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CONSTITUTIVE DIVISION, SAVAGE DEMOCRACY AND ANARCHISM

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ABSTRACT

To what extent can democracy be conceived of as 'savage'? Does the savagery in question have anything to do with those primitive societies that anthropologists talk about? Claude Lefort, by theorising the constitutive division of the social, and Miguel Abensour, by insisting on the principle of anarchy that negatively affects any positive order, have in fact a very modern conception of the savage that refers to the irruption and conflict that are so many notions taken in a meaning precisely averted by the savages that we find notably in Pierre Clastres. And yet the savage, in his rejection of social division (and therefore of the state and social classes), still has many things to remind us about the possibility of a society free of relations of domination. By acknowledging the need for conflict and plurality that marks our modernity when it is not caught up in the fantasy of totalitarianism, it then becomes possible to conceive of a new order that is not reduced to negativity, and yet is in the full force of the term anarchist. A new savage order, perhaps, but one that goes beyond the archaic savage as well as savage democracy by affirming the possibility of positivity without archè.

Keywords: Anarchism, Democracy, Division, State, Abensour, Lefort, Machiavel.

To what extent can democracy be conceived as 'savage'? Does the savagery in question have any link with the primitive societies that anthropologists speak of? Claude Lefort, by theorizing the original division of the social, and Miguel Abensour, by insisting on the principle of anarchy which operates negatively on any positive order, have in reality a very modern conception of the savage which refers to irruption and conflict in the sense precisely perceived by the savages that we find notably in

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Pierre Clastres. However, the savage, in his refusal of social division (and thus of the State and social classes), still has many things to tell us about the possibility of a society free from relations of domination. By taking note of the necessity of the conflict and of the plurality which marks our modernity when it is not drawn into the fantasy of totalitarianism, it is possible to conceive a new order which is not reduced to negativity, but with all the strength of the anarchist term. A new wild order perhaps, but which exceeds the archaic wild as well as wild democracy by affirming that positivity without *archē* is possible. From an anarchist anthropology, we advance the hypothesis that the struggle against the One, understood at the same time as the State (a lesson from primitive societies) and as a self-transparent society (a lesson from Machiavelli) takes place by virtue of the conflict and balance of forces which presupposes the disappearance of external warfare between homogeneous units (typical of primitive societies) and internal warfare within society, between the dominant and the dominated, the exploiters and the exploited. There can thus be a unity that forestalls the One and a conflictuality that forestalls war. Here division takes on a completely different meaning than that of the original division of the social which presupposes that domination and exploitation are unavoidable. It rests on the balance and separation of functions. To avoid the re-emergence of the One (as a State and a society transparent to itself) and to assure that there can be a radical pluralism that wards off both economic and political monopolies, social forces thus find their capacity to master reality and multiply their potential.

1. Constitutive division and conflict

Following the path trodden by Merleau-Ponty's "Notes on Machiavelli", Claude Lefort attempted to show that democracy is conflictual by nature, whereas totalitarianism, with its fantasy of achieving a society transparent to itself, denies that conflict can be possible. In the anti-totalitarian perspective of a revision of Marxism, recourse to Machiavelli seems at first sight judicious, as long as the irreducibility of conflict is taken into account, as well as that of the imaginary and the symbolic. Machiavelli, then, insists on the conflictual dimension of politics, whose realist dimension breaks away from Kantian idealism. Indeed, "Machiavelli is not so naive as to imagine that the law can support itself. The law is founded upon force, but the force in turn will destroy the law unless it also is bridled; but force can be bridled only by opposing force. Sociologically, therefore, the foundation of freedom is a balancing of forces, what Machiavelli calls 'mixed' government" (Burnham 1963: 80). This balance would thus ward off the

emergence of tyranny, whose supreme outcome would be the suppression of all antagonism and counter-power in favor of the One.

This conflictuality is articulated by Lefort and by most of those who take up Machiavelli's ideas on the possibility of radical or savage democracy. Apart from the conflict surrounding the plurality of values linked to modernity's democratic indeterminacy, the real structuring conflict is the conflict between the Great – a category we might equate with aristocrats and the bourgeois – and the People. This, then, is a struggle between "classes", which explains why Machiavelli's post-totalitarian readers remain influenced by Marxism. Hence their reframing of the communist outcome that presupposes a pacified state: struggles are no longer exclusively explained in economic terms, and they become irreducible, as the interminable motor of democracy where the people fight for their rights. Lefort describes the motives behind this conflict as follows: "The desire of the Great aims at an object: the other, and is embodied in signs that assure them of their position: wealth, rank, prestige. The desire of the people, on the other hand, is, strictly speaking, without an object. […] The specificity of their desire is that they are not oppressed. Such is the negativity of this desire that it accords with the freedom of the city, with the Law" (Lefort 1978: 131 and 136).

The freedom of the people is then expressed by the desire not to be oppressed by the Great, thus tending to break the logic of appropriation of the Great, whose desire is above all to keep what they have and to conquer ever more wealth. Conflict must therefore be overt, opening society up to a reflexivity that presupposes warding off ideology, which denies the reality of conflict in the name of order and unity. The people's struggle is thus inscribed in negativity: its struggle is without its own object, its freedom is negative. This supposedly original division is thus a constant of politics, and consequently an irreducible structuring element. Lefort's essentialism concerning the original division of the social is, in our view, reflected in his misinterpretation of the theses of the author of *La société contre l'Etat*. In this connection, Lefort writes: "Even if the object of refusal is not represented, and the state unknown to those who work against its coming, the discourse and practice of the primitives testify to a tacit recognition of social division and the possibility of its deployment" (Lefort 2007: 386).

Here, Lefort confuses the actual with the potential, the better to justify his theses, for in the stateless societies described by Clastres, there is no division of the social made possible by coercive authority. While warding off division presupposes an awareness that it can emerge, it remains strictly consubstantial with a homogeneous, unitary society marked by a heteronomy that is not linked to the State or to class division, but to the authority of the Ancestors: on the one hand, "the community wants

to persevere in its undivided being and prevent a unifying authority – the figure of the commanding chief – from separating itself from the social body and introducing social division between Master and Subjects" (Clastres 2005: 84-85). On the other hand, primitive conservatism seeks "to prevent innovation in society; it wants the respect of the Law to assure the maintenance of non-division; it seeks to prevent the appearance of division in society. This is primitive society's internal policy, as much on the economic level (the impossibility of accumulating wealth) as on the level of power relations (the chief is there not to command): to conserve itself as an undivided We, as a single totality" (*ibid.*: 80-81). The original division of society is a modern myth to justify the division between social classes and the State. It never existed in primitive societies. The original division is imaginary and symbolic: it concerns the separation of society from the foundations of the Law, which is given to them and cannot be questioned (unlike Clastres, Lefort and Gauchet rightly emphasize this division, but they confuse it with the social).

Conflict between the Great and the common is therefore inconceivable among savages, as it would make civil war within the community – and hence self-destruction – possible. In the reality of these savage societies, we find the conjuring mechanisms that prevented what political philosophers had intended from the outset to avert at all costs: civil war, stasis.

In a way, political philosophers were simply trying to think of the conditions and opportunities for regaining what had been lost: the civil peace and unity found in primitive societies. Yet these societies are far from peaceful. War is the ransom to be paid for this peace, and it's a costly one. Internal division is expelled to the outside world: civil war (between exploiters and exploited, dominant and dominated, characteristic of social division) is warded off by the war of all communities against all communities, guaranteeing their non-division and forestalling the emergence of the One. Here, Clastres goes against Hobbes, showing that war enables a certain mode of socialization in which the state of nature is not reduced to individual insecurity. Something more is at stake in establishing a system that averts, through war, a violence that has direct repercussions on society via a transcendent authority. So, whereas for Hobbes, the State is against war, primitive society reverses this proposition by asserting that "war is against the State" (*ibid.*: 90). Here's a fundamental idea from Clastres: "Not only does the discourse on war belong to the discourse on society but it assigns it its meaning: the idea of war measures the idea of society" (*ibid.*: 16).

The indivisibility of primitive society presupposes a homogeneity guaranteed by war, in accordance with an unchanging principle: all united against the enemy. This antagonistic logic of primitive societies, which

combines war with thwarting the emergence of the state, seems to ward off any idea of peace confused with the One, and any idea of internal conflict confused with social division. The radical exteriority between Us and Them, where the One is ultimately absorbed (sometimes literally, hence the anthropophagy) into each community as a homogeneous entity, jeopardizes the balance of power, and risks degenerating into destructive violence towards both the Other and Us. On the other hand, the radical heteronomy of the law, although naturally accepted by primitive societies, is nonetheless a violence entirely akin to a liberticidal peace (from a chronocentric point of view, we are close here to the fantasy of the self-transparent society of totalitarian regimes).

By contrast, theories of savage democracy insist that social division and internal conflictuality are needed to ward off the One. In this case, the One is not the state, but rather the fantasy of a completely homogeneous, self-transparent society. These readings of Machiavelli smack of the same confusion as that of primitive societies, in a symmetrically opposite way. With war as the means of forestalling the One in primitive societies, we could find an equivalence with conflict as means of forestalling the totalitarian One. However, these Machiavellian readings seek to avert the One, but not the State or social division, whereas the wars of primitive societies seek to avert the State, but also the conflictuality linked to a plurality that does not necessarily presuppose social division (on the contrary, we might say, since plurality is only really possible thanks to a balance of forces that prevents monopolies).

2. Constitutive division and the one

There is no question of an original division of the social in primitive societies, as this division only came about with the emergence of the state. There is neither division nor plurality, moreover, since the primitive community is fundamentally homogeneous and therefore anti-pluralist. "Sociopolitical autonomy and sociological non-division are conditions for each other, and the centrifugal logic of the crumbling is a refusal of the unifying logic of the One" (Clastres 2005: 85-86). Two comments: if socio-political autonomy is indeed inseparable from sociological non-division, it should be stressed that primitive societies, by receiving their law from their ancestors, who cannot be questioned, are radically heteronomous. Non-division has more to do with warding off the One, in other words, the State, as Clastres also affirms. However, this non-division is characterized by a homogeneity that is consubstantial with their heteronomous dimension, plurality being impossible by virtue of the authority of a law that naturally

imposes itself on all. So, while it's true that primitive societies don't have the modern reflexivity that consists in being aware that we give ourselves our own laws, they do have a reflexivity regarding the possibility that division can emerge.

Awareness of this potential, held as far as possible at bay, is itself a suspicion of the impossibility of history in these societies, and the appearance of prophets announcing the imminent end of unity confirms the porous nature of the cycle of eternal return, whose authority is the law in these societies. By "discovering the great affinity of power and nature, as the twofold limitation of the domain of culture, Indian societies were able to create a means for neutralizing the virulence of political authority" (Clastres 1974: 41): they themselves institute power by presenting it as it is, i.e., as the negation of culture, so as to be able to control it immediately. It is by turning nature's cunning against power that these societies, by appointing a chief relegated beyond a frontier that deprives him of all power of coercion, are able to ward off the emergence of transcendence. "It is in the nature of primitive society to know that violence is the essence of power. Deeply rooted in this knowledge is the concern to keep power apart from the institution of power, command apart from the chief. And it is the very domain of speech that ensures the separation and draws the dividing line" (*ibid.*: 111).

The problem remains, of course, that the chief speaks in the name of society and in the name of the ancestors. What's more, the substitution of speech for violence goes hand in hand with the conservatism of primitive societies: here, speech assigns individuals to a place from which they cannot move, and which they cannot question. It's a place of power occupied by the chief, the guarantor of tradition, to ensure that not just anyone can seize it and use it as they please. By contrast, in Lefort's savage democracy, the place of power is "empty". It is the site of a theatre that allows society to relate to itself and stage the conflicts that run through it. Through its symbolic dimension, power avoids the fantasy of fragmentation or fusion. For Lefort, power is nowhere to be found, either outside society as a founding otherness, or within the social body as a substantial unity: it is an organ of negativity that prevents a person from making it his own. This organ of negativity, which guarantees the distance between exterior and interior, as well as the mediation of conflicts, has a name: representation.

There's nothing to prevent us from guaranteeing a distance between the instituting and the instituted by means of mediation bodies, without this entailing a division of the social in the sense of a division into classes and the need for representation, which would in reality be synonymous with the appropriation of power (even if it couldn't be symbolically). To

examine the aporias of Lefort's reasoning in a little more depth, we need to return to the question of origin. For Lefort, society's recognition that it has no sacred origin would lead to the recognition of the division that runs through it, an irreducible division that justifies the permanence of the state. On the contrary, it can be affirmed that it is the recognition of the absence of a sacred origin that opens up the possibility of autonomy, if only because societies have not waited for the recognition of this absence to justify the state and social division (integrated, admittedly, most of the time into a harmonious, non-conflictual system). Just as Freud considered that the subject is divided, and can only break his desire for fusion through the law, Lefort believes that society renounces its fantasy of unity by recognizing its original division, with the law alone constituting the symbolic instance of mediation that enables conflicts to be articulated.

However, law and institutions cannot be reduced to a principle of reality that must be accepted as such, but rather a situated reality capable of being transformed. As Castoriadis remarks, reproaching Lefort for taking Lacan too seriously, "there is no reason to call the relation between society and the institution a form of alienation. Alienation appears *in* this relation, but it *is* not this relation – just as error or delirium are possible only *in* language but *are* not language" (Castoriadis 1999: 169-170). On the other hand, when the law merges with the state to regulate conflicts between classes or between elites and the people, it legitimizes an imbalance that manifests itself in a de facto misappropriation whose injustice is always liable to degenerate into civil war. A true balance between forces, and therefore a positive conflict, is only conceivable when they are each in full possession of their rights and capacities (political, economic, social, etc.).

Lastly, regarding the fantasy of unity: if the subject can never coincide with himself, it is not so much because he is prevented from doing so, or because a void underlies his desire, but because, on the contrary, a multitude of possibilities exceed the actuality of his identity. In the same vein, Simondon writes: "The individual is nothing but itself, but it exists as superior to itself because it contains within itself a more complete reality, one that the process of individuation did not exhaust, that remains new and potential, animated by potentials […] the individual does not feel alone in itself, does not feel limited as an individual to a reality that would be merely itself" (Simondon 1989: 194). The problem of the fantasy of the self-transparent society does not call into question the project of autonomy. On the contrary, since in such a society the One can only be conceived (without, however, the identity being perfect) in connection with a radical heteronomy, as we have seen in the case of primitive societies. The actualization of justice may be endless, but each step forward is marked by a progression in autonomy.

3. Savage democracy, anarchy and anarchism

Savage democracy is marked by the principle of anarchy, which undermines order, the *archē*. For Abensour, who rereads Heidegger via Reiner Schürmann's *Le principe d'anarchie. Heidegger et la question de l'agir* (Schürmann 1982), it is the principle of *archē*, as a metaphysical referent, that is called into question. "*Arche* always functions with regard to action, just as substance functions with regard to accidents, imparting meaning and *telos* to them" (*ibid.*: 15, quoted by Miguel Abensour in *La démocratie contre l'Etat*, 2004: 174). Metaphysical closure, then, imposes itself as the presence of a First Principle whose function is the positive foundation of an order. But this order is disturbed by the principle of anarchy, which is always ante-political and negative, beyond chaos and order. It is ceaselessly interrupting and irrupting, preserving from all the fences linked to a First Principle and therefore to domination. Anarchy "can only cause turmoil – but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation *without any affirmation*. The State then cannot set itself up as a Whole" (Levinas 1974: 128, quoted by Abensour 2004: 189).

Miguel Abensour, radicalizing Lefort's theses with his notion of "savage democracy", asserts that "[…] besides having to question recourse to principle itself – the *arche* – the political principle points to the idea of *anarchy* detached from its purely political conception, and lets itself be affected by the turmoil this idea causes, thereby outlining a negative dialectic" (Abensour 2004: 157). Further on, Abensour echoes Levinas, for whom anarchy above all designates a disorder, a disarray, "drawing the lines of a negative dialectic, specific in that it is delivered from any affirmative essence, in that the means of negation or the play of negativity ceases to produce the positive" (*ibid.*: 190). The negative dimension of anarchy enables man to escape the net of the state in particular, and the social order in general (the existentialist dimension of revolt being privileged over the revolutionary's supposed totalizing claim to find a new order). This work of the negative is indeed fundamental, but it is conceived here only in relation to the confusion between the positive order and the *archē*. For isn't it the eternal narrative of power to affirm the unity of *archē* and order? Is this not what enables it to justify the original division of the social as an unsurpassable horizon?

In reality, the principle of negative anarchy nourishes and strengthens the state as much as it disturbs it, since mastering chaos is what justifies its power. In reality, the transcendent authority conceives of disorder as a primary cause or to legitimize its coercion and maintain the negative anarchy that gives it its raison d'être. What we call "unity and centralization

is nothing but perpetual chaos, serving as a basis for endless tyranny; it is the advancing of the chaotic condition of social forces as an argument for despotism – a despotism which is really the cause of the chaos" (Proudhon 2000 [1851], p. 263). Negative anarchy is superimposed by an *archē* that maintains it by giving it the arbitrary form of an order. In this way, negative anarchy and *archē* support each other. In other words, we could argue that there is a theological principle of order (or first and only cause at the foundation of everything) articulating both chaos and arbitrariness.

This is because order, properly understood, has nothing to do with *archē*. Positive anarchy is thus an order that eludes all metaphysical closure, in the sense that Justice cannot be fulfilled as long as social relations, and hence history, exist. Positive anarchy therefore does not exclude negativity (conceived as freedom, for good or ill), but embraces it. For there is no such thing as the principle of anarchy on the one hand, and positive order on the other: on the contrary, such a representation allows the One to emerge against a backdrop of undifferentiation (as, for example, the scapegoat emerges against a backdrop of mimetic violence). The principle of anarchy and positive order integrate each other. Order always has a background of chaos, and chaos is always the bearer of order, and it is when collective beings organize themselves and differentiate what was a homogeneous representation of the One that a positive order without *archē* can emerge. For those who occupy the place of *archē*, managing negative anarchy as best they can, this is obviously not self-evident: politicians, "whatever their colours, are insurmountably repelled by anarchy, which they construe as disorder: as if democracy could be achieved other than by distribution of authority and as if the true meaning of the word 'democracy' was not dismissal of government" (Proudhon 1997 [1849]: 136).The distribution of authority thus presupposes the dissolution of *archē* in a positive order, with collective beings no longer dispossessed by the One, overcoming the polarization between chaos and arbitrariness to build a unity that forestalls both social division and heteronomy.

Social division and civil war are averted by reappropriating the power to make decisions concerning the public sphere (economic and political), and heteronomy is averted by reappropriating for all the imaginary that was externally given in early societies, thus guaranteeing pluralism. In a manner of speaking, "[…] government no longer exists, since by the progress of their separation and centralization the powers formerly gathered together by the government have either all disappeared or escaped the latter's initiative: anarchy has given birth to order" (*ibid.*: 197). The struggle against the One, understood both as the State (a lesson from primitive societies) and as a self-transparent society (a lesson from Machiavelli), takes place by virtue of the conflict and balance of forces that presuppose the disappearance

of external warfare between homogeneous units (typical of primitive societies) and internal warfare within society (between the dominant and the dominated, the exploiters and the exploited). A unity that forestalls the One and a conflictuality that forestalls war are thus conceivable.

Here, division takes on a completely different meaning from that of the original division of the social, which presupposes the irreducibility of domination and exploitation. It is based on the balance and separation of functions. To avoid the re-emergence of the One (as a state and a society transparent to itself) and ensure that there can be a radical pluralism that prevents both economic and political monopolies, social forces thus rediscover their capacity to master reality and multiply their potential.

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