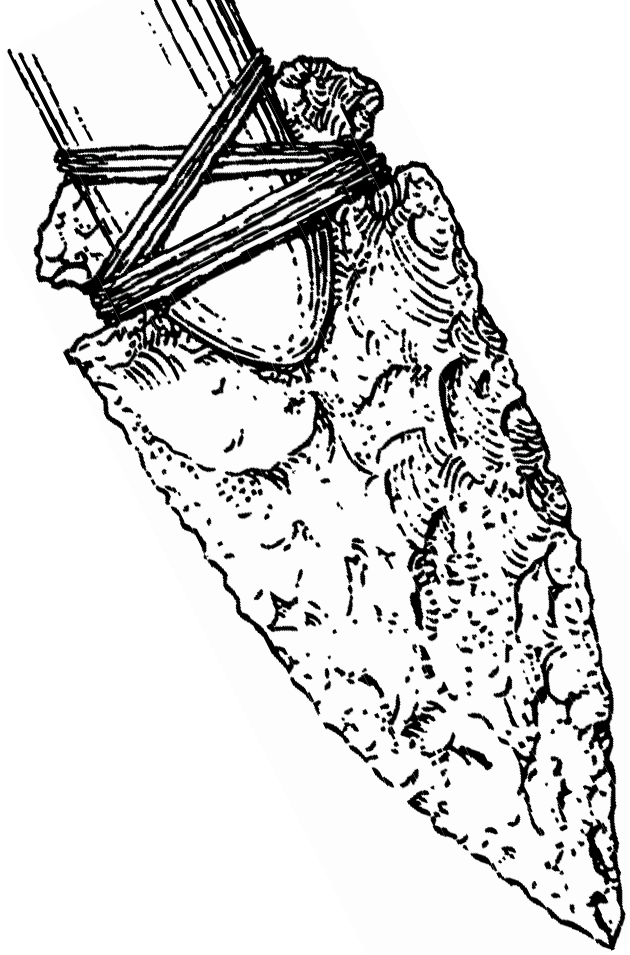

society against
the state

p. clastres, 1974

What is the significance of all that? Armed only with their Word, the prophets were able to bring about a "mobilization" of the Indians; they were able to accomplish that impossible thing in primitive society: to unify, in the religious migration, the multifarious variety of the tribes. They managed to carry out the whole "program" of the chiefs with a single stroke. Was this the ruse of history? A fatal flaw that, in spite of everything, dooms primitive society to dependency? There is no way of knowing. But, in any case, the insurrectional act of the prophets against the chiefs conferred on the former, through a strange reversal of things, infinitely more power than was held by the latter. So perhaps the idea of the spoken word being opposed to violence needs to be amended. While the primitive chief is under the obligation of *innocent* speech, primitive society can also, given quite specific conditions, lend its ear to another sort of speech, forgetting that it is uttered like a commandment: prophecy is that other speech. In the discourse of the prophets there may lie the seeds of the discourse of power, and beneath the exalted features of the mover of men, the one who tells them of their desire, the silent figure of the Despot may be hiding.

Prophetic speech, the power of that speech: might this be the place where power *tout court* originated, the beginning of the State in the Word? Prophets who were soul-winners before they were the masters of men? Perhaps. But even in the extreme experience of prophetism (extreme in that the Tupi-Guarani society had doubtless reached, whether for demographic reasons or others, the furthest limits that define a society as primitive), what the Savages exhibit is the continual effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs, the refusal of unification, the endeavor to exorcise the One, the State. It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State.

Society Against the State

Primitive societies are societies without a State. This factual judgment, accurate in itself, actually hides an opinion, a value judgment that immediately throws doubt on the possibility of constituting political anthropology as a strict science. What the statement says, in fact, is that primitive societies are missing something — the State — that is essential to them, as it is to any other society: our own, for instance. Consequently, those societies are *incomplete;* they are not quite true societies — they are not *civilized* — their existence continues to suffer the painful experience of a *lack* — the lack of a State — which, try as they may, they will never make up. Whether clearly stated or not, that is what comes through in the explorers' chronicles and the work of researchers alike: society is inconceivable without the State; the State is the destiny of every society. One detects an ethnocentric bias in this approach; more often than not it is unconscious, and so the more firmly anchored. Its immediate, spontaneous reference, while perhaps not the best known, is in any case the most familiar. In effect, each one of us carries within himself, internalized like the believer's faith, the certitude that society exists for the State. I low, then, can one conceive of the very existence of primitive societies if not as the rejects of universal history, anachronistic relics of a remote stage that everywhere else has been transcended? Her one recognizes ethnocentrism's other face, the complementary conviction that history is a one-way progression, that

every society is condemned to enter into that history and pass through the stages which lead from savagery to civilization. "All civilized peoples were once savages," wrote Raynal. But the assertion of an obvious evolution cannot justify a doctrine which, arbitrarily tying the state of civilization to the civilization of the State, designates the latter as the necessary end result assigned to all societies. One may ask what has kept the last of the primitive peoples as they are.

In reality, the same old evolutionism remains intact beneath the modern formulations. More subtle when couched in the language of anthropology instead of philosophy, it is on a level with other categories which claim to be scientific. It has already been remarked that archaic societies are almost always classed negatively, under the heading of lack: societies without a State, societies without writing, societies without history. The classing of these societies on the economic plane appears to be of the same order: societies with a subsistence economy. If one means by this that primitive societies are unacquainted with a market economy to which surplus products flow, strictly speaking one says nothing. One is content to observe an additional lack and continues to use our own world as the reference point: those societies without a State, without writing, without history are also without a market. But — common sense may object — what good is a market when no surplus exists? Now, the notion of a subsistence economy conceals within it the implicit assumption that if primitive societies do not produce a surplus, this is because they are incapable of doing so, entirely absorbed as they are in producing the minimum necessary for survival, for subsistence. The time-tested and ever serviceable image of the destitution of the Savages. And, to explain that inability of primitive societies to tear themselves away from the stagnation of living hand to mouth, from perpetual alienation in the search for food, it is said they are technically under-equipped, technologically inferior.

What is the reality? If one understands by technics the set of procedures men acquire not to ensure the absolute mastery of nature (that obtains only for our world and its insane Cartesian project, whose ecological consequences are just beginning to be measured), but to ensure a mastery of the natural environment *suited and relative to their needs*, then there is no longer any reason whatever to impute a technical inferiority to primitive societies: they demonstrate an ability to satisfy their needs which is

latter knew that the One was evil; that is what they preached, from village to village, and the people followed after them in search for the Good, the quest for the not-One. Hence we have, among the Tupi-Guarani at the time of the Discovery, on the one hand, a practice — the religious migration — which is inexplicable unless it is seen as the refusal of the course to which the chieftainship was committing the society, the refusal of separate political power, the refusal of the State; and, on the other hand, a prophetic discourse that identifies the One as the root of Evil, and asserts the possibility of breaking its hold. What makes it possible to conceive of the One? In one way or another, its presence, whether hated or desired, must be visible. And that is why I believe one can make out, beneath the metaphysical proposition that equates Evil with the One, another, more secret equation, of a political nature, which says that the One is the State. Tupi-Guarani prophetism is the heroic attempt of a primitive society to put an end to unhappiness by means of a radical refusal of the One, as the universal essence of the State. This "political" reading of a metaphysical intuition should prompt a somewhat sacrilegious question: could not every metaphysics of the One be subjected to a similar reading? What about the One as the Good, as the preferential object that dawning Western metaphysics assigned to man's desire? Let me go no further than this troublesome piece of evidence: the mind of the savage prophets and that of the ancient Greeks conceive of the same thing, Oneness; but the Guarani Indian says that the One is Evil, whereas Heraclitus says that it is the Good. *What conditions must obtain in order to conceive of the One as the Good?*

In conclusion, let us return to the exemplary world of the Tupi-Guarani. Here is a society that was encroached upon, threatened, by the irresistible rise of the chiefs; it responded by calling up from within itself and releasing forces capable, albeit at the price of collective near suicide, of thwarting the dynamic of the chieftainship, of cutting short the movement that might have caused it to transform the chiefs into law-giving kings. On one side, the chiefs, on the other, and standing against them, the prophets: these were the essential lines of Tupi-Guarani society at the end of the fifteenth century. And the prophetic "machine" worked perfectly well, since the *karai* were able to sweep astonishing masses of Indians along behind them, so spellbound (as one would say today) by the language of those men that they would accompany them to the point of death.

behind them in mad migrations questing for the homeland of the gods: it is the discourse of the *karai*, a prophetic speech, a virulent speech, highly subversive in its appeal to the Indians to undertake what must be acknowledged as the destruction of society. The prophets' call to abandon the evil land (that is, society as it existed) in order to inherit the Land Without Evil, the society of divine happiness, implied the death of society's structure and system of norms. Now that society was increasingly coming under the authority of the chiefs, the weight of their nascent political power. It is reasonable, then, to suppose that if the prophets, risen up from the core of society, proclaimed the world in which men were living to be evil, this was because they surmised that the misfortune, the evil, lay in that slow death to which the emergence of power would sooner or later condemn Tupi-Guarani society, insofar as it was a primitive society, a society without a State. Troubled by the feeling that the ancient primitive world was trembling at its foundations, and haunted by the premonition of a socio-economic catastrophe, the prophets decided that the world had to be changed, that one must change worlds, abandon the world of men for that of the gods.

A prophetic speech that is still living, as the texts "Prophets in the Jungle" and "Of the One Without the Many" should show The four or five thousand remaining Guarani Indians lead a wretched existence in the forests of Paraguay, but they are still in possession of the incomparable wealth afforded them by the *karai*. To be sure the latter no longer serve as guides to whole tribes, like their sixteenth-century ancestors; the search for the Land Without Evil is no longer possible. But the lack of action seems to have encouraged a frenzy of thought, an ever deepening reflection on the unhappiness of the human condition. And that savage thought, born of the dazzling light of the Sun, tells us that the birthplace of Evil, the source of misfortune, is the One.

Perhaps a little more needs to be said about the Guarani sage's concept of the One. What does the term embrace? The favorite themes of contemporary Guarani thought are the same ones that disturbed, more than four centuries ago, those who were called *karai*, prophets. Why is the world evil? What can we do to escape the evil? These are questions that generations of those Indians have asked themselves over and over again: the *karai* of today cling pathetically to the discourse of the prophets of times past. The

at least equal to that of which industrial and technological society is so proud. What this means is that every human group manages, perforce, to exercise the necessary minimum of domination over the environment it inhabits. Up to the present we know of no society that has occupied a natural space impossible to master, except for reasons of force or violence: either it disappears, or it changes territories. The astonishing thing about the Eskimo, or the Australians, is precisely the diversity, imagination, and fine quality of their technical activity, the power of invention and efficiency evident in the tools used by those peoples. Furthermore, one only has to spend a little time in an ethnographic museum: the quality of workmanship displayed in manufacturing the implements of everyday life makes nearly every humble tool into a work of art. Hence there is no hierarchy in the technical domain; there is no superior or inferior technology. The only measure of how well a society is equipped in technology is its ability to meet its needs in a given environment. And from this point of view, it does not appear in the least that primitive societies prove incapable of providing themselves with the means to achieve that end. Of course, the power of technical innovation shown by primitive societies spreads over a period of time. Nothing is immediately given; there is always the patient work of observation and research, the long succession trials and errors, successes and failures. Prehistorians inform us of the number of millennia required by the men of the Paleolithic to replace the crude bifaces of the beginning with the admirable blades of the Solutrian. From another viewpoint, one notes that the discovery of agriculture and the domestication of plants occurred at about the same time in America and the Old World. One is forced to acknowledge that the Amerindians are in no way inferior — quite the contrary — in the art of selecting and differentiating between manifold varieties of useful plants.

Let us dwell a moment on the disastrous interest that induced the Indians to want metal implements. This bears directly on the question of the economy in primitive societies, but not in the way one might think. It is contended that these societies are doomed to a subsistence economy because of their technological inferiority. As we have just seen, that argument has no basis either in logic or in fact. *Not in logic*, because there is no abstract standard in terms of which technological "intensities" can be measured: the technical apparatus of one society is not *directly* comparable

to that of another society, and there is no justification for contrasting the rifle with the bow. *Nor in fact*, seeing that archaeology, ethnography, botany, etc. give us clear proof of the efficiency and economy of performance of the primitive technologies. Hence, if primitive societies are based on a subsistence economy, it is not for want of technological know-how. This is in fact the true question: is the economy of these societies really a subsistence economy? If one gives a meaning to words, if by subsistence economy one is not content to understand an economy without a market and without a surplus — which would be a simple truism, the assertion of a difference - then one is actually affirming that this type of economy permits the society it sustains to merely subsist; one is affirming that this society continually calls upon the totality of its productive forces to supply its members with the minimum necessary for subsistence.

There is a stubborn prejudice in that notion, one which oddly enough goes hand in hand with the contradictory and no less common idea that the Savage is lazy. While, in our culture's vulgar language, there is the saying "to work like a nigger," there is a similar expression in South America, where one says "lazy like an Indian." Now, one cannot have it both ways: either man in primitive societies (American and others) lives in a subsistence economy and spends most of his time in the search for food; or else he does not live in a subsistence economy and can allow himself prolonged hours of leisure, smoking in his hammock. That is what made an unambiguously unfavorable impression on the first European observers of the Indians of Brazil. Great was their disapproval on seeing that those strapping men glowing with health preferred to deck themselves out like women with paint and feathers instead of perspiring away in their gardens. Obviously, these people were deliberately ignorant of the fact that one must earn his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. It wouldn't do, and it didn't last: the Indians were soon put to work, and they died of it. As a matter of fact, two axioms seem to have guided the advance of Western civilization from the outset: the first maintains that true societies unfold in the protective shadow of the State; the second states a categorical imperative: man must work.

The Indians devoted relatively little time to what is called work. And even so, they did not die of hunger. The chronicles of the period are unanimous in describing the fine appearance of the adults, the good health of the

expansion in a primitive society. But it does fall to that discipline to link the demographic and the political, to analyze the force exerted by the former on the latter, by means of the sociological.

Throughout this text, I have consistently argued that a separate power is not possible in a primitive society, for reasons deriving from their internal organization; that it is not possible for the State to arise from within primitive society. And here it seems that I have just contradicted myself by speaking of the Tupi-Guarani as an example of a primitive society in which something was beginning to surface that could have become the State. It is undeniable that a process was developing in those societies, in progress for quite a long time no doubt — a process that aimed at establishing a chieftainship whose political power was not inconsiderable. Things had even reached a point where the French and Portuguese chroniclers did not hesitate to bestow on the great chiefs of tribal federations the titles "provincial kings" or "kinglets." That process of profound transformation of the Tupi-Guarani society was brutally interrupted by the arrival of the Europeans. Does that mean that if the discovery of the New World had taken place a century later, for example, a State formation would have been imposed on the Indian tribes of the Brazilian coastal regions? It is always easy, and risky, to reconstruct a hypothetical history that no evidence can contradict. But in this instance, I think it is possible to answer firmly in the negative: it was not the arrival of the Westerners that put a stop to the eventual emergence of the State among the Tupi-Guarani, but rather an awakening of society itself to its own nature as primitive society, an awakening, an uprising, that was directed against the chieftainship in a sense, if not explicitly; for, in any case, it had destructive effects on the power of the chiefs. I have in mind that strange phenomenon that, beginning in the last decades of the fifteenth century, stirred up the Tupi-Guarani tribes, the fiery preaching of certain men who went from group to group inciting the Indians to forsake everything and launch out in search of the Land Without Evil, the earthly paradise.

In primitive society, the chieftainship and language are intrinsically linked; speech is the only power with which the chief is vested; more than that speech is an obligation for him. But there is another sort of speech, another discourse, uttered not by the chiefs, but by those men who, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, carried thousands of Indians along

sary effects (transformation of the social organization), and yet one cannot fail to remark, especially as regards America, the sociological consequence of population size, the ability the increase in densities has to unsettle (I do not say destroy) primitive society. In fact it is very probable that a basic condition for the existence of primitive societies is their relatively small demographic size. Things can function on the primitive model only if the people are few in number. Or, in other words, in order for a society to be primitive, it must be numerically small. And, in effect, what one observes in the Savage world is an extraordinary patchwork of "nations," tribes, and societies made up of local groups that take great care to preserve their autonomy within the larger group of which they are a part, although they may conclude temporary alliances with their nearby "fellow-countrymen," if the circumstances — especially those having to do with warfare — demand it. This atomization of the tribal universe is unquestionably an effective means of preventing the establishment of socio-political groupings that would incorporate the local groups and, beyond that, a means of preventing the emergence of the State, which is a unifier by nature.

Now, it is disturbing to find that the Tupi-Guarani, as they existed at the time of their discovery by Europe, represent a considerable departure from the usual primitive world, and on two essential points: *the demographic density ratio* of their tribes or local groups clearly exceeds that of the neighboring populations; moreover, *the size of the local groups* is out of all proportion to the socio-political units of the Tropical Forest. Of course, the Tupinamba villages, for instance, which numbered several thousand inhabitants, were not cities; but they did cease to belong to the "standard" demographic range of the neighboring societies. Against this background of demographic expansion and concentration of the population, there stands out — this too is an unusual phenomenon for primitive America, if not for imperial America — the manifest tendency of the chieftainships to acquire a power unknown elsewhere. The Tupi-Guarani chiefs were not despots, to be sure; but they were not altogether powerless chiefs either. This is not the place to undertake the long and complex task of analyzing the chieftainship among the Tupi-Guarani. Let me confine myself to pointing out, at one end of society, as it were, a demographic, growth, and, at the other end, the slow emergence of political power. It does not rest with ethnology (or at least not it alone) to answer the question of the causes of demographic

many children, the abundance and variety of things to eat. Consequently, the subsistence economy in effect among the Indian tribes did not by any means imply an anxious, full-time search for food. It follows that a subsistence economy is compatible with a substantial limitation of the time given to productive activities. Take the case of the South American tribes who practiced agriculture, the Tupi-Guarani, for example, whose idleness was such a source of irritation to the French and the Portuguese. The economic life of those Indians was primarily based on agriculture, secondarily on hunting, fishing, and gathering. The same garden plot was used for from four to six consecutive years after which it was abandoned, owing either to the depletion of the soil, or, more likely, to an invasion of the cultivated space by a parasitic vegetation that was difficult to eliminate. The biggest part of the work, performed by the men, consisted of clearing the necessary area by the slash and burn technique, using stone axes. This job, accomplished at the end of the rainy season, would keep the men busy for a month or two. Nearly all the rest of the agricultural process — planting, weeding, harvesting — was the responsibility of the women, in keeping with the sexual division of labor. This happy conclusion follows: the men (i.e., one-half the population) worked about two months every four years! As for the rest of the time, they reserved it for occupations experienced not as pain but as pleasure: hunting and fishing; entertainments and drinking sessions; and finally for satisfying their passionate liking for warfare.

Now, these qualitative and impressionistic pieces of information find a striking confirmation in recent research — some of it still in progress — of a rigorously conclusive nature, since it involves measuring the time spent working in societies with a subsistence economy. The figures obtained, whether they concern nomad hunters of the Kalahari Desert, or Amerindian sedentary agriculturists, reveal a mean apportionment of less than four hours daily for ordinary work time. J. Lizot, who has been living for several years among the Yanomami Indians of the Venezuelan Amazon region, has chronometrically established that the average length of time spent working each day by adults, *including all activities*, barely exceeds three hours. Although I did not carry out similar measurements among the Guayaki, who are nomad hunters of the Paraguayan forest, I can affirm that those Indians, women and men, spent at least half the day in almost total idleness since hunting and collecting took place (but not every

day) between six and eleven o'clock in the morning, or thereabouts. It is probable that similar studies conducted among the remaining primitive peoples would produce analogous results, taking ecological differences into account.

Thus we find ourselves at a far remove from the wretchedness that surrounds the idea of subsistence economy. Not only is man in primitive societies not bound to the animal existence that would derive from a continual search for the means of survival, but this result is even bought at the price of a remarkably short period of activity. This means that primitive societies have at their disposal, if they so desire, all the time necessary to increase the production of material goods. Common sense asks then: why would the men living in those societies want to work and produce more, given that three or four hours of peaceful activity suffice to meet the needs of the group? What good would it do them? What purpose would be served by the surplus thus accumulated? What would it be used for? Men work more than their needs require only when forced to. And it is just that kind of force which is absent from the primitive world; the absence of that external force even defines the nature of primitive society. The term, subsistence economy, is acceptable for describing the economic organization of those societies, provided it is taken to mean *not* the necessity that derives from a *lack*, an incapacity inherent in that type of society and its technology; but the contrary: the refusal of a useless *excess*, the determination to make productive activity agree with the satisfaction of needs. And nothing more. Moreover, a closer look at things will show there is actually the production of a surplus in primitive societies: the quantity of cultivated plants produced (manioc, maize, tobacco, and so on) always exceeds what is necessary for the group's consumption, it being understood that this production over and above is included in the usual time spent working. That surplus, obtained without surplus labor, is consumed consummated, for political purposes properly so called, on festive occasions, when invitations are extended, during visits by outsiders, and so forth.

The advantage of a metal ax over a stone ax is too obvious to require much discussion: one can do perhaps ten times as much work with the first in the same amount of time as with the second; or else, complete the same amount of work-in one-tenth the time. And when the Indians discovered the productive superiority of the white men's axes, they wanted them not

sufficient. But of course he could not go attacking Mexican villages all by himself, so he tried to persuade his people to set out again on the war path. In vain. Its collective goal — revenge — having been reached, the Apache society yearned for rest. Geronimo's goal, then, was a personal objective which he hoped to accomplish by drawing in the tribe. He attempted to turn the tribe into the instrument of his desire, whereas before, by virtue of his competence as a warrior, he was the tribe's instrument. Naturally, the Apaches chose not to follow Geronimo, just as the Yanomami refused to follow Fousiwe. At best, the Apache chief managed to convince (occasionally, at the cost of lies) a few young men with a craving for glory and spoils. For one of these expeditions, Geronimo's heroic and absurd army consisted of two men! The Apaches who, owing to the circumstances, accepted Geronimo's leadership because of his fighting skill, would regularly turn their backs on him whenever he wanted to wage his personal war. Geronimo, the last of the great North American war chiefs, who spent thirty years of his life trying to "play the chief," and never succeeded....

The essential feature (that is, relating to the essence) of primitive society is its exercise of absolute and complete power over all the elements of which it is composed; the fact that it prevents any one of the subgroups that constitute it from becoming autonomous; that it holds all the internal movements — conscious and unconscious — that maintain social life to the limits and direction prescribed by the society. One of the ways (violence, if necessary, is another) in which society manifests its will to preserve that primitive social order is by refusing to allow an individual, central, separate power to arise. Primitive society, then, is a society from which nothing escapes, which lets nothing get outside itself, for all the exits are blocked. It is a society, therefore, that ought to reproduce itself perpetually without anything affecting it throughout time.

There is, however, one area that seems to escape, at least in part, society's control; the demographic domain, a domain governed by cultural rules, but also by natural laws; a space where a life that is grounded in both the social and the biological unfolds, where there is a "machine" that operates according to its own mechanics, perhaps, which would place it beyond the social grasp.

There is no question of replacing an economic determinism with a demographic determinism, of fitting causes (demographic growth) to neces-

wants to wage war — then the relationship between the chief and the tribe is reversed; the leader tries to use society for his individual aim, as a means to his personal end. Now, it should be kept in mind that a primitive chief is a chief without power: how could he impose the dictates of his desire on a society that refused to be drawn in? He is a prisoner of both his desire for prestige and his powerlessness to fulfill that desire. What may happen in such situations? The warrior will be left to go it alone, to engage in a dubious battle that will only lead him to his death. That was the fate of the South American warrior Fousiwe. He saw himself deserted by his tribe for having tried to thrust on his people a war they did not want. It only remained for him to wage that war on his own, and he died riddled with arrows. Death is the warrior's destiny, for, primitive society is such that *it does not permit the desire for prestige to be replaced by the will to power*. Or, in other words, in primitive society the chief, who embodies the possibility of a will to power, is condemned to death in advance. Separate political power is impossible in primitive society; there is no room, no vacuum for the State to fill.

Less tragic in its conclusion, but very similar in its development, is the story of another Indian leader, far more renowned than the obscure Amazonian warrior: I refer to the famous Apache chief Geronimo. A reading of his memoirs[3] proves very instructive, despite the rather whimsical fashion in which they were set down in writing. Geronimo was only a young warrior like the others when the Mexican soldiers attacked his tribe's camp and massacred the women and children, killing Geronimo's whole family. The various Apache tribes banded together to avenge the murders, and Geronimo was commissioned to conduct the battle. The result was complete success for the Apaches, who wiped out the Mexican garrison. As the main architect of the victory, Geronimo experienced an immense increase in his prestige as a warrior. And, from that moment, things changed; something occurred in Geronimo; something was going on. For, while the affair was more or less laid to rest by the other Apaches, who were content with a victory that fully satisfied their hunger for vengeance, Geronimo, on the other hand, did not see it that way. He wanted more revenge on the Mexicans; he did not believe that the bloody defeat of the soldiers was

3. Geronimo: His Own Story, S. M. Barrett, ed.. New York, Ballantinc, 1970.

in order to produce more in the same amount of time, but to produce as much in a period of time ten times shorter. Exactly the opposite occurred, for, with the metal axes, the violence, the force, the power which the civilized newcomers brought to bear on the Savages created havoc in the primitive Indian world.

Primitive societies are, as Lizot writes with regard to the Yanomami, societies characterized by the rejection of work: "The Yanomamis' contempt for work and their disinterest in technological progress per se are beyond question."[1] The first leisure societies, the first affluent societies, according to M. Sahlin's apt and playful expression.

If the project of establishing an economic anthropology of primitive societies as an independent discipline is to have any meaning, the latter cannot derive merely from a scrutiny of the economic life of those societies: one would remain within the confines of an ethnology of description, the description of a *non-autonomous* dimension of primitive social life. Rather, it is when that dimension of the "total social fact" is constituted as an autonomous sphere that the notion of an economic anthropology appears justified: when the refusal of work disappears, when the taste for accumulation replaces the sense of leisure; in a word, when the external force mentioned above makes its appearance in the social body. That force without which the Savages would never surrender their leisure, that force which destroys society insofar as it is primitive society, is the power to compel; it is the power of coercion; it is political power. But economic anthropology is invalidated in any case; in a sense, it loses its object at the very moment it thinks it has grasped it: *the economy becomes a political economy*.

For man in primitive societies, the activity of production is measured precisely, delimited by the needs to be satisfied, it being understood that what is essentially involved is energy needs: production is restricted to replenishing the stock of energy expended. In other words, it is life as nature that — excepting the production of goods socially consumed on festive occasions — establishes and determines the quantity of time devoted to reproduction. This means that once its needs are fully satisfied nothing

1. J. Lizot, "Economie ou societe? Quelques themes a propos de I'etude d'une communaute d'Amerindiens," Journal de la Societe des Americanistes, vol. 9, (1973), pp. 137-75.

could induce primitive society to produce more, that is, to alienate its time by working for no good reason when that time is available for idleness, play, warfare, or festivities. What are the conditions under which this relationship between primitive man and the activity of production can change? Under what conditions can that activity be assigned a goal other than the satisfaction of energy needs? This amounts to raising the question of the origin of work as alienated labor.

In primitive society — an essentially egalitarian society — men control their activity, control the circulation of the products of that activity: they act only on their own behalf, even though the law of exchange mediates the direct relation of man to his product. Everything is thrown into confusion, therefore, when the activity of production is diverted from its initial goal, when, instead of producing only for himself, primitive man also produces for others, *without exchange and without reciprocity*. That is the point at which it becomes possible to speak of labor: when the egalitarian rule of exchange ceases to constitute the "civil code" of the society, when the activity of production is aimed at satisfying the needs of others, when the order of exchange gives way to the terror of debt. It is there, in fact, that the difference between the Amazonian Savage and the Indian of the Inca empire is to be placed. All things considered, the first produces in order to live, whereas the second works in addition so that others can live, those who do not work, the masters who tell him: you must pay what you owe us, you must perpetually repay your debt to us.

When, in primitive society, the economic dynamic lends itself to definition as a distinct and autonomous domain, when the activity of production becomes alienated, accountable labor, levied by men who will enjoy the fruits of that labor, what has come to pass is that society has been divided into rulers and ruled, masters and subjects — it has ceased to exorcise the thing that will be its ruin: power and the respect for power. Society's major division, the division that is the basis for all the others, including no doubt the division of labor, is the new vertical ordering of things between a base and a summit; it is the great political cleavage between those who hold the force, be it military or religious, and those subject to that force. 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

remain unchanged. But the risk of an excessive desire on the part of the chief with respect to that of the tribe as a whole, the danger to him of going too far, of exceeding the strict limits allotted to his office, is ever present. Occasionally a chief accepts running that risk and attempts to put his personal interest ahead of the collective interest. Reversing the normal relationship that determines the leader as a means in the service of a socially defined end, he tries to make society into the means for achieving a purely private end: *the tribe in the service of the chief and no longer the chief in the service of the tribe*. If it "worked," then we would have found the birthplace of political power, as force and violence; we would have the first incarnation, the minimal form of the State. But it never works.

In the very fine account of the twenty years she spent among the Yanomami,[2] Elena Valero talks at length about her first husband, the war leader Fousiwe. His story illustrates quite well the fate of the primitive chief when, by the force of circumstances, he is led to transgress the law of primitive society; being the true locus of power, society refuses to let go of it, refuses to delegate it. So Fousiwe is acknowledged by his tribe as "chief," owing to the prestige he has obtained for himself as the organizer and leader of victorious raids against enemy groups. As a result, he plans and directs wars that his tribe undertakes willingly; he places his technical competence as a man of war, his courage, and his dynamism in the service of the group: he is the effective instrument of his society. But the unfortunate thing about a primitive warrior's life is that the prestige he acquires in warfare is soon lost if it is not constantly renewed by fresh successes. The tribe, for whom the chief is nothing more than the appropriate tool for implementing its will, easily forgets the chief's past victories. For him, nothing is permanently acquired, and if he intends to remind people, whose memory is apt to fail, of his fame and prestige, it will not be enough merely to exalt his old exploits: he will have to create the occasion for new feats of arms. A warrior has no choice: he is obliged to desire war. It is here that the consensus by which he is recognized as chief draws its boundary line. If his desire for war coincides with society's desire for war, the society continues to follow him. But if the chief 's desire for war attempts to fall back on a society motivated by the desire for peace — no society *always*

2. Ettore Biocca and Helena Valero, Yanoama, Dennis Rhodes, trans., New York, Dutton, 1970.

gressing primitive law are *rare: you are worth no more than the others*. Rare, to be sure, but not unheard of: it occasionally happens that a chief tries to *play the chief,* and not out of Machiavellian motives, but rather because he has no choice; he cannot do otherwise. Let me explain. As a rule, a chief does not attempt (the thought does not even enter his mind) to subvert the normal relationship (i.e., in keeping with the norms) he maintains with respect to his group, a subversion that would make him the master of the tribe instead of its servant. The great cacique Alaykin, the war chief of a tribe inhabiting the Argentinean Chaco gave a very good definition of that normal relationship in his reply to a Spanish officer who was trying to convince him to drag his tribe into a war it did not want: "The Abipones, by a custom handed down by their ancestors, follow their own bidding and not that of their cacique. I am their leader, but I could not bring harm to any of my people without bringing harm to myself; if I were to use orders or force with my comrades, they would turn their backs on me at once. I prefer to be loved and not feared by them." And, let there be no doubt, most Indian chiefs would have spoken similar words.

There are exceptions, however, nearly always connected with warfare. We know, in fact, that the preparation and conduct of a military expedition are the only circumstances in which the chief has the opportunity to exercise a minimum of authority, deriving solely from his technical competence as a warrior. As soon as things have been concluded, and whatever the outcome of the fighting, the war chief again becomes a chief without power; in no case is the prestige that comes with victory converted into authority. Even- thing hinges on just that separation maintained by the society between power and prestige, between the fame of a victorious warrior and the command that he is forbidden to exercise. The fountain most suited to quenching a warrior's thirst for prestige is war. At the same time, a chief whose prestige is linked with warfare can preserve and bolster it only in warfare: it is a kind of compulsion, a kind of escape into the fray, that has him continually wanting to organize martial expeditions from which he hopes to obtain the (symbolic) benefits attaching to victory. As long as his desire for war corresponds to the general will of the tribe, particularly that of the young men, for whom war is also the principal means of acquiring prestige, as long as the will of the chief does not go beyond that of the tribe, the customary relations between the chief and the tribe

determines the advent of classes.

Incompletion, unfulfillment, lack: the nature of primitive societies is not to be sought in that direction. Rather, it asserts itself as positivity, as a mastery of the natural milieu and the social project; as the sovereign will to let nothing slip outside its being that might alter, corrupt, and destroy it. This is what needs to be firmly grasped: primitive societies are not overdue embryos of subsequent societies, social bodies whose "normal" development was arrested by some strange malady; they are not situated at the commencement of a historical logic leading straight to an end given ahead of time, but recognized only a posteriori as our own social system. (If history is that logic, how is it that primitive societies still exist?) All the foregoing is expressed, at the level of economic life, by the refusal of primitive societies to allow work and production to engulf them; by the decision to restrict supplies to socio-political needs; by the intrinsic impossibility of competition (in a primitive society what would be the use of being a rich man in the midst of poor men?); in short, by the prohibition — unstated but said nonetheless — of inequality.

Why is the economy in a primitive society not a political economy? This is due to the evident fact that in primitive societies the economy is not autonomous. It might be said that in this sense primitive societies are societies without an economy, *because they refuse an economy*. But, in that case, must one again define the political in these societies in terms of an absence? Must it be supposed that, since we are dealing with "lawless and kingless" societies, they lack a field of political activity? And would we not, in that way, fall into the classic rut of an ethnocentrism for which "lack" is the salient feature at all levels of societies that are different?

Let us discuss, then, the question of the political dimension in primitive societies. It is not simply a matter of an "interesting" problem, a subject to be pondered by specialists alone. For, in this instance, ethnology would have to be broad enough in scope to meet the requirements of a general theory (yet to be constructed) of society and history. The extraordinary diversity of types of social organization, the profusion, in time and space, of dissimilar societies, do not, however, prevent the possibility of discovering an order within the discontinuous, the possibility of a reduction of that infinite multiplicity of differences. A massive reduction, seeing that history affords us in fact only *two* types of society utterly irreducible to

one another, two macro-classes, each one of which encompasses societies that have something basic in common, not withstanding their differences. *On the one hand, there are primitive societies or societies without a State; on the other hand, there are societies with a State.* It is the presence or absence of the State apparatus (capable of assuming many forms) that assigns every society its logical place, and always down and irreversible line of discontinuity between the two types of society. The emergence of the State brought about the great typological division between Savage and Civilized man; it created the unbridgeable gulf whereby everything was changed, for, on the other side, Time became History. It has often been remarked, and rightly so, that the movement of world history was radically affected by two accelerations in its rhythm. The impetus of the first was furnished by what is termed the Neolithic Revolution (the domestication of animals, agriculture, the discovery of the arts of weaving and pottery, the subsequent sedentarization of human groups, and so forth). We are still living, and increasingly so, if one may put it that way, within the prolongation of the second acceleration, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century.

Obviously, there is no doubt that the Neolithic break drastically altered the conditions of material existence of the formerly Paleolithic peoples. But was that transformation profound enough to have affected the very being of the societies concerned? Is it possible to say that societies function differently according to whether they are pre-Neolithic or post-Neolithic? There is ethnographic evidence that points, rather, to the contrary. The transition from nomadism to sedentarization is held to be the most significant consequence of the Neolithic Revolution, in that it made possible — through the concentration of a stabilized population — cities and, beyond that, the formation of state machines. But that hypothesis carries with it the assumption that every technological "complex" without agriculture is of necessity consigned to nomadism. The inference is ethnographically incorrect: an economy of hunting, fishing, and gathering does not necessarily demand a nomadic way of life. There are several examples, in America and elsewhere, attesting that the absence of agriculture is compatible with sedentariness. This justifies the assumption that if some peoples did not acquire agriculture even though it was ecologically feasible, it was not because they were incompetent, technologically backward, or culturally inferior, but, more simply, because they had no need of it.

tions of the chief, as they have been analyzed above, are convincing proof that the chieftainship does not involve functions of authority. Mainly responsible for resolving the conflicts that can surface between individuals, families, lineages, and so forth, the chief has to rely on nothing more than the prestige accorded him by the society to restore order and harmony. But prestige does not signify power, certainly, and the means the chief possesses for performing his task of peacemaker are limited to the use of speech: not even to arbitrate between the contending parties, because the chief is not a judge; but, armed only with his eloquence, to try to persuade the people that it is best to calm down, stop insulting one another, and emulate the ancestors who always lived together in harmony. The success of the endeavor is never guaranteed, for *the chief's word carries no force of law*. If the effort to persuade should fail, the conflict then risks having a violent outcome, and the chiefs prestige may very well be a casualty, since he will have proved his inability to accomplish what was expected of him.

In the estimation of the tribe, what qualifies such a man to be chief? In the end, it is his "technical" competence alone: his oratorical talent, his expertise as a hunter, his ability to coordinate martial activities, both offensive and defensive. And in no circumstance does the tribe allow the chief to go beyond that technical limit; it never allows a technical superiority to change into a political authority. The chief is there to serve society; it is society as such — the real locus of power — that exercises its authority over the chief. That is why it is impossible for the chief to reverse that relationship for his own ends, to put society in his service, to exercise what is termed power over the tribe: primitive society would never tolerate having a chief transform himself into a despot.

In a sense, the tribe keeps the chief under a close watch; he is a kind of prisoner in a space which the tribe does not let him leave. But does he have any desire to get out of that space? Does it ever happen that a chief desires to be chief? That he wants to substitute the realization of his own desire for the service and the interest of the group? That the satisfaction of his personal interest takes precedence over his obedience to the collective project? By virtue of the close supervision to which the leader's practice, *like that of all the others*, is subjected by society — this supervision resulting from the nature of primitive societies, and not, of course, from a conscious and deliberate preoccupation with surveillance — instances of chiefs trans-

State is impossible. And yet all civilized peoples were first primitives: what made it so that the State ceased to be impossible? Why did some peoples cease to be primitives? What tremendous event, what revolution, allowed the figure of the Despot, of he who gives orders to those who obey, to emerge? *Where does political power come from?* Such is the mystery (perhaps a temporary one) of the origin.

While it still does not appear possible to determine the conditions in which the State emerged, it is possible to specify the conditions of its non-emergence; and the texts assembled in this volume attempt to delineate the space of the political in societies without a State. Faithless, lawless, and kingless: these terms used by the sixteenth-century West to describe the Indians can easily be extended to cover all primitive societies. They can serve as the distinguishing criteria: a society is primitive if it is without a king, as the legitimate source of the law, that is, the State machine. Conversely, every non-primitive society is a society with a State: no matter what socio-political regime is in effect. That is what permits one to consolidate all the great despotisms — kings, emperors of China or the Andes, pharaohs — into a single class, along with the more recent monarchies — "I am the State" — and the contemporary social systems, whether they possess a liberal capitalism as in Western Europe, or a State capitalism such as exists elsewhere…

Hence there is no king in the tribe, but a chief who is not a chief of State. What does that imply? Simply that the chief has no authority at his disposal, no power of coercion, no means of giving an order. The chief is not a commander; the people of the tribe are under no obligation to obey. *The space of the chieftainship is not the locus of power*, and the "profile" of the primitive chief in no way foreshadows that of a future despot. There is nothing about the chieftainship that suggests the State apparatus derived from it.

How is it that the tribal chief does not prefigure the chief of State? Why is such an anticipation not possible in the world of Savages? That radical discontinuity — which makes a gradual transition from the primitive chieftainship to the State machine unthinkable — is logically based in the relation of exclusion that places political power outside the chieftainship. What we are dealing with is a chief without power, and an institution, the chieftainship, that is a stranger to its essence, which is authority. The func-

The post-Columbian history of America offers cases of populations comprised of sedentary agriculturists who, experiencing the effects of a technical revolution (the acquisition of the horse and, secondarily, firearms) elected to abandon agriculture and devote themselves almost exclusively to hunting, whose yield was multiplied by the tenfold increase in mobility that came from using the horse. Once they were mounted, the tribes of the Plains of North America and those of the Chaco intensified and extended their movements; but their nomadism bore little resemblance to the descriptions generally given of bands of hunters and gatherers such as the Guayaki of Paraguay, and their abandonment of agriculture did not result in either a demographic scattering or a transformation of their previous social organization.

What is to be learned from the movement of the greatest number of societies from hunting to agriculture, and the reverse movement, of a few others, from agriculture to hunting? It appears to have been affected without changing the nature of those societies in any way. It would appear that where their conditions of material existence were all that changed, they remained as they were- that the Neolithic Revolution — while it did have a considerable effect on the material life of the human groups then existing, doubtless making life easier for them — did not mechanically bring about an overturning of the social order. In other words, as regards primitive societies, a transformation at the level of what Marxists term the economic infrastructure is not necessarily "reflected" in its corollary, the political superstructure, since the latter appears to be independent of its material base. The American continent clearly illustrates the independence of the economy and society with respect to one another. Some groups of hunters-fishers-gatherers, be they nomads or not, present the same socio-political characteristics as their sedentary agriculturist neighbors: different "infrastructures," the same "superstructure." Conversely, the meso-American societies — imperial societies, societies with a State — depended on an agriculture that, although more intensive than elsewhere, nevertheless was very similar, from the standpoint of its technical level, to the agriculture of the "savage" tribes of the Tropical Forest; the same "infrastructure," different "superstructures," since in the one case it was a matter of societies without a State, in the other case full-fledged States.

Hence, it is the Political break [*coupure*] that is decisive, and not the

economic transformation. The true revolution in man's protohistory is not the Neolithic, since it may very well leave the previously existing social organization intact; it is the political revolution, that mysterious emergence — irreversible, fatal to primitive societies — of the thing we know by the name of the State. And if one wants to preserve the Marxist concepts of infrastructure and superstructure, then perhaps one must acknowledge that the infrastructure is the political, and the superstructure is the economic. Only one structural, cataclysmic upheaval is capable of transforming primitive society, destroying it in the process: the mutation that causes to rise up within that society, or from outside it, the thing whose very absence defines primitive society, hierarchical authority, the power relation, the subjugation of men — in a word, the State. It would be quite futile to search for the cause of the event in a hypothetical modification of the relations of production in primitive society, a modification that, dividing society gradually into rich and poor, exploiters and exploited, would mechanically lead to the establishment of an organ enabling the former to exercise power over the latter; leading, that is, to the birth of the State.

Not only is such a modification of the economic base hypothetical, it is also impossible. For the system of production of a given society to change in the direction of an intensification of work with a view to producing a greater quantity of goods, either the men living in that society must desire the transformation of their mode of life, or else, not desiring it, they must have it imposed on them by external violence. In the second instance, nothing originates in the society itself; it suffers the aggression of an external power for whose benefit the productive system will be modified: more work and more production to satisfy the needs of the new masters of power. Political oppression determines, begets, allows exploitation. But it serves no purpose to evoke such a "scenario," since it posits an external, contingent, immediate origin of State violence, and not the slow fruition of the internal, socio-economic conditions of its rise.

It is said that the State is the instrument that allows the ruling class to bring its violent domination to bear on the dominated classes. Let us assume that to be true. For the State to appear, then, there would have to exist a prior division of societies into antagonistic social classes, tied to one another by relations of exploitation. Flence the *structure* of society — the

division into classes — would have to precede the emergence of the State *machine*. Let me point out, in passing, the extreme fragility of that purely instrumentalist theory of the State. If society is organized by oppressors who are able to exploit the oppressed, this is because that ability to impose alienation rests on the use of a certain force, that is, on the thing that constitutes the very substance of the State, "the monopoly of legitimate physical violence." That being granted, what necessity would be met by the existence of a State, since its essence — violence — is inherent in the division of society, and, in that sense, it is already given in the oppression that one group inflicts on the others? It would be no more than the useless organ of a function that is filled beforehand and elsewhere.

Tying the emergence of the State machine to a transformation of the social structure results merely in deferring the problem of that emergence. For then one must ask why the new division of men into rulers and ruled within a primitive society, that is, an undivided society, occurred. What motive force was behind that transformation that culminated in the formation of the State? One might reply that its emergence gave legal sanction to a private property that had come into existence previously. Very good. But why would private property spring up in a type of society in which it is unknown because it is rejected? Why would a few members want to proclaim one day: *this is mine*, and how could the others allow the seeds of the thing primitive society knows nothing about — authority, oppression, the State — to take hold? The knowledge of primitive societies that we now have no longer permits us to look for the origin of the political at the level of the economic. That is not the soil in which the genealogy of the State has its roots. There is nothing in the economic working of a primitive society, a society without a State, that enables a difference to be introduced making some richer or poorer than others, because no one in such a society feels the quaint desire to do more, own more, or appear to be more than his neighbor. The ability, held by all cultures alike, to satisfy their material needs, and the exchange of goods and services, which continually prevents the private accumulation of goods, quite simply make it impossible for such a desire — the desire for possession that is actually the desire for power — to develop. Primitive society, the first society of abundance, leaves no room for the desire for overabundance.

Primitive societies are societies without a State because for them the