On Ethnocide

by Pierre Clastres

"De l'ethnocide" first appeared in the Encyclopaedia Universalis (Paris, Editions Universalia, 1974, pp. 282b-286a) and was later reproduced in a collection of essays by Pierre Clastres, Recherches d'anthropologie politique (Seuil, 1980, pp. 47-57). Before his death in 1977 — depriving ethnology of one of its brightest intellects — Clastres had published three works: Chronique des Indiens Guayaki (Plon, 1972), le Grand Parler (Seuil, 1974) and la Société contre l'État (Minuit, 1974; trans. R. Hurley, Society Against the State, New York, Urizen, 1977). At the time of his death, Clastres had embarked on a major project which set out to clear the premise that the organisation and mode of life in 'primitive' society is politically determined by the mechanism of war, which has the strategic function of preventing the development of State formations and of preserving the ideal of autarky. Such a project necessarily challenges both structuralist and marxist anthropological givens. Hints of this argument are readable in "On Ethnocide."

While Clastres' work is largely unknown in the English-speaking world, it has been widely recognised in France by such thinkers as Deleuze and Guattari (Nomadology), Baudrillard (L'échange symbolique et la mort) and de Certeau (Heterologies). Given the orgy of self-congratulation which is currently descending on Australia in the form of the Bicentenary, a reflection on ethnocide is undoubtedly both timely and long overdue. [Trans.]

A few years ago the word ethnocide did not exist. Benefiting from the passing vogues of fashion and, more certainly, from its ability to meet a demand, to satisfy a certain need for terminological precision, the use of the word has largely and rapidly eclipsed its origin in ethnology to arrive in a sense in the public domain. But does the rapid diffusion of a word guarantee that the idea it serves to convey upholds the desired coherence and rigour? It is not evident that comprehension profits from exposure and that, all things considered, there is a perfectly clear understanding of what is being referred to when one speaks of ethnocide. In the mind of its inventors, the word was certainly meant to translate a reality which no other term could express. If the necessity was felt to create a new word, it is because there existed something new to be thought — or else something old, but as yet unthought. In other words, genocide, a term which had been in circulation for a much longer time, was deemed inade-
quate or unsuitable for addressing this new need. Consequently, a serious examination of the idea of ethnocide cannot be undertaken without having first determined what distinguishes the phenomenon so designated from the reality called genocide.

Created in 1946 at the Nuremberg trials, the juridical concept of genocide is the recognition in legal terms of a hitherto unknown type of criminality. More precisely, it corresponds to the first appearance, duly registered by the law, of this criminality: the systematic extermination of European Jews by the German Nazis. Thus the crime defined juridically by genocide becomes rooted in racism, as its logical and ultimately necessary product: a racism which develops freely, as was the case in Nazi Germany, can only lead to genocide. Nevertheless, the colonial wars which came after 1945 throughout the Third World, and which in some cases still continue, have given rise to specific accusations of genocide against the colonial powers. But the game of international relations and the relative indifference of public opinion have prevented the establishment of consensus analogous to what happened at Nuremberg: no legal action has ever been taken.

If the antisemitic genocide by the Nazis was the first to be judged under the law, it was not at all the first to be perpetrated. The history of Western expansion in the 19th century, the history of the formation of colonial empires by the great European powers is punctuated by the methodical massacre of autochthonous peoples. Nevertheless, because of its extent across the continent and the enormous demographic decline it caused for its victims, the genocide of indigenous Americans commands the greatest attention. Since the discovery of America in 1492, a machine to destroy the Indians was set in motion. This machine continues to function throughout the great Amazonian forest where the last 'savage' tribes subsist. In recent years, the massacre of Indians in Brazil, Columbia and Paraguay has been denounced — always in vain.

It is principally from this American experience that ethnologists, and in particular Robert Jaulin, have come to formulate the concept of ethnocide. In the beginning it referred to the situation of the South American Indians. Thus favourable ground, if one can say it, exists there for research into the difference between genocide and ethnocide, since the continent's remaining indigenous peoples are simultaneously the victims of both types of criminality. If genocide refers to the idea of 'race' and to the will to exterminate a racial minority, ethnocide does not point to the physical destruction of a people (in which case the genocidal situation would still apply), but to the destruction of their culture. Ethnocide is therefore the systematic destruction of the modes of life and thought of people who are different from those who carry out this destructive enterprise. In short, genocide kills their bodies, while ethnocide kills their spirit. Of course, in either case it always involves death, but a different death: direct physical suppression is not cultural oppression with long-term effects, depending on the oppressed minority's capacity for resistance. It isn't a choice here between the lesser of two evils. The choice is clear: less barbarism is better than more barbarism. That said, it is now a question of examining the real significance of ethnocide.

Ethnocide shares with genocide an identical vision of the Other: the Other is difference, certainly, but it is above all a bad difference. Both attitudes divide on the nature of the treatment that must be reserved for this difference. On the one hand, the genocidal mind (if one can call it that) wants purely and simply to deny difference; the others are exterminated because they are absolutely bad. Ethnocide, on the other hand, admits a relativity of evil in difference: the others are bad, but they can be improved, by obliging them to transform themselves to the point of total identification, if possible, with the model proposed to or imposed on them. Ethnocidal negation of
the Other leads to an identification with self. Genocide and ethnocide could be opposed as the two perverse forms of optimism and pessimism. In South America, those who butchered the Indians pushed this condition of the Other as difference to the limit: the Indian savage is not a human being, but simply an animal. The murder of an Indian is not a criminal act, racism doesn't play a part in it, since in practice it effectively implies the recognition of a minimum humanity in the Other. The monotonous repetition of a very ancient infamy: Claude Lévi-Strauss, addressing ethnocide before the term existed, recalls in Race and History how the West Indians asked themselves whether the newly-arrived Spanish were gods or men, while the Whites argued over the human or animal nature of the natives.

But who are the practitioners of ethnocide? Who attacks the soul of peoples? In South America, but also in other regions, missionaries head the list. These militant propagators of the Christian faith use force to substitute the Western religion for the barbaric beliefs of the pagans. This evangelistic movement implies two convictions: first, that the difference — paganism — is unacceptable and must be rejected; second, that the evil of this bad difference can be minimised, indeed abolished. Here the ethnical attitude is almost optimistic: the Other, sinful at the outset, is now assumed perfectable, by recognising in him, through identification, the means of elevation to the perfection which Christianity represents. To smash the power of pagan beliefs is to destroy the very fabric of the society. Moreover, the outcome is inevitable: that of leading indigenous people, by the path of true faith, from savagery to civilisation. Ethnocide is practised for the good of the Savage. The secular discourse says nothing different when it announces, for example, the Brazilian government's official doctrine on Indian affairs: "Our Indians," proclaim the authorities, "are human beings just like anyone else. But the life of savagery they lead in the forests condemns them to misery and unhappiness. It is our duty to help them free themselves from servitude. They have the right to elevate themselves to the rank of Brazilian citizens, so that they may fully participate in the development of the national society and enjoy its benefits." The spirituality of ethnocide is the ethic of humanism.

The horizon against which the spirit and practice of ethnocide take shape is composed of two axioms. The first proclaims the hierarchy of cultures: some are inferior, some superior. The second affirms the absolute superiority of Western culture, which therefore can only maintain a relationship of negation with the others, in particular primitive cultures. But it is a positive negation, since it wants to suppress the inferior as lower in order to raise it up to a higher level. The 'Indianness' of the Indians is suppressed in order to make them into Brazilian citizens. Thus it follows that ethnocide, from the perspective of its agents, does not recognise itself as a destructive enterprise: on the contrary, it is a duty, demanded by the humanism inscribed at the heart of Western culture.

This attitude of measuring differences by the yardstick of one's own culture is called ethnocentrism. The West is ethnocidal because it is ethnocentric, because it imagines itself and chooses to be the civilisation. Still, a question arises: does our culture have the monopoly on ethnocentrism? Ethnological experience permits a response. Let us consider the way that primitive societies name themselves. It can be noticed that in reality there is no independent process of naming, insofar as societies usually have the habit of calling themselves by the same name, Mankind. A few examples will serve to illustrate this cultural trait: the Guarani Indians call themselves Ava, meaning 'mankind'; the Guayaki say that they are Aché, the 'persons'; the Waika of Venezuela name themselves Yanoaki, the 'people'; the Eskimos are Inuit, 'men'. This list of proper names could be extended to form a dictionary where all the words have the same meaning: mankind. Inversely, each society systematically refers to its neighbours by pejorative, scornful or insulting names.
Thus each culture divides humanity between itself, which is affirmed as the finest representative of the human species, and the others, who barely come under the title of humanity. The discourse which primitive societies apply to themselves, a discourse which is condensed in the names they confer upon themselves, is thoroughly ethnocentric: the assertion of its own cultural superiority, the refusal to recognise others as equals. Ethnocentrism therefore appears to be the most common thing in the world, and, in this regard at least, the culture of the West is indistinguishable from the rest. To take the analysis a bit further, it is even possible to think that ethnocentrism is a formal property of every cultural formation, immanent in culture itself. The essence of culture is inherently ethnocentric insofar as all cultures in fact consider themselves to be the culture par excellence. In other words, cultural otherness is never understood as positive difference, but always as inferiority on a hierarchical scale.

Yet the fact remains that even if all cultures are ethnocentric, only the West is ethnocidal. It thus follows that ethnocidal practice is not necessarily predicated on an ethnocentric conviction. Otherwise, every culture would be ethnocidal, which is not the case. It is at this level that a certain lack of thought seems to exist regarding the recent preoccupation of researchers with the problem of ethocide. In fact, it is not enough to recognise and affirm the ethnocidal nature and function of Western civilisation. So long as one is content to identify the white world as ethnocidal, one remains at the surface of things, within the repetition (naturally enough, for nothing has changed) of a discourse already enunciated at the beginning of the 16th century — indeed, for example, since the Bishop Las Casas denounced in no uncertain terms the genocide and ethocide practised by the Spanish on the Indians of Central America. From reading the works devoted to ethocide one gets the impression that Western civilisation is for their authors a sort of abstraction, without socio-historical roots, a vague essence that forever contains within itself the ethnocidal spirit. But our culture is not at all an abstraction; rather, it is the slowly constituted product of a history, and answerable to genealogical research. What has made Western civilisation ethnocidal? This is the real question. Beyond the exposure of facts, the analysis of ethocide entails an examination of the historically determined nature of our cultural world. So it is to history that we must now turn.

Not at all an extra-temporal abstraction, neither is Western civilisation a homogeneous reality, an undifferentiated mass identical in all its parts. Yet this is apparently the image portrayed by the aforementioned authors. If the West is ethnocidal like the Sun is bright, then such fatalism renders useless and even absurd the denunciation of its crimes and the call for the protection of its victims. On the contrary, isn't it precisely because Western civilisation is ethnocidal inside itself first that it can then be so on the outside, namely towards other cultural formations? The ethnocidal tendency of Western society is unthinkable without linking it to this feature of our own world, a feature which is itself the classic criterion for distinguishing between Savages and Civilised, between the primitive world and the Western world: the former groups together societies without the State, the latter is comprised of societies with the State. This is a distinction which needs to be examined: can these two properties of the West — as ethnocidal culture and as society with the State — be legitimately put into perspective? If this was so, one could understand why primitive societies may be ethnocentric without in any way being ethnocidal, precisely because they are societies without the State.

Ethocide, let us agree, is the suppression of cultural differences judged inferior or bad; it implements a principle of identification, the project of reducing the other to the same (the Amazonian Indian suppressed as other and reduced to the same as Brazilian citizen). In other words, ethocide ends in the dissolution of the many in
the One. What then of the State? In essence, it is the activation of a centripetal force which tends, when circumstances demand it, to crush the opposing centrifugal forces. The State endeavours to become and proclaims itself as the centre of society, the totality of the social body, the absolute master of the various organs of this body. Here we discover, within the very fabric of the State, the active potency of the One, the desire to refuse the many, the fear and horror of difference. At this formal level, where we are currently situated, it can be noticed that ethnocidal practice and the State machine function in the same way and produce the same effects: the varieties of Western civilisation or the State always reveal the will to reduce difference and otherness, the instinct and taste for the identical and the One.

Leaving this formal, and in a way structuralist, axis to move on to the diachronic axis of concrete history, let us consider French culture as a particular instance of Western culture, as an exemplary illustration of the spirit and destiny of the West. Its formation, rooted in a secular past, appears strictly coextensive with the expansion and reinforcement of the State apparatus, initially in its monarchic and then republican forms. For each development of centralised power there is a corresponding expansion of the cultural world. French culture is a national culture, a culture of French. The extension of the authority of the State is translated into the expansion of the language of the State: French. The nation can be said to constitute itself, the State can proclaim itself as the sole seat of power, when the people over whom it exercises its authority speak the same language as the State. This process of integration evidently comes about by the suppression of differences. Thus it happens, at the dawn of the French nation, when France was no more than a Frankish dominion and its king a pale lord from the North of the Loire, that the Albigensian Crusade
is waged against the South in order to destroy its civilisation. The eradication of the Cathar heresy — a pretext and means of expansion for the Capetian monarchy, and tracing almost the precise boundaries of France — appears as a pure case of ethnocide: the culture of Le Midi, its religion, literature and poetry, was irreversibly censured and the Languedocians became loyal subjects to the king of France.

The Revolution of 1789, which resulted in the triumph of the centralist spirit of the Jacobins over the federalist tendencies of the Girondins, led in turn to the political ascendancy of the Parisian administration. The provinces, as territorial unities, were each based on an ancient reality that was culturally homogeneous in terms of language, political traditions, etc. These were replaced by the abstract division into départements, sufficient to shatter all reference to local particularisms, and thus to facilitate everywhere the penetration of the State authority. As the final stage of this movement, by which the differences vanished one after the other before the force of the State, the Third Republic totally transformed the inhabitants of the Hexagon into citizens, thanks to the institution of the state school, free but compulsory, followed by that of compulsory military service. What remained of autonomous existence in provincial and rural life succumbed to this movement. The ‘Frenchisation’ was complete, the ethnocide consummated: traditional languages were hounded out as backward patois, and village life degraded to the level of folkloric spectacle destined for the consumption of tourists, etc.

Brief as it is, this glance over the history of our country is sufficient to show that ethnocide, as the more or less authoritarian suppression of socio-cultural differences, is preinscribed in the nature and functioning of the State machine, which proceeds by rendering uniform the relation which binds it to individuals: the State only recognises citizens who are equal under the Law.

To assert from the French example that ethnocide belongs to the unifying essence of the State leads to the logical conclusion that all State formations are ethnocidal. Let us quickly examine a type of State that is quite different from the European States. The Incas had achieved the construction of a mechanism of government in the Andes which attracted the admiration of the Spanish, as much for the huge territory over which it extended as for the precision and minutiae of administrative techniques which permitted the emperor and his numerous officials to exercise almost total and permanent control over the empire’s inhabitants. The strictly ethnocidal aspect of this State machine exists in its tendency to ‘Inca-ise’ the newly conquered populations, not only obliging them to pay tribute to the new masters, but above all forcing them to celebrate exclusively the cult of the conquerors: that of the Sun, namely of the Inca himself. The State religion, imposed by force, was to the detriment of the local cults. It is equally true that the pressure exerted by the Incas over the captured tribes never attained the violence of the maniacal zeal with which the Spanish later annihilated indigenous idolatry. Nevertheless, skillful as the Incas may have been as diplomats, they still knew how to use force when they needed to; their organisation could react with the greatest brutality, as does every State apparatus when its power is called into question. The frequent uprisings against the central authority in Cuzco, pitilessly put down at first, were later punished by mass deportation of the conquered to regions far from their home territory and its network of sacred places (streams, hills, caves, etc.). Deracination, deterritorialisation, ethnocide . . .

Ethnocidal violence, as the negation of difference, indeed belongs to the essence of the State, just as much in barbarous empires as in the civilised societies of the West: every State organisation is ethnocidal, ethnocide is the State’s normal mode of existence. Thus ethnocide has a certain universality, since it is an attribute not only of a vague indeterminate ‘white world’, but of a whole collection of societies which are
societies with the State. The examination of ethnocide, therefore, requires an analysis of the State. But should it stop there, confining itself to the fact that ethnocide is the State and that, in this respect, all States are equal? But this would be to fall into the trap of abstraction for which we have just reproached 'the school of ethnocide'; it would be to disregard once again the concrete history of our own cultural world.

Where do we situate the difference that prohibits the placing of barbarous States (Incas, Pharoahs, Oriental despots, etc.) on the same map or in the same bag as civilised States (the Western world)? The difference can be discerned primarily at the level of the ethnocidal capacity of State apparatuses. In the first instance, this capacity is limited not by the weakness of the State but, on the contrary, by its strength: ethnicultural practice — the abolition of difference when it becomes oppositional — ceases once the force of the State is no longer at risk. The Incas tolerated a relative autonomy of the Andean communities as long as they recognised the political and religious authority of the emperor. On the other hand, we see that in the second instance — the Western States — the ethnicultural capacity is limitless, uncontrollable. This is why it can lead to genocide, and why in fact we can speak of the Western world as being absolutely ethnicial. How does this happen? What is it about Western civilisation that makes it infinitely more ethnicial than all the other forms of society? It is its system of economic production, which is precisely a space of the unlimited, a space without places since it is in constant retreat from limits, an infinite space in permanent forward flight. What differentiates the West is capitalism, as much in the impossibility of remaining on this side of a frontier as in passing beyond every frontier; it is capitalism, that system of production for which nothing is impossible, except for not being an end unto itself, whether liberal and private capitalism as in Western Europe or planned, State capitalism as in Eastern Europe. Industrial society, the most formidable production machine, is for that very reason the most frightening destruction machine. Races, societies, individuals; space, nature, seas, forests, subsoil: everything is useful, everything must be utilised, everything must be productive, have a productivity driven to its maximum rate of intensity.

This is why no respite could be given to societies who abandoned the world to its original tranquil unproductivity. This is why, in the eyes of the West, the wastefulness represented by the non-exploitation of immense resources was intolerable. The choice left to these societies posed a dilemma: either yield to production or else disappear, either ethnocide or else genocide. At the end of the last century, the Indians of the Argentine pampas were totally exterminated to make way for extensive sheep and cattle grazing, which founded the wealth for Argentine capitalism. At the beginning of this century hundreds of thousands of Amazonian Indians perished at the hands of the rubber exploiters. Currently, the remaining free Indians throughout South America are succumbing under the enormous push towards economic growth, Brazil's in particular. The rapidly constructed transcontinental roads form the lines of colonisation through the territories they traverse: bad luck for the Indians when the road meets up with them! What are several thousand unproductive Savages worth compared to the potential wealth of gold, rare minerals, oil, cattle grazing, coffee plantations, etc.? Produce or perish, that is the motto of the West. The North American Indians have learned this lesson in their flesh and blood, dying almost to the very last to make way for production. One of their executioners, General Sherman, claimed ingenuously in a letter to another famous Indian killer, Buffalo Bill: "In my estimation there were around nine and a half million buffalo on the plains between the Missouri and the Rocky Mountains in 1862. They have all disappeared, killed for their meat, hides and bones ... At that time there were about 165,000 Pawnees, Sioux, Cheyenne, Kiowa and Apaches, who annually depended on these buffalo for
food. They're also gone and have been replaced by two to three times that number of men and women of the white race, who have turned this land into a garden and who can be counted, taxed and governed according to the laws of nature and of civilisation. This change has been beneficial and will be carried to the very end."

The General was right. The change will be carried to the very end: it will end when there is nothing at all left to change.

Translated by Julian Pefanis and Bernadette Maher

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