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## The Identity of the Commander – Nomad Organization Against the State

In *Geronimo*, a film by Walter Hill, there is a scene in which a detachment of US cavalry encounters in the mountains of Arizona a small group of Chiricahua Apache warriors. The Indians, single file as usual, appear unexpectedly on the left at a distance of a few hundred metres, a kilometre perhaps, and for a minute or so the two parties ride parallel to each other slowly and gingerly. Suddenly the Indian who heads the file starts galloping towards the US cavalrymen. Their commander, lieutenant Charles Gatewood, raises his hand to stop the column and alone rides forward about a hundred metres, then stops. The galloping Apache also stops and begins to shout to Gatewood.

In the column behind Gatewood there is a young lieutenant who has recently graduated from a military academy and has been in the field for a few weeks only. He is puzzled by the situation, so he asks an Apache scout employed by the US army about what is happening. The scout explains that the warriors they have just encountered are a raiding party that has split off from Geronimo, and that the warrior who has left the file and galloped towards them challenges Gatewood to fight; he wants to show the others that he is brave.

Gatewood neither moves nor says anything. The Apache draws out his pistol and shoots at him but they are too far away from each other for the shot to be accurate. So the Apache spurs his horse and continuing to fire his pistol at Gatewood starts galloping towards him. Gatewood waits a few seconds, then forces his horse to lie down, hides behind the animal, draws out his rifle, takes careful aim and kills the Indian with a single shot. The duel is over. Both the Apaches and the Bluecoats remain silent and motionless for a while, then the Apaches ride away.

If we examine the duel in the context of the film's plot, we may come to the conclusion that the scene is redundant; the story would not lose any of its coherence if the scene were cut out. But on the cultural and political plane the scene appears to be of crucial importance, almost indispensable to the understanding of the film, because it reveals one of the essential differences between the nomad organization and the State, and in this way gives us an insight into what happened when the USA expanded west of the Mississippi River, into the Great Plains – the land of the North American nomads.

We are told in the film that the Apache who challenged lieutenant Gatewood wanted to show the others that he was brave. But what he did, and especially the way he did it, looked very reckless, almost suicidal. The question, then, is whether he wanted to do it, or whether he, in a sense, had to. The answer that imposes itself is that he did have to if he wanted to remain in command.

In an attempt to explain the Apache's apparently reckless behaviour, reference to Elias Canetti's analysis of the command (order) may prove useful.<sup>1</sup> He looks for the origins of the command in the animal world. According to him "Commands are older than speech. If this were not so, dogs could not understand them. Animals can be trained because they can be taught to understand what is required of them without understanding speech."<sup>2</sup> The original command is that given by a stronger animal to a weaker one of a different species on which the stronger one preys. It is a command to flee. If the weaker animal does not escape, it will be eaten. The original command developed from a threat of death:

For the roar of the lion is a death sentence. It is the one sound in its language which all its victims understand; this threat may be the only thing they have in common, widely different as they otherwise are. The oldest command – and it is far older than man – is a death sentence, and it compels the victim to flee. We should remember this when we come to discuss human commands. Beneath all commands glints the harshness of the death sentence.<sup>3</sup>

Though we may find parts of Canetti's argument not entirely convincing, we have to admit that what he writes about the link between the command and the death sentence is undoubtedly true in the case of the armed forces – especially in wartime, when it is made clear to all soldiers that there is a court martial with its threat of death behind almost every command.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the chapter entitled "The Command" in E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. C. Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Canetti is aware, of course, that human commands are more complex and that the obey-or-die situations are rare. We may also point here to other easily distinguishable forces behind/

It is crucial that we mention the court martial in our analysis, because it shows that the army detached the death sentence from the body that issues commands; in effect, the power of a command does not come from the officer who gives the command. He may even be incompetent and despised by his soldiers, yet his orders will still be obeyed; instances of insubordination are statistically very rare.<sup>5</sup> To use Canetti's simile we could say that if a command is a roar, then it is certainly not the officer who is the lion. At best, he might be the lion's throat. It is the court martial that has in part assumed the role of the lion ("in part" because it is not the source of a command).<sup>6</sup>

Canetti's analysis is certainly very interesting and seminal too, but from our perspective it has a serious shortcoming: it fails to distinguish between two basic types of commanders – the officer and the chieftain. By failing to make this distinction Canetti did not realize that in fact he was not writing about the command in general, but only about one type of command.

The officer holds office; he is part of an institution. He was placed in his position by his superiors, literally by the people "from above" (Latin *superus* means "placed above"). The power of his commands is thus the power of the institution; it is not his power. Very often he does not even give commands himself but only passes down those he has received from above, and then it becomes clear that he is a transmitter (a new kind of herald), a representative, a proxy. The State, especially in its modern form, turns the whole army into a proxy. The commander-in-chief of the world's most powerful army, that of the USA, is the President, i.e. a civilian, and the head of NATO, the world's most powerful military organization, is a civilian too. The officer of the highest rank in the armed forces is still only a recipient of commands. Indeed, the State puts a lot of effort into preventing the army from becoming the source of a command – into averting the danger of the army turning itself into a true lion.

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/beneath the command. For example, a soldier may feel compelled to obey orders out of patriotism – to defend his motherland invaded by enemies; or he may understand that a group of which he is a member will survive in a dangerous and traumatic situation only through joint and well-organized action, which often means obeying the orders given by an experienced commander (a situation not infrequent at sea, which became one of Joseph Conrad's favourite themes). But no matter how complex the forces behind a command may be, the threat of death never disappears: "Amongst men they [commands] have become so systematized that death is normally avoided, but the threat and the fear of it is always contained in them; and the continued pronouncement and execution of real death sentences keeps alive the fear of every individual command and of commands in general." *Crowds and Power*, p. 352.

<sup>5</sup> One can argue that it is largely due to their rareness that instances of group insubordination – such as the mutiny aboard HMS *Bounty* – became widely known and are stored in popular imagination as adventure stories, as if they were equally improbable.

<sup>6</sup> We should not be misled here by the fact that in the past officers were sometimes given the right to kill soldiers on the spot for their disobedience. It only means that the officers were allowed – always for the time being only! – to act in the name of the court martial.

The idea of officership implies that the three elements of a command which appear together in the lion are distributed among three bodies: the officer, who is the giver, often nothing more than a pronouncer, of commands; the court martial, which is the death-threatener, sometimes the executioner; and the State, which is the source of a command.

However, Canetti's lion theory, though original and inspiring, is not applicable to chieftainship. To explain why let us refer to a brief note about the Bedouin which Immanuel Kant makes in his essay on history. Kant is worth quoting at this point not because he can be regarded as an expert on nomadism and chieftainship, but because he was one of the first to say very explicitly that the nomad organization opposes the State. If so, then we can assume that the chieftain, who is an essential part of the nomad organization, must stand in a similar opposition to the officer, who represents the State. The note reads as follows:

The *Bedouins* of Arabia still describe themselves as children of a former sheikh, the founder of their tribe [...] But the *sheikh* is by no means their *master*, and he cannot force his will upon them as he chooses. For in a nation of herdsmen, no one has fixed property which he cannot take with him, so that any family which is discontented with its tribe can easily leave it and join forces with another.<sup>7</sup>

To make the picture of the sheikh a little more complete, we can supplement Kant's remarks by saying that in Bedouin communities the leader is *elected*,

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<sup>7</sup> I. Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History", in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 230. And in order to demonstrate that what Kant says about the Bedouin sheikh is in fact true of any chieftain in a nomadic community, let us quote a passage describing the problems which Red Cloud, a famous Sioux chieftain, had with his warriors:

Again Red Cloud refused to interfere. He was not surprised when many of the protesters packed up, dismantled their tepees, and started back north to spend the winter off the reservation. They had proved to him that there were still Sioux warriors who would never take lightly any invasion of Paha Sapa, yet apparently *Red Cloud did not realize that he was losing these young men forever. They had rejected his leadership* for that of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, neither of whom had ever lived on a reservation or taken the white man's hand-outs.

D. Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (London: Vintage, Random House, 1991), p. 278. [Italics mine.]

The State does not tolerate in its army any such "rejections of leadership". They are labelled desertion or treason and are punishable by death. Even the civil administration of a democratic country – though it grants one a lot of freedom – makes one obey the commands of those who have won the elections, and it does not matter in the least whether one has voted for them or not. It is even quite possible that one may spend one's whole life being governed by people whom, personally, one has never accepted as leaders; the same may be true of one's workplace.

and that his position is seen as that of the “first among equals”; his power consists in arbitrating rather than issuing commands.<sup>8</sup>

The chieftain of a nomadic tribe is not their master, he cannot force his will upon his people. The difference between the chieftain and the officer begins to manifest itself already when we try to choose the right words to describe the two commanders. For example, we have called the recipients of the chieftain’s commands “his people,” because in no way could we refer to them as “his subordinates” or “his inferiors” (Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, when writing about chieftainship in Mato Grosso, calls the recipients of the chief’s commands “his fellow-members of the group” and “his companions”). It is enough to take a look at a picture of any Cheyenne or Sioux warrior and try to think of him as somebody’s subordinate to see that one cannot help but laugh at the preposterousness of such an idea.

The chieftain’s commands do not contain a death threat, often no threats at all, because he himself is not a threatener and there is no authority above or behind him that would attach such a threat to his commands. A chieftain cannot be characterized as powerful. Deleuze and Guattari say that within communities which have chiefs there are “diffuse, collective mechanisms” or “mechanisms of inhibition” that prevent the chief from acquiring stable power and make it impossible for him to become a man of State.<sup>9</sup> In practice, such mechanisms radically reduce the power of his commands.

One of these preventive mechanisms, essential to our analysis, is the dispersion of wealth – a complete reversal of what we find among the sedentaries of the State. In the note about the Bedouin, Kant makes it very explicit that there is a close link between the command and property (a link which Canetti seemed to have overlooked, though it is no less important than the one between the command and death). A command appears to be a kind of blackmail, the use of which is possible only among the owners of immovable property. Those who have not got such property cannot be forced to obey orders.

It is never, of course, as simple as that, but basically Kant is right. The problem is that he did not enquire fully into the consequences of the blackmail nor did he ask who the blackmailers were. Perhaps he found the answer to be

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). I use the Polish translation: B. Lewis, *Arabowie w historii*, trans. J. Danecki (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1995), p. 36. Bernard Lewis also writes that in the nomadic communities of Arabia the sheikh did not have at his disposal any means of coercion, and that in fact such notions as power, rule, public punishment, etc. were regarded with abhorrence among the Arabian nomads. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine”, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), pp. 357–358. The examples given by Deleuze and Guattari come from the works of P. Clastres, J. Meunier, and I. S. Bernstein.

all too obvious: they have always been those who managed to accumulate much more than their neighbours. The reign of William the Conqueror is a good example (in fact the reign of almost any feudal king could be used as an example). William was very generous and granted a lot of land to his knights, but at the same time he saw to it that he possessed much more than anybody else. He understood very well that in order to be in effective control of the country, he had to be the chief possessor, the first landlord.

Nowadays we find it difficult to imagine that property could be the source of almost unlimited power, which really turned commands into death sentences.

In 1194 the crusading knight, Henry of Champagne, paid a visit to the headquarters of the Assassins at the castle at al-Kahf [...] Henry was sumptuously received. In one of the more impressive entertainments a succession of the loyal members of the cult, at a word from the Sheik, expertly immolated themselves. Before and ever since, the willing obedience of a household coterie has been a source of similar satisfaction to those able to command it. *Wealth has been the most prominent device by which it has been obtained.*<sup>10</sup>

Real property, then, creates not only the recipients but also the issuers of commands. Most people, of course, would prefer to be on the issuers' side because no one likes receiving commands: "an action performed as the result of a command [...] is experienced and remembered as something alien, something not really our own."<sup>11</sup> The sedentary, however, is left with little choice. In order to move from the position of the recipient of commands to that of the issuer he has to accumulate wealth. Although there is no clear dividing line between those who obey and those in authority, a certain general tendency is easily discernable: the more one accumulates, the fewer commands are directed at the person, until finally one becomes a master.

Within the areas controlled by the State accumulation of wealth has always been the sedentary's dream irrespective of social class. The aristocracy had the force to divide among themselves the whole land of their native and conquered countries. Those of simple birth could not do it but they wished they could: in folktales the hero, a humble peasant boy, is very often rewarded with a kingdom, or at least half of it, for his acts of bravery. Fame, admiration, respect, etc. are not a sufficient reward. Ultimately, it is only the possession of land, real(!) property, that counts. The king's daughter, who is part of the reward,

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<sup>10</sup> J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 81–82. [Italics mine.] Galbraith speaks of wealth in general, but it is obvious that among the sedentaries it has always been the immovable property that counted most. Even now, at the end of the 20th century, investments in real property are said to be the safest ones.

<sup>11</sup> *Crowds and Power*, p. 353.

only confirms the hero's new status – now he is the master. Likewise, the middle classes, who came into existence as a result of accumulation of wealth, told their stories in the novel, in which the theme of becoming rich was for a long time a central one.<sup>12</sup>

Expressions of the sedentary's aspirations to achieve a leading position through the accumulation of wealth are indeed very numerous, but few people put it as bluntly as Tevye the milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye sings that if he were a rich man, he not only would not have to work hard, but would also become a highly esteemed figure in the community. "If I were a rich man," says Tevye, then "the most important men in town will come to fawn on me. They'll ask me to advise them like a Solomon wise. [...] And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong – when you're rich, they think you really know."

The position Tevye dreams of attaining is something extreme; there is no exaggeration in the way he describes it. In their societal development the sedentaries have reached a stage in which accumulated wealth makes such an overwhelming impression that people no longer have to be forced to obey commands, they ask for them.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, it is advice that they seek, not

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Watt in his essay on *Robinson Crusoe* analyses the way in which the novel reflected the drive towards accumulation of wealth:

Defoe's plot, then, expresses some of the most important tendencies of the life of his time, and it is this which sets his hero apart from most of the travellers in literature. Robinson Crusoe is not, like Autolycus, a commercial traveller rooted in an extended but still familiar locality: nor is he, like Ulysses, an unwilling voyager trying to get back to his family and his native land: *profit is Crusoe's only vocation*, and the whole world is his territory. *The primacy of individual economic advantage has tended to diminish the importance of personal as well as group relationships...*

I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 74. [Italics mine.]

<sup>13</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss gives an account of a master-servant relationship that is even more extreme. In the poverty-stricken communities in India, where the huge gap between the rich and the poor is justified and made unbridgeable by the caste system, anybody who appears to be fairly well-off is literally forced to accept the position of a master. There is something weird in the relationship, as the "servants" command the "master" to give them commands:

The gulf separating extreme luxury and extreme poverty destroys the human dimension. [...] Every European in India finds himself surrounded, whether he likes it or not, by a fair number of general manservants, called bearers. I cannot say whether their eagerness to serve is to be explained by the caste system, the tradition of social inequality or the demand for service on the part of the colonizers. However, their obsequiousness very quickly has the effect of making the atmosphere intolerable. If necessary, they would lie down on the ground to let you walk over them, [...] Each time, they are there at once, begging for orders. [...] And if your behaviour does not correspond to their expectations, if you do not behave on all occasions like their former British masters, their universe collapses.

C. Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J. & D. Weightman (London: Picador Classics, Pan Books, 1989), pp. 174–175. Levi-Strauss claims that any attempt to change the relationship, to treat a fellow human being as your equal, is immediately rejected: "If one tried to treat these unfortunate wretches [beggars] as equals, they would protest against the injustice of one's doing so; they do not want to be equal; they beg, they entreat you to crush them with your pride, since it is from the widening of the gap between you and them that they expect their mite." *Ibid.*, p. 172.



commands. But at the same time they accept a rich man as their leader, which turns his pieces of advice into commands, though subtler in form and degree than those in the army.<sup>14</sup>

A chieftain may also use property to gain power, but in a radically opposite way: by giving away instead of accumulating. Dispersion of wealth is one of the distinctive features of chieftainship. Anthropologists who write about chiefs often mention a ceremony called *potlatch* as an example of such dispersion. "A potlatch is a public distribution of goods and the holder of a potlatch makes a claim to status on the basis of his power to give. [...] The system is fiercely competitive with each holder trying to outdo rivals in generosity."<sup>15</sup> At the end of such a ceremony, which may last for a number of days, its holder can be deprived of his property altogether, but his gain in honour and prestige is by far bigger.<sup>16</sup>

Potlatch is a ceremony organized among the Kwakiutl, who were not a nomadic tribe (not at the time when the first colonists reached the west coast of Canada), but the same give-away mechanisms not only are to be found among nomads, but are crucial to their social organization. The Mongols, for example, had a law which stated that all the spoils of war belonged to the community and not to the chief or any other individual. Claude Levi-Strauss reports that among the Nambikwara, a (semi-) nomadic tribe of the Mato Grosso Plateau, the chief's "primary and principal instrument of power lies in his generosity."<sup>17</sup>

Although the chief does not seem to be in a privileged position as regards material belongings, *he must have at his disposal a surplus* of food, weapons and ornaments [...] When an individual, a family or the group as a whole feel a desire or a need for something, they turn to the chief. It follows that *generosity is the main quality expected of a new chief*. [...] There can be no doubt that, in this respect, the chief's capacities are exploited to the utmost. [...] as a general rule, *the chief remained just as poor* as he had been when I arrived. Everything he had been given [...] had already been extorted from him.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J. K. Galbraith says that "Broadly speaking, there are three basic benefits from wealth. First is the satisfaction in the power with which it endows the individual. Second is the physical possession of the things which money can buy. Third is the distinction or esteem that accrues to the rich man as the result of his wealth." *The Affluent Society*, p. 80. [Italics mine.] Since wealth brings the sedentary both power and esteem, the distinction between his commands and pieces of advice will, at least in certain situations, be blurred.

<sup>15</sup> "Potlatch," in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, eds. A. Bullock, O. Stallybrass, and S. Trombley (London: Fontana Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the chapter on the Indians living on the north-western coast written by Victoria Wyatt, in *Native Americans*, ed. R. Collins (Salamander Books Ltd, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 408.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408. [Italics mine.]

You are what you give, one is tempted to say. The chief has a surplus and yet remains poor; this was something the European colonists could not possibly understand. Victoria Wyatt writes that when in the early 19th century, in the northwest, trade in fur skins increased the Indians' affluence, they used the wealth to support their rites and cultural activities: in the first few decades after the trade had developed they organized more potlatch ceremonies than ever before.<sup>19</sup> The more they got, the more they gave away. *Chieftains use accumulation of wealth only to increase its dispersion.*

But to say that a chieftain is generous is not sufficient: we would still not be able to tell the difference between the chief and the king, who also had the obligation to be generous. We have already mentioned William the Conqueror, and Canetti gives us a vivid account of the reign of Muhammad Tughlak, a Sultan of Dehli, who used to make a dazzling display of his generosity:

On one of his [the Sultan's] entries into the capital I saw three or four small catapults placed on elephants throwing gold and silver coins amongst the people from the moment he entered the city until he reached the palace.<sup>20</sup>

The king's generosity and that of the chieftain are two different things. The king has to be both generous and greedy. If he allows anybody in his kingdom to possess more than he does, then he is almost sure to be overthrown. In some cases it may lead not only to a change on the throne but also to a disintegration of the state. (The Poland of the 18th century is a particularly good example of such a disintegration caused to a large extent by the fact that some of those who were nominally the king's vassals became more powerful – i.e. they possessed more – than the king himself.)

There is, then, a clearly defined limit to the king's generosity, while there seems to be no limit to his greed. This greed is in fact the greed of the State, and it does not really matter who represents it, the king or a democratically elected president. If it is true that the surplus produced by agriculture was one of the decisive factors that sparkled the development of the sedentary's civilization, it may also be true that the tendency towards accumulation has remained a permanent feature of this civilization, especially within the State, where the tendency is most conspicuous. It is tellingly significant that the word *weal*, now out of use, meant both *wealth* and *the State*.

In the film *Geronimo* a conversation occurs between the chieftain and general Crook. Geronimo has escaped from a reservation and keeps fighting against the white settlers. Crook tries to persuade him to surrender, which to Geronimo means being sent from Arizona to a reservation in Florida. Geroni-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Native Americans*, the chapter on the tribes of the north-western coast.

<sup>20</sup> *Crowds and Power*, p. 496. The passage comes from a description made by Ibn Batuta, a famous Arab traveller.

mo asks why in such a huge country there is no room for the Apaches, why it is that the white man wants *all* land.<sup>21</sup> A long silence follows; Crook does not answer the question.

Geronimo, a war chief, does not understand a culture that was founded on the accumulation of wealth. He himself possesses nothing and yet he is a chief. (The *yet* in the sentence indicates that it has been written from the perspective of a man of State, because one does not become a chief *in spite of* having nothing. A nomad would say: he is a chief *so/therefore* he has got nothing.) Though anthropologists often speak of the chief's generosity, it is probably imprecise to say that a chief is generous because generosity, as our brief analysis of kingship has revealed, does not exclude greed. Chieftainship, in fact, implies total greedlessness, sometimes even a kind of reversal of greed – a necessity to possess nothing, or very little.<sup>22</sup>

A chieftain can threaten his people with neither death nor loss of property. If we accepted as generally true what Canetti and Kant say about the mechanisms of a command, we would have to admit that a chieftain is not able to give a single command, but that is obviously not the case. A chieftain *is* in command of his people. The question is what makes this command possible. To find the answer we shall again refer to potlatch. I have presented the ceremony as a preventive, negative mechanism that makes it impossible for an individual to become a certain type of leader – one with stable power based on the accumulation of wealth. But potlatch has also a creative, positive function: it gives the individual the opportunity to assume leadership of a different kind. This other kind of leadership, however, is not based on dispersion; to the holder of a potlatch distribution of goods is only a means; the objective, as has already been mentioned, is to gain *prestige*.

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<sup>21</sup> On the last page of *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* there is a photograph of chief Red Cloud in old age with the following quotation: "They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it."

Today the State may appear to be less greedy for land, but that is because all the land has already been taken. If, however, a state is threatened with a loss of a tiny bit of its territory, it immediately mobilizes its force in order to defend it. Recent history provides enough examples, such as the war over the Falkland Islands or the conflict over the Kurile Islands. In Russia the idea of returning the islands to Japan is unthinkable, though obviously Russia would profit a lot from such a deal, because it would normalize the relations between the two countries and make it possible for the Japanese capital and technology to flow into Russia.

<sup>22</sup> Leonard Cohen, in his song *The Night Comes On*, gives a poetic account of what can be called a reversal of greed, a state of mind, a mode of being perhaps, which cannot be equated with generosity because generosity is only a "by-product", a kind of positive side effect of such a state:

I needed so much  
To have nothing to touch  
I've always been greedy that way

Whenever one reads about chieftains, one also reads about prestige: “Clastres describes the situation of the chief, who has no instituted weapon other than his prestige, no other means of persuasion, no other rule than his sense of the group’s desires.”<sup>23</sup> Levi-Strauss writes that “Personal prestige and the ability to inspire confidence are the basis of power in Nambikwara society.”<sup>24</sup> It is not out of politeness that travellers and anthropologists speak of chiefs as exceptional individuals. Prestige is a *conditio sine qua non* for chieftainship: a chieftain *must* be held in high esteem by his tribe, otherwise he simply ceases to be the chief. Personal prestige is not what merely helps him to achieve the position of the leader; prestige is *indispensable*, first to attain the position, then to maintain it. The chieftain can never take his leadership for granted; he has to invest continuous effort into maintaining it.

In this respect Canetti’s theory of the command again stands in sharp contrast to chieftainship. According to Canetti

The power behind a command must not be open to doubt; if it has fallen into abeyance it must be ready to prove itself again by force. But it is astonishing how seldom fresh proofs are called for, how long the original proof suffices. Success in conflict is perpetuated by commands; every command obeyed is an old victory won again. The power of those who give commands appears to grow all the time.<sup>25</sup>

Among the nomads it is exactly the other way round: the power behind a command *is* open to doubt; it is *not allowed* to prove itself by force. It is astonishing how *frequently* fresh proofs are called for, how the original proof *does not* suffice. Success in conflict is *not* perpetuated by commands. The power of those who give commands does *not* grow all the time. It is really striking how diametrically opposed the two types of leadership are; this opposition very well confirms Deleuze and Guattari’s argument when they question the evolutionary model according to which there was some sort of linear or nonlinear passage “from clans to empires” or “from bands to kingdoms.” When chiefs become kings, when a band changes into a kingdom, it is like the swing of the pendulum; it is certainly not an evolutionary change from the lower-worse-less organized into the higher-better-more organized.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, the adoption of the nonevolutionary model changes quite considerably our views on the origins and development of the mechanisms of power. For example, we can no longer follow Levi-Strauss when he places

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<sup>23</sup> “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” p. 357.

<sup>24</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 407.

<sup>25</sup> *Crowds and Power*, p. 363

<sup>26</sup> Cf. “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” pp. 359–360. “[...] bands and clans are no less organized than empire-kingdoms.”

chieftainship among “the most rudimentary forms of power” and claims that the Nambikwara represent a “simple form of social organization.” Such a view is untenable, especially that Levi-Strauss himself provides us with a strong argument against his theory. He has it that “underlying the most rudimentary forms of power, there is an essential feature which is something new in comparison with biological phenomena: this new element is *consent*. Power both originates in consent and is bounded by it.”<sup>27</sup> (Consent of the governed; a chieftain, as we know, has to be accepted by his people because he has no powers of coercion.) Then, however, as society developed, things apparently got worse: “unilateral relationships, such as those characteristic of gerontocracy, autocracy or any form of government, can arise in groups with an already complex structure. They are out of the question in simple forms of social organization, [...]”<sup>28</sup> In other words despotism, for example, should be seen as a product of a higher complexity of social organization. Now, according to the evolutionary theory it is parliamentary democracy that seems to be the most complex and advanced form of social organization, and its basic, fundamental feature is *consent*. All that amounts to saying that humanity placed consent at the basis of its societal development, then scrapped it and for millenia kept experimenting and making all kinds of mistakes, such as despotism, only to return to the original idea. Such a thesis is far from being plausible. More convincing is the theory according to which bands and kingdoms developed simultaneously, side by side, permeating and “contaminating” each other, perhaps forming all kinds of hybrids, but nevertheless remaining distinct.<sup>29</sup>

The State is not characterized by consent but by “voluntary servitude.”<sup>30</sup> Though one may argue that this servitude is a kind of consent too – a person voluntarily renounces his freedom – it is obviously an entirely different consent, and Levi-Strauss is well aware of the difference:

It is true that Rousseau’s analysis differs from the quasi-contractual relationships which exist between the chief and his fellow-members of the group. Rousseau was thinking of *a quite different phenomenon, namely the renunciation by individuals of their particular independence in the interest of the general will*. [...] Rousseau and his contemporaries displayed profound so-

<sup>27</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 413.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue that “there has always been a State, quite perfect, quite complete. The more discoveries archaeologists make, the more empires they uncover. [...] It is hard to imagine primitive societies that would not have been in contact with imperial States, at the periphery or in poorly controlled areas. But of greater importance is the inverse hypothesis: that the State itself has always been in a relation with an outside and is inconceivable independent of that relationship.” “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” p. 360.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

biological intuition in grasping the fact that cultural attitudes and features such as “contract” and “consent” are not secondary creations, [...] they are the basic material of social life, and it is impossible to imagine any form of political organization in which they would not be present.<sup>31</sup>

Levi-Strauss admits that the consent given by a subject (citizen) is “a quite different phenomenon,” that it has nothing to do with the consent which characterizes chieftainship, and yet he ends his argument with general statements in which the differences disappear: “contract and consent are [...] the basic material of social life,” and a few lines below he continues in the same vein by saying that “consent is the psychological basis of power.” To Levi-Strauss, the differences between the two kinds of leadership are of little importance because he adheres to the evolutionary model according to which chieftainship (primitive statelessness) evolved into kingship, which makes it logical to assume that the State was to a large extent founded on the consent of the governed.

Let us repeat that we find it hardly possible to agree with the evolutionary approach. Firstly because kingship (institution) and chieftainship (prestige) actively oppose each other. It is true that sometimes the State “makes use” of prestige, but when we analyse the way in which the State functions in extreme situations, for instance during the war, we realize that prestige is not only unnecessary but may even be an obstacle to the functioning of the State. A good example is the situation in which a state’s existence is threatened. When in September 1939 Poland was invaded by the Nazi and Soviet armies, it very quickly became obvious to the Polish authorities that the country was not able to defend itself, and that the best if not the only way to save the state was to evacuate its institutions. In this way the government, which was internationally recognized, was still able to represent the state, i.e. to continue its foreign policy, to recruit a new army, etc. But the decision to evacuate the state’s institutions was a very dramatic one because the government was immediately accused of abandoning the country’s people; political opponents, then and after the war, even spoke of treason. The choice which the Polish authorities faced was either to save the state or personal prestige, they could not have it both ways. Since their loyalty was to the state, they chose to give up personal prestige. The State can function without prestige, but it cannot without its institutions. Within the nomad organization, on the other hand, it is simply impossible that the chieftain will be forced to choose between prestige and something else. He will not be able to maintain his position without prestige.

The other reason why we cannot accept the theory that chieftainship evolved into kingship is because we have seen how easily the State slips from any kind

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<sup>31</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 413–414.

of democracy (government legitimized by consent) into the purest forms of despotism and dictatorship, e.g. changes such as in ancient Rome, from the republican government into that by the emperors, or in 20th-century Germany, from the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich. A reversed process – a change from despotism to democracy – takes much more effort and time. Even today democracy is still a fragile construction that must be constantly defended. The consent of the governed can in no way be thought of as immanent in the State, whereas coercion certainly can.

*Consent is immanent in the nomad organization.* It is, to a large extent, in any community led by a chief, but with nomads it is most conspicuous. The social organization of the Nambikwara tribe is particularly interesting to study as it reveals that consent among nomads means a lot more than it has ever meant within the State. It can already be deduced from what Kant says about the Bedouin that consent is given by the community to the chief but always temporarily, that “The chief [...] is always in danger of being disavowed, abandoned by his people.”<sup>32</sup> Levi-Strauss writes that “The Nambikwara chief has a difficult part to play; he has to exert himself in order to maintain his position. What is more, if he does not constantly improve it, he runs the risk of losing what it has taken him months or years to achieve.”<sup>33</sup> But again we are imprecise, or even wrong, when we say that consent is given by the community because consent is what forms the community:

In the initial community, there are men who are recognized as leaders: it is they who form the nuclei around which the groups assemble. The size of the group and its greater or lesser degree of stability during a given period are proportionate to the ability of the particular chief to maintain his rank and improve his position. Political power does not appear to result from the needs of the community; *it is the group rather which owes its form, size and even origin to the potential chief who was there before it came into being.*<sup>34</sup>

Consent, then, cannot be given, i.e. it cannot be voiced, because it *precedes the community*; it is the formation of a community or a group that indicates to the chief that the consent is already there. That is why we say that consent is immanent in the nomad organization. What Levi-Strauss writes about the nature of power – that it both originates in consent and is bounded by it – is true only of the nomads.

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<sup>32</sup> “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” p. 357.

<sup>33</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 415

<sup>34</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 404. [Italics mine.] A few pages below Levi-Strauss repeats the observation in a more terse manner: “[...] the chief is seen as the cause of the group’s desire to exist as a group, and not as the result of the need for a central authority felt by some already established group.” *Ibid.*, p. 407.

And once more it appears that our vocabulary is inadequate. If the chieftain is a noncoercionist – the exact opposite of the despot – then we cannot associate him with power. “Power is the ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to his *will*, on whatsoever basis.”<sup>35</sup> The chieftain is not able to exact compliance, he “is more like a leader or a star than a man of power.”<sup>36</sup> Star is a very appropriate word to describe the chieftain because he can be in command only when he is admired. Prestige, which is his principal instrument of command (we can no longer use the word “power”) is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as “blinding or dazzling influence.” The chief “shines”; he is a star.

Let us now return to the scene of the duel from *Geronimo* with which we began this essay. What the young Apache does seems reckless; it is an unnecessary display of bravery, which costs him his life. We asked why he should risk his life in such a way. His opponent, a US cavalry officer, behaves in a way that we perceive as much more sensible. But we have to realize that this perception, or perspective, is that of the man of the State, it is not a universal perspective from which all actions can be judged. The perspective of the nomad, and especially the nomad warrior, involves entirely different principles.

Let us try to find out what the young Apache could do if he wanted to be a (war) chief. He was among his equals. He could not threaten them with death or loss of property. He had got nothing so he could not be generous and was not able to “buy” their loyalty. He was not even older than his fellow warriors, which excluded any form of gerontocracy. To put it briefly, he was completely powerless. The only thing he could do was to live up to his warriors’ expectations of him, which meant he had to be brave (actually, the word for a North American Indian warrior is a *brave*). That is how Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Gall, Crazy Horse, and many others became chieftains. They were intelligent and talented individuals but they also surpassed others in bravery.<sup>37</sup> It is indeed a wonder that some of them managed to live to a ripe old age, especially that they were confronted with a powerful state apparatus that was determined to crush them. Nana, an Apache chief, who “had been fighting Spanish-speaking white men and English-speaking white men as long as he could remember” surrendered when he was in his seventies. Even at this age his bravery and

<sup>35</sup> “Power,” in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*.

<sup>36</sup> “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” p. 357.

<sup>37</sup> “[...] the warrior himself is caught in a process of accumulating exploits leading him to solitude and a prestigious but powerless death.”

“1227: Treatise on Nomadology – the War Machine,” p. 357.

The scene of the duel from *Geronimo* shows that the US cavalry officer, lieutenant Gatewood, does not have to prove that he is brave. His refusal to take up the Apache’s challenge does not affect his position as a commander; his commands will be obeyed anyway. He shoots the Indian warrior in self-defence.



determination to fight made it still possible for him to recruit a guerrilla army.<sup>38</sup> Fight was the only “commodity” he could offer to his followers.

It is, then, quite plain that Canetti was mistaken when he thought that he had discovered the basic forces behind a command. Roughly speaking, the scope of his archaeology of command is limited to the State. His main thesis that there is a death threat behind every command is untenable when we examine the position of the chieftain. And in the case of the war chief it is actually the reverse that is true, namely it is, as we have seen, the war chief who is threatened with death, not his warriors: he has to risk his life in order to be accepted as a commander.

Despite some obvious shortcomings Canetti’s analysis is very important as it is one more confirmation that the nomad organization can by no means be regarded as merely a stage in the history of mankind, one which preceded sedentarism. Canetti, as we remember, argues that the history of the command is very long, longer than speech. But the fact that his presentation of this history is coherent, though it leaves the nomad out of account, indicates that there can be no such concept as the history of the command; there are at least two parallel and distinct histories. The other history, overlooked by Canetti, must have had a completely different beginning and an equally alternate development.

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<sup>38</sup> *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, p. 401.