

letters

Doing justice to Clastres

The assessment of Pierre Clastres by Bartholomew Dean (A.T., April 1999) is marred by inconsistency and anachronism and does not put this French ethnologist's contribution in a proper perspective.

The article opens with a paragraph of praises for the work of Clastres on the Aché Guayaki Indians of Paraguay (published in French in 1972, in English in 1998), which is indeed justified. But it then goes on to retrospectively debunk Clastres' whole approach, thereby virtually reducing his contribution to Amerindian studies to a primitivist gloss in the history of anthropology. Dean suggests that Clastres' work is marred by his 'exotacist/primitivist' perception, and his 'unabashed pristinitism'. He states further that Clastres' book is, '...in design and content, [...] an old-fashioned monograph detailing heroic encounters with the exotic Other', and goes on to say that it shows a 'profoundly self-assured empiricism', 'can be read as a response to our discontent with western modernity', and that the author shows 'ahistoricism, rhetorical romanticism, and museumification'. And so on.

We all know what Dean means, but this is too much invective for a book which did nothing else but draw attention to the plight of the Aché, a marginal and exploited group, describe in depth their way of life and culture, and evoke their common humanity with us, the Others. As such the book has had its impact. Based on his image of anthropological practice of the late 1990s, Dean perhaps expected a contribution to a full-fledged emancipatory project and to the struggle of indigenous peoples. But in 1972 these concerns had to take a different shape, partly because of the great differences in intellectual and political space for anthropology and for action research then and now, and especially in the South America of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In France, however, Clastres was one of the engaged, 'anti-imperialist' scholars in post 1968 ethnology.

One can also see the so-called 'romantically positive light' in which Clastres allegedly portrayed the Guayaki as a rhetorical device of social criticism, meant to ultimately retrieve their way of life and continued existence. Clastres' emphasis on the disturbing effects of 'our civilization' on the 'hardly touched' Aché should be read as a fundamental critique against the arrogant idea – still widely present in Western and other powerful societies; see development aid and international politics – that they should be reformed in our image and respond to our models of social and economic life. Thus, apart from the fact that Dean's remarks cannot in themselves disqualify any of the book's information on Aché Guayaki society in the 1950s and 60s, one cannot deny its

having a critical message. Only its clear prediction that this people would 'disappear' soon was proved wrong. Clastres' ethnography has depicted the Guayaki in a certain light, but in presenting them as 'indigenes' with specific cultural values and identity, he has also tried to ground their presence and their historical rights within Paraguayan society, in whatever problematic way these were and will be implemented.

Clastres' studies on the Guayaki still stand as invaluable reference works (see also his *Society against the State*, Oxford 1977) which in places offer some theoretical challenge as well. We should obviously take his work as an account of the Guayaki at one point in time – it cannot be otherwise. Dean's insistence on the 'primitive perspective' and the 'cultural essentializing' of Clastres tends to yield too much to the emerging stereotype in 'globalization studies' that all non-western/non-industrial peoples have been connected always and in virtually equal measure to the outside world and have been decisively shaped by the emerging world political economy – as if nothing existed before that. Thus Dean's retrospective criticism of Clastres's ethnography has a point, but as a whole strikes one as too facile and exaggerated. Some more historical understanding of the evolution of ethnology and the choices its practitioners realistically had would be useful in evaluating monographs of the past. □

Jon Abbink

African Studies Centre, Leiden