

## Society Against the State Summary

Clastres opens his essay with claiming that the statement “Primitive societies are societies without a State” is a value judgement and implies that primitive societies are somehow incomplete, and have a lack of a State which makes them uncivilized. However, this conclusion implies that primitive societies are backwards and anachronistic societies that failed to develop into civilization. Clastres then using this logical conclusion to demonstrate that ethnocentrism is at the core of these beliefs; the idea that society is a straight progression from savagery to civilization is pseudoscientific and false.

Primitive societies do not lack the technical abilities to break free from their subsistence economy. Rather, primitive societies aim to develop a mastery of technology that simply satisfies their needs. Clastres explains that the Eskimo and Australians have great technical achievements which are in no way inferior to the technical achievements of the industrialized world. Clastres points out that the real reason primitive societies may have subsistence economies is out of deliberate choice. A subsistence economy did not cause native people to incessantly and frantically search for food. Rather, as a lifestyle it afforded them quite a bit of leisure time. In fact, the Tupi-Guarani men, whom the French and Portuguese decried as idle, worked two months every four years. This high quantity of leisure time means that primitive societies have enough time to develop technical capabilities, but chose not to do so because they did not want to work more. Clastres claims that men work more only when they are forced to. Since primitive societies lack external force from the state, men choose not to work more than they need for the sake of generating “useless excess”. A surplus, generated without overtime labor, is only consumed on festive occasions. Production is simply replenishing the amount of energy necessary for production.

When production no longer goes to the producer, but instead goes to another, “exchange without reciprocity”, egalitarian exchange ceases to exist and production becomes centered around satisfying others; this is hierarchy and state power. The economic conditions surrounding this development occur after the political emergence of the State.

Clastres minimizes the importance of the Neolithic Revolution, claiming that some people did not develop agriculture simply because they were satisfied with hunter gatherer ways of life, and did not lack the technical potential for farming. Although the Neolithic Revolution changed human way of life, it did not change social order. Instead, some political revolution led to the development of the State. This created power relations, exploiters and exploited, the state, which allowed those who have power to exert power on those who do not have power. Political oppression leads to more oppression, because more work benefits those with power at no cost.

Clastres argues that primitive societies have no state because the structure of their society is designed so that no state can emerge. The chief of a tribe has no power of authority and cannot coerce others into obeying. Political power, rather than centered in the chief as a locus of power, is distributed throughout the society. Society exercises its power over the chief, and in this way prevents the chief from abusing power.

The warrior is destined to continue going to war, as the only way a warrior can gain prestige is through warfare. However, the chief’s desire to go to war may exceed the society’s desire to go to war. In this case, the chief is unable to win, and may go to war without the support of others, which is essentially a death sentence.

Clastres concludes by claiming that *karai*, prophetic speech, might have prevented the emergence of political power in Tupi-Guarani society. *Karai* denounced the One as the root of Evil. Clastres claims that “the One” is in fact the State. The prophets, armed with speech, were able to mobilize the people to go against the chiefs so that “the One” would not emerge.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21A.506 The Anthropology of Politics: Persuasion and Power  
Spring 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.