

John Protevi [www/protevi.com/DG](http://www.protevi.com/DG)
Outline of Pierre Clastres, "Society Against the State"

- I. Political focus and ethnocentric bias of early accounts:
 - a. First contact is from people of a state society (SS)
 - b. So to them, a society without the state (SWS) must be incomplete, lacking, rejected from progressive history.
 - c. 19th century evolutionism.
 - d. Clastres: But, if there is an evolution why then do we have contemporary SWS?
- II. Economic / technical focus of modern anthropology is hardly better:
 - a. SWS as "subsistence economy," "outside market relations"
 - i. Having no surplus implies incapacity to produce surplus
 - ii. Due to their inferior technology.
 - b. Clastres: reality of primitive "technology"
 - i. It might not be "Cartesian" mastery of nature
 - ii. But it does master their environment relative to their needs
 - iii. Hence: "every human society masters its environment or it leaves"
 1. Look at the ingenuity of the Eskimos or Australians
 2. Quality of workmanship makes tools into works of art
 3. South Americans have agriculture and horticulture too
 - iv. Consequently, they are not inferior by logic or fact
 1. By logic, bcs there is no objective standard to compare technological "intensities"
 - a. That is, you must measure relative to society
 - b. So you can't directly compare rifle and bow
 2. By fact: evidence of efficiency of primitive economies
 - v. So "subsistence" is not bcs of technological lack
- III. So what really is a "subsistence economy"?
 - a. Euro-prejudice: Society does all it can just to let its members get a minimum survival
 - i. "Laziness" of natives: they do what they need and then lounge about
 - ii. So we see dual Euro-notion:
 1. Politics: must be the State
 2. Economics: one must "work"
 - a. Biblical injunction: "earn bread in sweat of brow"
 - b. Slavery as forced conversion to "work"
 - b. Reality: natives were healthy (they weren't on edge of starvation) and had plenty of leisure (they weren't always scrounging for scraps)
 - i. Example of Tupi-Guarani, from first contact narratives:
 1. Primarily (slash and burn) "agriculture" (I think it's horticulture), w/ hunting, fishing, gathering
 2. Men clear land (2 months every 6 years); women work the land
 3. Rest of time, it was pleasure for men: hunt, fish, make war
 - ii. Confirmed by modern economic anthropology
 1. Kalahari desert, Yanomami
 2. Clastres with Guayaki (nomad hunters in Paraguay)
 - c. So natives have all the time they would need to develop surplus if they so desired
 - i. They don't work for a surplus bcs they are not forced to externally
 - ii. They refuse to produce a useless excess: they produce for their needs
 - iii. In fact, they do produce a surplus: that is then consumed in festivals when outsiders arrive and / or neighbors are invited
 - d. So primitives refuse "work"; they have leisure and affluence (Sahlins)
- IV. In reality "economic anthropology" needs to self-destruct and become political economy

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- a. You can't "objectively" cross-compare "production" and "surplus"
 - i. That can only happen when "work" is instituted
 - ii. But then you have to talk politics: capture, enslavement, external force, destruction of social life
 - b. What you have to see is that primitives have a physiological energy economy
 - i. Production is limited to replenishing stock of energy expended
 - ii. Plus socially consumed surplus in feasts
 - iii. This frees time for play, war, festivals
 - c. What we need to do is see origin of "work" as "alienated labor"
 - i. Primitive egalitarianism means men control their activity
 - 1. They act only on their own,
 - 2. Though "law of exchange" (= "circulation of 'debts'" for DG; or better, social relations through always unequalizable obligations, à la Graeber) always mediates one's production.
 - a. That is, you never consume what you produce: you "give" that away
 - b. And you consume what is "given" to you
 - ii. So alienated labor is production for debt to the masters who don't "work"
 - d. Thus it's the vertical relation of power btw masters and subjected that precedes and enables the economic relation of exploitation. States emerge (political power) before classes emerge (economic relations).
- V. Political positivity of primitive society:
- a. Rigorous egalitarianism
 - i. Refusal of work and surplus
 - ii. Economics is not autonomous in primitive society
 - b. What is politics of primitive society?
 - i. Within large diversity of social orders we find a basic duality: SWS vs SS
 - 1. Emergence of state: unbridgeable gulf; time becomes history
 - a. Neolithic Revolution
 - b. Industrial Revolution
 - 2. Neolithic revolution often discussed as nomadic foragers vs sedentary agriculture
 - a. But this overlooks sedentary horticulturalists (w/ hunting, fishing, gathering) who are still SWS
 - b. We also see creation of horse nomadism in the Americas: abandonment of agriculture, but this doesn't look like nomadic hunter / gatherers of South America such as the Guayaki
 - ii. So post-Neolithic we see
 - 1. Change of economy (to agriculture / horticulture) w/o change of politics (still SWS)
 - 2. Change of politics (American empires) with same economy (agriculture / horticulture) as primitives
 - iii. So, politics is what counts (SWS vs SS), not economics
 - iv. So, we can invert Marxists: the "infrastructure" is politics (SWS vs SS) and the "superstructure" is economics
- VI. So the real question is the emergence of the State, which destroys SWS
- a. It's impossible to conceive an internal mutation of the economy leading the way; primitives would have to desire to change, but their whole way of life produces a different form of desire (DG's desiring-production visible here)
 - b. So there must be an external political force that imposes economic transformation
 - c. Thus we can't see State as mere instrument of pre-existing ruling / owning class

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- i. If there were a prior difference in force allowing exploitative class
 - ii. Why bother constructing a State to wield force that already exists?
 - d. If State protects pre-existing private property, how does that arise in primitive society dedicated to refusing private property?
 - i. The primitives know that private property introduces inequality,
 - ii. Because the entirety of their social machine is dedicated to producing and reinforcing
 - 1. Material equality (pass around produced goods, consume excesses)
 - 2. Desire for equality: (prosocial affective investment: you feel good when you produce and consume in a network)
 - e. Again, what is the mystery of the emergence of the State?
 - i. In fact we can't determine the conditions for emergence of State (this is where Sibertin-Blanc lets us see what DG are doing with their notion of the "Ur-State" and the "auto-presupposition" of the State: it needs surplus to feed its specialists but it needs specialists to produce its surplus)
 - ii. But we can see conditions of its non-emergence.
- VII. Political positivity of SWS: the locus of political power is the tribe itself (207); "absolute and complete power over all the elements of which it is composed" (212)
 - a. The clue to political positivity of SWS: the chief is not a king
 - i. The chief has no authority, no power, no coercion, no command
 - ii. Locus of political power of the tribe is the tribe itself, not the chief, who serves tribe
 - iii. Function of the chief:
 - 1. Resolve conflicts via his prestige used in oratory
 - 2. Persuade people in conflict to calm down, emulate harmonious ancestors (here is where we could look to Boehm's ethnography of nomadic foragers and their anti-big man / anti-state powers of ridicule, exile, killing)
 - b. Sometimes the chief will "play the chief" because he has no choice not to
 - i. Due to technical competence as war leader: "minimum of authority"
 - ii. But he can't convert (war-derived) prestige into (civil political) power
 - iii. If desire of chief for war-prestige matches that of (young men) in tribe then all is well
 - iv. Overweening desire by chief risks inverting his political relation to tribe as servant
 - 1. So this might be origin of State
 - 2. But this inverted political relation through excessive war-desire never works
 - 3. Because sometimes the society wants peace, and then he has to fight alone
 - a. He is thus "condemned to death in advance"
 - b. Primitive society does not permit replacement of chief's desire for prestige by will-to-power
 - i. Yanamamo chief, Fousiwe
 - ii. Apache chief, Geronimo
- VIII. Demography is one area that partially escapes social control
 - a. We can't just replace economic determinism by demographic determinism
 - i. Yet social consequences of population size / density "unsettles" primitive society
 - ii. Hence fission and atomization to maintain small group size, even if temporary alliances are possible
 - b. Example of effects of size:
 - i. Tupi-Guarani chiefs who were not kings, but not powerless either
 - ii. But as their power grows, prophets arise to preach against evil, "against the One"
 - c. Political metaphysics
 - i. For the T-G prophets, the One is evil (compare La Boétie)
 - ii. What are conditions in which the One is good?

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- d. Might the Word be the beginning of the State?
 - i. By preaching against the chiefs, prophets may themselves limn figure of Despot
 - ii. Perversely, they themselves wield political power of unification of the people, precisely by preaching against the power of the chiefs whom they denounce as wanting to command and unify the people
 - iii. But even this extreme example shows the desire of the primitives to refuse unification, to "exorcise" the One and the State