of failed exchanges”.<sup>1</sup> For Clastres, indeed, war takes on a role that contrasts

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\* EHESS, LIER-FYT. Address for correspondence: clara.mogno@ehess.fr.

Note to the reader: in this article the expression “primitive societies” is employed, and Indigenous peoples are referred to as “Indians” – a definition and designation from which I distance myself, recognizing their profoundly problematic nature, yet which I use because they were chosen by Pierre Clastres in his writings.

<sup>1</sup> GLOWCZEWSKI 2008: 85.

sharply with the interpretation offered by Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, as can be seen in *Archéologie de la violence: la guerre dans les sociétés primitives*:<sup>2</sup> instead of being triggered by disruptions in the commodity flow within a communicative model, war is conceived by Clastres as a positive response to a distinct need inherent in so-called primitive societies. It is through war, it would seem, that primitive societies avert the onset of the unifying and transcendent power of the State (i.e., the One) in order to maintain the dimension of multiplicity, and this idea will inspire, for instance, the considerations of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari regarding nomadology and the function of war machines in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the milestone book by Pierre Clastres, an author who has fascinated and still fascinates scholars and readers for his prose<sup>3</sup> and his captivating theses<sup>4</sup> (that have also been sharply criticized<sup>5</sup>), I will analyze how the author positions himself in relation to structuralist analysis and to exchange as the hermeneutic element *par excellence*. Second, I will examine Clastres' epistemic operation regarding the foundation of a new political anthropology based on a positive and active qualification of the so-called "primitive societies", no longer defined without the State but *against* the State. At the same time, I will emphasize how Clastres does not fully overcome the epistemological obstacle represented by the "State" insofar as he does not analyze the character of legitimacy and authorization, the founding elements of modern State democracy. In order to do so, I will discuss how Clastres considers the organization and functioning of *chefferie*

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<sup>2</sup> First published in the journal *Libre* and then in *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of *Chronique des Indiens Guayaki* is by none other than Paul Auster. Auster came to know Clastres through the article "De l'un sans le multiple", published for the magazine *L'Éphémère*, of which he was an assiduous reader: the text struck the American writer not only for its content and for being an intelligent, provocative and rigorous contribution, but also for its style. It is in fact Clastres' prose that enthuses Auster: it is "impossible not to love this book", he writes, whose prose "seemed to combine a poet's temperament with a philosopher's depth of mind". Auster returned to New York and proposed to do the translation, funded thanks to a grant from the CNRS. He delivered the manuscript to the publisher, the publisher paid him only after insistent requests, but did not publish it. Years passed, and the manuscript of the translation – of which the writer did not have a copy – was lost, and only later found by a collector, who brought it – finally! – back into Auster's hands in 1996. The text then reached the English-speaking public in its translated version 19 years after Clastres' death. See AUSTER 1998: VII.

<sup>4</sup> Several books from conference proceedings have been written about Clastres: ABENSOUR 1987a; ABENSOUR and KUPIEC 2011; CAMPAGNO 2014; DELORME and POUTOT 2020. As far as the dialog with Clastrian theses and their analysis consider also for instance SCOTT 1998, 2009; DARDOT and LAVAL 2020; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 2002, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, TERRAY 1989.

(chieftainship), the object of research to which he devoted himself from the beginning of his intellectual production.

In fact, Clastres' main objective was to contribute to the formulation of a political anthropology through the analysis of the functioning of "chefferie". It is no coincidence that the subtitle of *La Société contre l'État* and the title of the 1980 posthumous collection are *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*: Clastres advocated for a renewed political anthropology that could move beyond economic and Marxist frameworks, particularly those represented by Godelier and Meillassoux, which he critiques in his article "Les marxistes et leur anthropologie".<sup>6</sup> For him, the State cannot be seen merely as an instrument wielded by a dominant class over a subordinate one, because the existence of a relationship of domination indicates that society is already situated in a framework defined by command, obedience, and control, and therefore State. In critiquing Marxist anthropology for its excessive focus on economic factors, Clastres argues for prioritizing the political dimension as the best epistemic lens for comprehending social organizations, and he posits that understanding the genesis of the command relationship is an essential prerequisite for explaining the exploitative dynamics between dominant and dominated classes.<sup>7</sup>

Clastres' critique of Lévi-Strauss' exchange model also seems to play a crucial role in the construction of this new political anthropology. Indeed, the leader of societies against the State is a figure who disrupts exchange, in terms of goods, but also in terms of women, and especially speech. With regard to the political dimension, exchange does not seem to be sufficient to grasp the dimension of power as it is organized in the Amerindian tribes considered by Clastres. In fact, in *Archéologie de la violence: la guerre dans les sociétés primitives*, an article originally published in the journal *Libre* in 1977 and later included in the posthumous collection *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Clastres argued that the structuralist model is incapable of showing and explaining the sociological role of war in primitive societies. This consideration will lead him to assert that "It is not exchange in and of itself that is contradictory to war, but the discourse that reduces the social being of primitive society exclusively to exchange. Primitive society is a space of exchange, and it is also a place of violence: war, on the same level as exchange, belongs to the primitive social being. One cannot, and this

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<sup>6</sup> CLASTRES 1977a.

<sup>7</sup> Clastres criticized the "instrumental" conception of the State in Marxist anthropology as early as 1974: "The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation. Alienation is political before it is economic; power precedes labor; the economic derives from the political; the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes" (CLASTRES 1989: 198).

is what must be established, think of primitive society without thinking, at the same time, of war. For Hobbes, primitive society was war of each against each. Lévi-Strauss' point of view is symmetrical and inverse to that of Hobbes: primitive society is the exchange of each with each. Hobbes left out exchange; Lévi-Strauss leaves out war".<sup>8</sup>

Scholars have proposed various interpretations of Clastres' relationship with structuralism and Lévi-Strauss' exchange theory. Miguel Abensour, for example, emphasizes Clastres' progressive distance from structuralism, noting that a focus on kinship and myth relations fails to capture the essence of primitive society as a distinct form of social institution.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Viveiros de Castro argues that Clastres radicalizes rather than entirely rejecting structuralism,<sup>10</sup> while Sperber positions Clastrian research as aligned with structural anthropology, observing that while Clastres and Lévi-Strauss offer different analyses, their perspectives are fundamentally inverted.<sup>11</sup> What I will show here is that the claim that exchange theory is insufficient for understanding the essence of primitive societies seems to be present *in nuce* from Clastres' very first text, written on the basis of the scientific literature available in 1962 and in the light of chroniclers' accounts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> CLASTRES 1994: 152.

<sup>9</sup> "Certes, sur le terrain de la parenté et des mythes, Clastres salue sans réserve l'originalité et l'importance de l'œuvre de Lévi-Strauss, même si, de privilégier dans son analyse la relation des mythes entre eux, le mythologue évacue ou néglige, selon lui, le lieu de production du mythe, à savoir la société. Bref, ce que Clastres reproche au structuralisme c'est d'avoir, en concentrant son attention sur les mythes et les structures de la parenté, manqué la question de la société. Ou encore d'avoir manqué la société primitive comme forme spécifique de l'institution sociale" (ABENSOIR 1987b: 9).

<sup>10</sup> "Clastres's work is more a radicalization than a rejection of structuralism. The idea of 'cold societies', societies organized in such a way that their empirical historicity is not internalized as a transcendental condition, finds in Clastres a political expression: his primitive societies are Levi-Strauss' cold societies; they are against the State for exactly the same reasons that they are against history. In both cases, incidentally, what they are seeking to conjure keeps threatening to invade them from the outside or erupt from the inside; this was a problem that Clastres, and Levi-Strauss in his own way, never ceased to confront. And if Clastrean war preempts structuralist exchange, it must be emphasized that it does not abolish it. On the contrary, it reinforces (in its prototypical incarnation as 'incest prohibition') its eminent status as the generic vector of hominization. For this reason the prohibition of incest is incapable to account for the singular form of human life that Clastres calls 'primitive society' – which is for him, the true object of anthropology or ethnology, a word that he often prefers to describe his profession" (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO 2010: 13-14).

<sup>11</sup> "Les analyses de Claude Lévi-Strauss et de Pierre Clastres ne sont pas seulement différentes, elles sont inverses: réciprocité contre destruction de la réciprocité; motivations individuelles contre philosophie d'une société; structure sans politique contre politique hors de, et opposée à, la structure; système d'échanges contre système de signes" (SPERBER 1968: 81).

<sup>12</sup> In this connection, Clastres states in an interview with the magazine *Anti-Mythes* released in 1974, "Je ne suis pas structuraliste. Mais ce n'est pas que j'aie quoi que ce soit

The hypocenter of the “Clastrian earthquake” thus seems to have been active in 1962, but it was not until 1974 that this underground energy would see the light of day. To understand this, it may be useful to analyze the structure and material genesis of the book. *La Société contre l'État* consists of eleven chapters, all published previously in the same or slightly different form except the last, from which the book takes its name. The reprinted chapters do not follow the order of their original appearance: the book opens with “Copernicus and the Savages”, first published in 1969 in *Critique*, a journal founded by Georges Bataille, but the earliest text is the second chapter, “Exchange and Power: Philosophy of the Indian Chieftainship”, first published in *L'Homme* in 1962. If we were to reconstruct the book's structure by order of publication, the sequence would be: 1. “Exchange and Power: Philosophy of the Indian Chieftainship” (Chapter 2, 1962); 2. “Independence and Exogamy” (Chapter 3, first published in *L'Homme* in 1963); 3. “The Bow and the Basket” (Chapter 5, first published in *L'Homme* in 1966); 4. “What Makes Indians Laugh” (Chapter 6, first published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1967); 5. “Copernicus and the Savages” (Chapter 1, first published in *Critique* in 1969); 6. “Prophets in the Jungle” (Chapter 8, first published in *Échanges et Communications. Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60<sup>e</sup> anniversaire* in 1970); 7. “Of the One Without the Many” (Chapter 9, first published in *L'Ephémère*, 1972-1973); 8. “Elements of Amerindian Demography” (Chapter 4, first published in *L'Homme* in 1973); 9. “Of Torture in Primitive Societies” (Chapter 10, first published in *L'Homme* in 1973); 10. “The Duty to Speak” (Chapter 7, first published in *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* in 1973); 11. “Society Against the State” (Chapter 11, previously unpublished). As can be seen, *La Société contre l'État* is a book that comes from afar, as it consists almost entirely of articles that had been published elsewhere, and the critical approach to Lévi-Strauss is present from the very beginning.

From the very title of *Exchange et pouvoir: philosophie de la chefferie indienne*,<sup>13</sup> we can see that the topic is the role of the exchange, of power

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contre le structuralisme, c'est que je m'occupe, comme ethnologue, de champs qui ne relèvent pas d'une analyse structurale à mon avis; ceux qui s'occupent de parenté, de mythologie, là apparemment ça marche, le structuralisme, et Lévi-Strauss l'a bien démontré que ce soit quand il a analysé les structures élémentaires de la parenté, ou les mythologiques. Ici je m'occupe, disons, en gros, d'anthropologie politique, la question de la chefferie et du pouvoir, et là j'ai l'impression que ça ne fonctionne pas; ça relève d'un autre type d'analyse” (CLASTRES 2012: 13).

<sup>13</sup> The original article published in *L'Homme* appears in slightly revised form in *La Société contre l'État*. I will refer here to the first version, which is available at [https://www.persee.fr/doc/hom\\_0439-4216\\_1962\\_num\\_2\\_1\\_366449](https://www.persee.fr/doc/hom_0439-4216_1962_num_2_1_366449). Slight though the differences between the versions are, they are nevertheless significant, especially those regarding Clastres' use of

and chieftainship in the “philosophy” (we could even say in the “political philosophy”) of Native peoples who are not organized in State-form. Clastres wrote this article even before he went on a field mission (his first mission started in February 1963).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he could rely only on the then-available scientific literature, as he had not yet been able to do fieldwork. However, in this article, we already see the elements that will be presented later on the basis of material findings during his missions to South America.<sup>15</sup>

Clastres begins by asking why ethnologists have shown such limited interest in the political organization of primitive societies. He argues that because the subject is seen as unproblematic, it can be oversimplified and dismissed with two opposing and contradictory theses, both influenced by an ethnocentric Western perspective. On the one hand, primitive societies are viewed as lacking any power organization because they exist without the state, which seems to serve as a benchmark for assessing political dimensions; on the other hand, these societies are portrayed as despotic and tyrannical, marked by an excess of political power. According to Clastres, we are consequently faced with a paradoxical alternative: either a complete lack of power, or its absolute and excessive exercise. This impasse is shaped

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Bachelard and the passage in which he refers to the impossibility of accumulating surplus from productive activities, as the economy of these populations would be characterized by a scarcity of resources (“En outre la rareté des biens, interdisant l’accumulation de surplus, contribue à renforcer l’absence de réciprocité de leur circulation” (CLASTRES 1962: 61). By deleting this passage, Clastres appears to adjust his original perspective, influenced by the works of Jacques LIZOT (1970) and Marshall SAHLINS (1972). It should be borne in mind that Clastres wrote the preface to the French edition of *Stone Age Economics*.

<sup>14</sup> The first mission, conducted together with Lucien Sebag, was organized by Alfred Métraux. As Clastres recalls in *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, “Alfred Métraux, who took an interest in everything concerning the Indians, was excited by this possibility and offered me something which I could not fully appreciate at the time and which I now realize was an extraordinary opportunity: a chance to study the Guayaki. With the help of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, I arrived in the forest with my colleague S. at the end of February 1963. Yet there had not been anything very dramatic about my preparations for this trip, which I hardly thought of as an ‘expedition’” (CLASTRES 1988: 44-45).

<sup>15</sup> In this connection, Cartry affirms: “Un peu plus d’un an avant son départ chez les Guayaki du Paraguay (c’était je crois dans les derniers mois de l’année 1961 et il ne devait partir qu’en janvier 1963), Pierre Clastres écrit son premier article d’ethnologie intitulé ‘Échange et pouvoir: philosophie de la chefferie indienne’, cette longue étude, un chef-d’œuvre, contenait le programme de sa recherche future” (CARTRY 1976: 37). Clastres himself confirms this: “En effet, au moins dans les textes les plus anciens, parce que, là, après tout, il y a un vocabulaire philosophique; ainsi dans le plus ancien, qui est intitulé ‘Échange et pouvoir: philosophie de la chefferie indienne’; je l’ai écrit en 1962, ça fait un moment; ceci dit, je n’ai pas grand chose à y changer. On ne peut pas m’accuser de changer des idées comme de chemises! Mais à cette époque-là, je n’étais pas sorti de la philo, au sens où j’étais étudiant en philo; je préparais d’assez loin l’agrégation. Et je dois dire que j’étais en effet dans Heidegger” (CLASTRES 2012: 49).



by what Clastres calls an “epistemological obstacle”<sup>16</sup> that hinders the development of a political anthropology that can adequately address the dynamics of power in non-Western societies, a topic that is also explored in “Copernicus and the Savages”, the opening chapter of *La Société contre l'État*.<sup>17</sup> This is the fundamental problem that marks all of Clastres’ work: how can we understand power in societies where there is no State, where there is no relation of coercitive power, and how can we break out of evolutionary schematism and the Western perspective, which defines these societies through absence and lack? Gaston Bachelard, to whom Clastres refers in the original version of this article without explicitly quoting him when he speaks of the “natural attitude”<sup>18</sup> of ethnocentrism and of “epistemological obstacle”, stated in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* that “whenever we look back and see the errors of our past, we discover truth through a real intellectual repentance”, and that “we know *against* previous knowledge, when we destroy knowledge that was badly made and surmount all those obstacles to spiritualisation that lie in the mind itself”.<sup>19</sup> We can thus say that, in establishing a scientific foundation for a new political anthropology, it is essential for Clastres to construct knowledge *against* the state-centric perspective that defines “societies” solely in terms of the presence or absence of the State. To do so, Clastres explores the nature of the chief’s relationship with the group’s members and the functions performed by the leader. In exploring this idea, he paradoxically adheres to the narratives provided by chroniclers and later by ethnologists in his description of the chief, who seemingly lacks any real authority,

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<sup>16</sup> “A méconnaître ainsi la différence entre l’objet et sa mesure, comme si tout type d’institution politique devait être analysé et évalué en fonction du modèle occidental, on procède non seulement à des valorisations évidemment arbitraires, mais on laisse se créer un véritable ‘obstacle épistémologique’ à la constitution d’une anthropologie politique” (CLASTRES 1962: 52).

<sup>17</sup> The indirect reference to Bachelard, deleted from the first version of the first article, returns with this formulation: “Here we have perhaps the main obstacle for classical thought regarding power: it is impossible to think the apolitical without the political, immediate social control without the concept of mediation – in a word, *society without power*. Hopefully, it has been shown that the epistemological obstacle that ‘politicology’ has thus far been unable to overcome lies within the cultural ethnocentrism of Western thought, itself linked to an exotic view of non-Western societies. If ethnographers persist in reflecting on power, starting from the assurance that its true form has been realized in our culture, and if they continue to make this form the measure of all the others, even of their telos, then discursive consistency will be abandoned, and the science will be allowed to degenerate into opinion” (CLASTRES 1989: 21).

<sup>18</sup> “Car ce qui se repère ici, sous une forme plus subtile de se conformer à l’apparence, c’est l’attitude naturelle’ de l’ethnocentrisme, pour qui, en fin de compte, le pouvoir rationnel est une institution exclusivement occidentale” (CLASTRES 1962: 52).

<sup>19</sup> BACHELARD 2002: 24.

except for the chiefs of a few Arawak groups typically organized in castes. The Portuguese colonizers portrayed these populations as “without faith, king, or law”, and Clastres seeks to analyze the figure of the leader to illustrate the possibility of a form of power that does not manifest solely through coercion. As mentioned earlier, his aim is to recognize and ascribe a dimension of politics even in the absence of a clear command-obedience relationship. At the same time, however, he employs the lack of coercive authority as an epistemic lens to define both the political and, subsequently, the scientific horizons he wishes to explore.

In that period, the milestone in the scientific literature on this topic was of course Lowie’s *Social Organization* (1948), in which the leader is described as a peacemaker, obliged to be generous with the members of the tribe, and a good speaker.<sup>20</sup> Clastres defines his generosity as a unilateral relationship of *servitude*: the chief, through his goods, is at the service of the group, whereas in societies where the State exists, it is the dominated who have to pay tribute and be at the service of the dominant. The chief must also be a talented speaker, but in moments of peace, he never seems to be truly attended to and heard by the rest of the group. Oratorical talent is in fact both a prerequisite and a tool of political power, and based on the *Handbook of South American Indians*, Clastres asserts that the chief is required to deliver uplifting and pacifying speeches to the tribe, aimed at preserving internal harmony. However, these speeches are often met with general indifference from the group.<sup>21</sup>

The leader is thus the figure with whom reciprocity is interrupted, and the *chefferie* is the institution of the rupture of the exchange relationship,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See in particular LOWIE 1948: 322-323; 328-337. The other references used by Clastres in this article, on which we will not elaborate, are HUXLEY 1956, LÉVI-STRAUSS 1948, and the *Handbook of South American Indians*. Moreover, Clastres adds to Lowie’s remarks by noting that the chief is the only one in the group that can be polygamous (and that he cannot return the same number of women to the group in exchange).

<sup>21</sup> “No doubt the chief is sometimes a voice preaching in the wilderness: the Toba of the Chaco or the Trumai of the upper Xingu often ignore the discourse of their leader, who thus speaks in an atmosphere of general indifference” (CLASTRES 1989: 31-32).

<sup>22</sup> Clastres will return to this later, when, after his mission in Paraguay, he gave his first radio interview on January 1, 1967, for the program *Sciences et techniques*, hosted by Jean Charbonnier. In this interview, Clastres stated that the chief “receives women from the group but he, obviously, is incapable of ensuring reciprocity, that is to say, of putting an equal quantity of women back into circulation within the group. [...] And when it comes to goods, well, the chief is a man who has to give, meaning that he doesn’t have the right to refuse a request, and you could even say that he’s very often... that he’s subjected to constant plundering by the people in his group, who are under absolutely no obligation to offer him anything, are they? So, what I find interesting on this point is that the sphere of power, or chieftaincy in these societies, appears as the rupture of exchange, doesn’t it? Whereas exchange is the very essence of society... Isn’t it?” (CHARBONNIER and CLASTRES 1967).



which is why the structuralist model is not sufficient and needs additions that can account for the political dimension. The three types of sign (women, words and goods) on which the Lévi-Straussian model is based cease to be exchange values, “reciprocity ceases to regulate their circulation, and each of them falls, therefore, outside the province of communication”.<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that the structuralist model is not sufficient, and that what is needed is an analysis capable of accounting for the *interruption* of the exchange with respect to the figure of the leader and the way in which he and the group’s members relate to the exercise of power and, hence, to the political dimension of these populations.

Moreover, the role of the chief takes on a completely different aspect during wartime: according to Clastres, it is only in the exceptional circumstances of conflict with other tribes that the chief “commands a substantial amount of power – at times absolute – over the group of warriors” and that “once peace is restored the war chief loses all his power”,<sup>24</sup> and resumes his role as the peacemaker of internal conflicts within the tribe. Decision-making power, therefore, is assigned to the chief during warrior expeditions but is null and void in normal times. In other words, the *chefferie* is an impotent institution, and it is repeatedly described by Clastres as the exercise of an empty power, the echo of a word without new information content. The leader *must* speak but his word has no command function, is powerless power, a “function operating in a void” without authority.<sup>25</sup> His discourses are a simple transmission and repetition of the tradition and the norms, it is speech that he *owes to* the group, with which he always maintains a relationship of continuous debt.<sup>26</sup> As Maurice Blanchot points out, the discourse of the *chef* described by Clastres is empty because it is separated from power insofar as the locus of power is society itself, and as the philosopher reminds us, “that constant flow of empty speech [...] which he *owes to* the tribe – is the infinite debt which effectively rules out speaking man’s ever becoming a man of power”.<sup>27</sup> In the day-to-day life of

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<sup>23</sup> CLASTRES 1989: 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 30. Later Clastres, as mentioned above, will attribute a positive function to war, going so far as to state that “primitive societies are violent societies; their social being is a being-for-war” (CLASTRES 1994: 141) and that “the machine of dispersion functions against the machine of unification; it tells us that war is against the State” (CLASTRES 1994: 167).

<sup>25</sup> CLASTRES 1989: 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 155.

<sup>27</sup> BLANCHOT 1995: 9. Clastres will later return to this point during his interview with Raymond Bellour. Since this knowledge is continually transmitted and reiterated, and therefore known by all as society’s discourse about itself, it implies, among other things, the rejection of the division between those who know and those who do not know. BELLOUR and CLASTRES 1978: 432: “L’essentiel d’un discours de chef, c’est de rappeler à ses auditeurs qu’il faut vivre

the tribe, Clastres tells us, there would be no coercive power, but it cannot be deduced from this absence that there is no political dimension, rather the opposite. The leader is completely dependent on the group, which controls him in all his actions, and towards which he is obliged to “exhibit at every moment the innocence of his office”,<sup>28</sup> and in so-called “primitive societies”, universal accord and unanimity, democracy and love of equality would reign:<sup>29</sup> “[n]ormal civil power, based on the *consensus omnium* and not on constraint, is thus profoundly peaceful and its function is ‘pacification’: the chief is responsible for maintaining peace and harmony in the group”. The chief must appease internal conflicts “not by employing a force he does not possess and which would not be acknowledged in any case, but by relying solely on the strength of his prestige, his fairness, and his verbal ability”,<sup>30</sup> and if he fails to maintain unity and to reconcile the parties he can do nothing.<sup>31</sup> In the societies that reject coercion there would be no divisions into dominated and dominant, the leader would be constantly in control and at the service of the group, and the disengagement of the leader’s power by the group would constitute an essential rejection of and defense mechanism against transcendence. By contrast, in state-societies, the leader’s absolute authority and decision-making power prevail, where the sovereign does not serve the group but rather demands tribute through taxation. In this dynamic, it is society that is obliged to offer goods, while the leader must be obeyed unconditionally, as the sole bearer of legitimate violence.

As we have shown, for Clastres, the political dimension cannot simply be reduced to the presence or absence of coercive violent power, but this “alternative” form seems to be understood solely as a *negation* of the former. In order to conceptualize stateless societies as political entities, Clastres appears to compel himself to envision *non-power* in action: it is

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selon la tradition, c’est la référence constante aux normes jadis définies par les ancêtres, c’est la volonté affirmée de ne rien changer à l’ordre existant. Ce qui implique, entre autres, le refus de la division entre ceux qui savent et ceux qui ne savent pas, le refus de laisser un savoir devenu secret engendrer la relation de pouvoir”.

<sup>28</sup> CLASTRES 1989: 45.

<sup>29</sup> “The anarchic separatism of the majority of Indian societies is contrasted to the massive nature of the Inca organization, ‘the totalitarian empire of the past’. Yet, given their political organization, most Indian societies of America are distinguished by their sense of democracy and taste for equality” (*ibid.*: 28).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 30.

<sup>31</sup> “More than a judge who passes sentence, he is an arbiter who seeks to reconcile. The chief can do nothing to prevent a dispute from turning into a feud if he fails to effect a reconciliation of the contending parties. That plainly reveals the disjunction between power and coercion” (*ibid.*).

only by asserting the *impotence* of coercive power that he can reflect on the political nature of Amerindian collectives. How, then, does Clastres address the issue of ethnocentrism? He transitions from a perspective of “without” and “absence” (without coercive power, stateless) to one of “not” (the presence of non-coercive, powerless power), and finally to “against” (against the State, against transcendence). However, while the propositions shift, the underlying terms remain unchanged. The outcome of this perspective is thus not an investigation of the alternative to the state-centric approach, capable of bypassing the epistemological obstacle represented by the concept of the State, but a mirror effect in which the State itself seems once again to assume, through its negation, the role of touchstone.

Moreover, it is essential to reconsider whether the State can truly be defined solely in terms of coercion. Beginning with contractualism, particularly in the work of Hobbes and Rousseau, a paradigmatic logic emerges that is fundamentally based on *consensus* in the *authorization* process. While Clastres sees the monopoly of legitimate violence as a characteristic of the State, he does not examine how this legitimacy is established through the processes of *representation* and *delegation* that define State democracies.<sup>32</sup> Clastres points out that in primitive societies it is society, not the chief, that usually makes decisions; that the chief does not command, it is society that governs; and lastly that the chief does not act for personal interest but instead serves as the spokesperson and representative of the community, with the tribe comprising free and equal individuals, united in democracy and fraternity. However, we could assert that this dynamic also reflects what takes place in states based on representation and democracy. The power of the logic of the modern State, characterized by representation, lies precisely in the justification from the transmission of the singular and individual will through elections. In this sense, therefore, they are fraternally equals, and they decide to establish a body to ensure peace among them. The governed obey themselves in a certain sense, as they are the authors and agents of the actions carried out by their representatives. Although Clastres seems to perceive the problem

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<sup>32</sup> This aspect is also evident in another text, *La question du pouvoir dans les sociétés primitives*, first published in *Interrogations* in 1976 and thus in *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*: “The social is the political, the political is the exercise of power (legitimate or not, it matters little here) by one or several over the rest of society (for better or worse, it matters little here): for Heraclitus, as for Plato and Aristotle, there is no society except under the aegis of kings; society is unthinkable without its division between those who command and those who obey, and there where the exercise of power is lacking, we find ourselves in the infra-social, in non-society” (CLASTRES 1994: 88).

of the mechanism of the transcendence of the State institution, by thus instituting a “*grand partage*” between State and non-State societies on the basis of the presence or *refusal* of a relationship of domination, he seems to fall into an epistemological trap that does not allow him to question the justification and legitimacy of the State through the mechanism of the transmission of the will of individuals and the group and, at the same time, to see power and “power-machines” in everyday relationships like those based on gender.<sup>33</sup> This is the real enigma: how to stop obeying ourselves when we are reflected in the mirror of the State? How does the transmission of the wills of individuals and the group give rise to transcendence, and how can we deactivate it?

Perhaps Clastres, for the reasons we have explored through this essay, cannot truly help us in answering this question. However, engaging with his work and with the possibility of a new political anthropology he holds out offers to those engaged in political philosophy the opportunity to return to the fundamental and methodological questions about how we interrogate power and its different forms of exercise, allowing us to try to articulate the logic of the modern State but also to explore a possible alternative in the organization of our relations and our living together. This is why, fifty years after its release, *La Société contre l'État* continues to serve as a vibrant battleground and tool for re-thinking and deactivating the logic of modern power and the State-form.

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<sup>33</sup> I refer in particular to a dialog with Guattari broadcast for the *Atelier de création radiophonique* on February 14, 1975, which is held at the INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel) and which I transcribed for my PhD dissertation. In one passage of this interview Guattari states: “Ce qui me gêne un petit peu c'est l'opposition très brutale que tu fais très souvent entre des sociétés à État et des sociétés sans État. À mon avis il y a déjà, dans ces sociétés sans État, des formes de pouvoirs, qui ne sont pas des pouvoir d'État mais qui sont des pouvoirs de valeurs sociales, des pouvoirs sur les femmes, des pouvoir d'initiation. Tu donnes l'exemple d'homosexuel dans L'arc et le panier. Si tu appartiens du point de vue érotique à des valeurs féminines, eh bah tu ne participes pas du pouvoir des chasseurs! Tu ne peux pas être porteur d'arc! Alors, c'est pas l'État mais c'est tout même bien une machine de pouvoir! Je crois que on a intérêt à éviter cette dualité un petit peu trop brutale que tu amènes là”.

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