

Circulation: War and Exchange

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It may gratify you to know that historically the reach of anthropology and its contributions discourse in general have extended far beyond its disciplinary bounds. Alexandre Kojève's initiatory readings of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the thirties to the rising generation of thinkers in Paris (Lacan, Bataille, Sartre, etc.) was remarkable for the anthropological spin he gave the development of philosophical consciousness. Similarly, Freud's own archaeology of consciousness in the *Group Psychology* relied on an anthropological narrative. In both cases, the narratives invoked a kind of primal violence at the origin of consciousness: in Kojève's Hegel it involved the famous conflict between master and slave (which ultimately explained why people will risk their lives in the service of a principle) and in Freud's case it involved the sacrificial murder of a patriarchal father. Guilt, resentment, patricidal and fratricidal feelings are thus foundational characteristics of human society. French anthropology in the form of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss provided a kind of corrective to this bleak predestination of society by emphasising the exchangeist character of society.

Lévi-Strauss claimed that war and commerce could not be understood in isolation, and commercial exchange represented potential wars peacefully settled: war was the result of a poor transaction. Before I look at this proposition in detail, in considering the work of Pierre Clastres, I should point out that within Maussian theory, there is indeed a moment of war in the theory of the potlatch, a form of exchange which Mauss claimed was at times indistinguishable from war. That is, Mauss identified an institution in so-called primitive society predicated on bellicosity and aggressive intent. (So to speak briefly here on my interests in this, it was precisely the gift form of the potlatch, which set into motion a cycle of gift and counter-gift and counter-gift, each more excessive and lavish than the preceding one, that formed the theoretical substrate of Bataille's notion of transgression. Thus it is through the notion of transgression, which is very useful in art historical and art theoretical discourses, that I come to this anthropological discourse).

The idea that "primitive society" is society for exchange in fact flies in the face of perceptions the earliest explorers, missionaries and soldiers to the new world. On one thing they all agreed: these societies were bellicose, and their social being is a being for

war. And here I start to draw on the work of Pierre Clastres. A student of Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault, Clastres is responsible for two major texts: *Society against the state* and the *Archaeology of Violence*, a translation of his *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*. He was influential to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's project in their *Thousand Plateaus*, but died young and never delivered on the promise of his early brilliance. Clearly he broke with Levi-Strauss on the question of the character of primitive society and in so doing, developed a kind of primitive ontology based on war. So what was the problem with the Levi-Strauss' exchangeist view?

In fact there were several. First, Clastres contends that the ideal of primitive society is the autarchy: politically self sufficient, in control of a territory and in principle able to satisfy all its own needs. Recourse to exchanging with others is an admission of a certain type of failure. It has no need of external economic relations: the essence of culture is profoundly ethnocentric.

If Levi-Strauss says war is related to exchange, and primitive society is society for exchange, then war itself is given no positivity except as the negative of a bad exchange. It loses its institutional character. And this was Clastres' point, war has a structural role in primitive society that in many ways was positive. He explores this in an essay called "the unhappiness of the primitive warrior". In some south American tribes (eg the Chaco between Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina) war was a central part of the political and ritual life of the social body. The warrior gains prestige, but no power, in waging war. So war itself is not the goal of the warrior, that is, it is not an end in itself: the goal, and this is remarkably Hegelian, is simply prestige. And the signs of success, plunder, prisoners, scalps are what determine the warriors stature. But warriors are difficult people to have around, and the first scalp of the child warrior is simply the start of a career in which he must constantly prove himself and in doing so, achieve prestige. This is the origin of the warrior's unhappiness, this constant pressure to do more killing and, at the same time, to be at the constant risk of his own death at the hands of his enemy. The warrior logic propels them to ever greater risks, and this is why, to European eyes, they appeared at the same time to be so brave and so mad.

But the fragility of warrior society rests on this dialectic: once you have an armed group of warriors with no goals, it won't be long before they constitute a class within the

society and with that bring the beginning of the end: in dividing the unified social body, they create a society of masters and subjects, and it won't be long before they create a state formation. So the existence of warriors, or beings for death, is a structural necessity in at least some primitive cultures. The true warrior fights for prestige and becomes a killing machine and eventually meets his own death in combat. Now I don't know whether the logic is intentional or not, but the consequence is that while primitive society is society for war, it is also against the warrior, and most importantly against the state (of course the title of Clastres' book).

Now there is an excellent homology here between this warrior logic and the way it prevents state formation to the existence of the potlatch in primitive society. If the *kula* is the metaphor for exchange in Mauss, then the potlatch is the metaphor for war, and it is here that Georges Bataille's reading of Mauss has proved crucial for a structuralism's counter-tradition (let us say an anti-structuralism). The potlatch is the gift of excess, the *prestation* that is accompanied on occasions with a display so antagonistic that it is indistinguishable from an act of war. But the significance of the potlatch for Bataille, which he meditated on in several works, including the Accursed Share, is not in the celebration of violence, but rather, on its normative effects. The potlatch society prevents accumulation by the immediate sacrifice of the surplus, *la part maudite*, in an active principle of consumption which ensures an undivided social body because prestige is achieved as an index of goods destroyed, and not—as is the case in our culture—of goods accumulated. He thus challenges the ideological assumptions of political economies and anthropologies based on the central category of production; he replaces production with depense, or a certain type of expenditure, whose restricted sense refers to unproductive practices, like war, sex, death, art and literature. In this analysis it is precisely the means of disposing of the surplus—which even the most reputedly subsistence economies will produce (and thus he anticipates Sahlins of the *Society of Abundance*) that characterises the nature of different social formations. Thus societies of production, whether capitalist or socialist, distinguish themselves from the rest by their reinvestment of the surplus into the machinery of production. So contrary to appearances, industrial society is society which defers consumption, preferring in the terms of the later situationists, to substitute the festival for the festival, reserving consumption as a private and rational principle: the

privatisation of wealth. Thus we find in this theory a critique of all anthropologies based on a political economic principle—including Marxist ones.