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«IT IS NOT THAT EASY  
TO ESCAPE THE SUPERNATURAL»\*\*

A REVIEW ON A BOOK BY AURÉLIE NÉVOŢ

NÉVOŢ, A. 2023. *LE RESSAC DE L'ALTÉRITÉ. MARC RICHIR ET PIERRE CLASTRES À L'ÉPREUVE DE L'ETHNOLOGIE* [IN FRENCH]. WUPPERTAL: ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DE PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIE

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*Ressac de l'Altérité*, recently published within the Mémoires des Annales de Phénoménologie (vol. XXII) in Wuppertal, is undoubtedly paving a new way of speaking about ethnology *and* phenomenology<sup>1</sup>. This approach in many ways respects Névoť' s background, which is not solely academical but also ethnological: since 1998, she has been doing fieldwork in Yunnan (China), studying Nipa' s religious practices, in particular that of shamanism (bimo) (Névoť, 2008; 2013). In other words, this book is written by an ethnologist who makes certain philosophical intuitions work in the field, that is an approved remedy for an old critique of both cabinet anthropologists and philosophers.

From the theoretical point of view, Aurélie Névoť' s new book is the first major attempt to capture the trace left by Pierre Clastres' anthropology on the phenomenological project by Marc Richir. Although this work is far from descriptive one, as the author go further in her reflections on this philosophical tradition. The work points out at least three main dimensions of the undoubtedly large theme “anthropology — phenomenology”. Firstly, it aims to show the ethnocentric nature of phenomenology as a part of philosophy in European sense of the term. In Richirian terms, this perspective becomes a critique of the *symbolic institution* of the philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup>I am deeply grateful to Dr. Aurelie Névoť for generously granting me access to her book' s author' s copy, and to Dr. Georgy Chernavin for bringing to my attention the latest research that unveils a new dimension of Marc Richir' s phenomenology.

This leads to a possibility of the phenomenology reconsidered, i. e. of the phenomenology that “takes seriously” other way of thinking provided by ethnology. If such a reconsidering is possible, it is revealing the plasticity of the phenomenology and its ability to enter into a dialogue with other cultures, make them *present* and not *represented*. For Névot, this striving to present or take seriously the radical alterity intertwine with the classical Husserlian motto “to the things themselves”, which should not be confused with nostalgic aspiration of “noble savage”, typical for Rousseauist heritage of Claude Lévy-Strauss’ structural anthropology (Névot, 2023: 131). Rather, it is a *quête* of the Other’s Other, i. e. of the angle from which the western culture, inevitably including its metaphysical philosophy and phenomenology, can be seen as *strange* and not just retrospectively reconsidered. However, this call to deconstruct some western thinking habits and rebuilt them in the light of non-western ethnographic data could seem common for the literature that were long ago enriched with Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism and other projects within intercultural phenomenology. The novelty of the recently published Aurelie Nevot’ book is eloquent: she does not offer a philosophical guideline to field-working ethnologists, neither provides philosophers with ethnological discoveries able to “overthrow” their way of thinking man,<sup>2</sup> power and societies (even that without state). *Ressac de l’Alterité* can be conceived, firstly, as a medium that plays ethnographic phenomenology at work — with all paradoxes and kaleidoscopic data proper to work in progress (ibid.: 132). Such an exposition invites one to collaborate with the proposed project, to expend it in different ways. This first impression finds its confirmation in the *Conclusion*: Névot explicitly states her main aspiration that new generation of phenomenologists would think the politic in another way. In this sense, the practical value of the book provided by wide ethnographic and analytical materials outlined in three chapters.

Although Richir and Clastres as the main characters of the book, Névot extends the problematic of their interaction. In terms of bibliographic value, Névot monography has an evident advantage of being the first serious investigation of Clastrian trace in Richir’s phenomenology. The ethnological enthusiasm of the latter can be grasped in two senses: (I) as a prominent metaphor for richirian theme of contingency and (II) as a theoretical framework for his reflexion on theological and political character of symbolic

<sup>2</sup>However, Névot considers the striving for (re)thinking “man” (l’Homme) as a trace of humanistic anthropology of 1960s that was not able to extend its boundaries to non-human (Névot, 2023: 24).

institution. In the first sense, an ethnologist is considered as an intermediary between different symbolic institutions: for instance, institution of state authority and that of chiefdom.<sup>3</sup> The second sense becomes especially eloquent in the light of two Richir's works published in 1990s *La naissance des Dieux* (1995) and *Du sublime en politique* (1991). His interest for Clastres, as Nébot shows it, was driven by the question of mythologisation and the dichotomy of mythical/mythological that Richir understands through the transition from *Societies against the State* to *Societies with the State*.

The first chapter starts with an outlook of Pierre Clastres' famous figure of "societies against the State" and its reception in Richirian phenomenology, especially in its political branch which traces, as Nébot supposes, were present in his entire œuvre from 1968 to 2014. As Clastres and Richir left chamanism and Amazonian ritual activities behind, Nébot enriched this context by newly collected ethnological materials, deeply investigated in the Second chapter. She works with two ethnological Asian examples: Nip'a and Yunnan Lolop'o,<sup>4</sup> particularly rich in ritual practices. The shamanic systems described in Tibeto-Burman terrains of China provide an opportunity to problematize the irruption of the bureaucratic State and the echo it leaves in collective imaginary (Nébot, 2023: 72). She uses the the theoretical framework of anarchist ethnology in order to analyze these materials and to show a considerable resistance of the margins to the State center. For instance, James C. Scott follows Clastrian idea of so-called "regression" undertaken by indians Gayaki who became back hunter-gatherers after being cultivators in order to escape spanish colonial rules (Scott, 2009; cited in Nébot, 2023: 74). Scott finds other examples of such a revolutionary escape from state authority in prophetism evoking "theodicy of the marginal and the dispossessed" (Scott, 2009: 416). Nébot shows that these conclusions, being built on a lack of methodological rigour, lead to some simpliste dichotomies as State/anarchy, oral/writing culture, and some more complicated as literate & historical society/illiterate & ahistorical society. Even if Scott, following Clastres again, nuances the notion of illiterate societies by considering

<sup>3</sup>Richir understands a symbolic institution (Stiftung) as a sedimentated sense-structure that precedes active process of sense-formation. While dividing phenomenological and symbolic registers of the sense-being in general, he also speaks about symbolic institutions in plural: that of the language, different social practices, philosophy itself. The last becomes particularly crucial for Nébot's book that inherit its definition from Richir: Richir, 1991: 448).

<sup>4</sup>Nébot uses terminology proper to groups' self-identification (as for Lolop'o and Nip'a for example, both called Yi by chinese authorities). Governmental control on ethnic groups is investigated in Nébot, 2019.

them as societies *against* (and not *without* writing), he is still imposing ethnocentric dichotomies to the field that do not fit in them (Nébot, 2023: 77). From this lesson of discrepancy of the theory regarding the field data begins the reflection of the second chapter showing scottian misuse of the Clastres' notion of society against the State.

Scottian logocentric approach is due to his disregard for shamanic practices that pushed him to assume Lolopo's rejection of writing. Nébot shows that Scott neglect the possibility of transformed writing, that is exactly the Lolop'o case with its particular ritual performativity. Writing is no more *visible*, that does not mean that it is not *present*: its way of presence was interiorised (for example, in shaman's, plants' and animal bodies) but able to manifest externally. Hence, Lolop'o writing culture can not be considered as lost or lapsed into silence, unless we are still using logocentric concept according to which writing would be a simple fixation of ritual language (ibid.: 80)<sup>5</sup>. Some *bimo* (shamans or psalmody masters) also recognize their writing as a form of resistance that builds up their identity by means of reading order: while classic chinese Han is read from right to left, Nip'a read from left to right. Nevertheless, writing's role is also political, i. e. exposed to state control which redoubles religious power of *midje'oma* (chief) and *midjebimo* (shaman) by that of Communist party appointee endowed with coercitive power. The second instrumentalized Nip'a submutant form of writing and made it susceptible to administration. But this new status is not enough to consider Nip'a as a society of the State even in Clastrian sense (which Nébot by the way criticizes) because of irreducible multiplicity of relations between its human and non-human agents (ibid.: 99–100) which are hardly envisageable by scientific means. The search for its alternative appears to be the main challenge of the last, third chapter, where Nébot goes back to richirian political phenomenology.

As a Clastres' reader, Richir associates society against state with a myth, and that of the state with mythology, i. e. (meta-)discourse on myths. His core notion obtains here a new aspect: the anchoring of State in the symbolic institution occurs simultaneously with the appearing of mythology (ibid.: 104). In Richirian terms, it means that any experience henceforth would be come into the category of the State, even negatively. Being consistent

<sup>5</sup>Given this, Nébot proceeds with the notion of submutance borrowed from Léon Vandermeersch and challenging the concept of aristotelian substance. Considering Nip'a's writing as submutance, she is trying to underline the dynamics of writing that does not always have a stance (*stare*) but rather a motion (*mutare*) (Nébot, 2023: 81, 89).

in abstract sense, this model falls into the same issue as Clastrian one: considering societies ahistorically, it loses the diachronic dimension or, as Névot puts it, *symbolic in the making*. The last notion is introduced by analogy to Richirian *sense in the making* (*sens se faisant*) that exceeds all sedimented forms of experience and is generally opposed to a symbolic one. These notions were translated into Richirian politic phenomenology as a *sublime moment* that reveals itself inside symbolically settled power. Societies against state are free from a chief with coercitive power and the anarchist moment is maintained in them. However, would it be truly anarchist if one can control and manage it? In order to raise this question, Névot refers to Ashema myth and its “reception” by Chinese State. Despite the complexity of fieldwork (manuscripts related to Nip’a practices were burned during the Cultural revolution, the remaining ones are kept in Yunnan state museums (Névot, 2023: 105)), Névot undertakes an analysis of this myth playing a crucial role in Nip’a identity — “who does not know Achema is not Nip’a” (ibid.). But being part of the initial culture, Achema came early into view of Chinese Communist party that found in it a profound socialistic susceptibility of Nip’a. This subjection necessitated some concealments, for example that of shamanic discourse; but it does not mean that the myth itself would exist in the framework of the State. Rather, it is the State that enhanced its history and now exists within the other symbolic institution, i. e. that of Achema myth. The process we are dealing with is certainly anthropological, but in a special way that does not imply any question of transcendental subjectivity: this symbolic institution is transformed by concrete persons authorized to change and transmit the narrative (ibid.: 106). Chinese example is especially illuminating at this point because of Cultural revolution whose running is still visible. As Communist party has invented its own historicity regimes, Achema myth in the 1950s turned out to be a portent of socialism appeared long time before it. But the first Achema endowed with shamanic sense is still present. For Névot, the recognition of the enunciation context is required to distinguish Achema (Nip’a transliteration) and Achima (official transliteration invented in 1953).

As Nip’a loss of their own myth made it a particular sociological group (for chinese state but also for adepts of mythology), it is the ritual that replaced it in their connection to religious (ibid.: 133).

This somewhat secularizing conclusion may seem paradoxical or simplistic for transcendental phenomenology that carefully avoids talking about “particular” persons. As Richir puts it, “there is no man without symbolic

institution [...] because man is also a sense-being that determines his facticity” (Richir, 2011): the symbolic system always precedes human coordinate system provoking a famous phenomenological topic of *always-already given* (Vavilov, 2023). But as Névot shows, this pre-giveness of the symbolic should not be taken as self-evident, otherwise we would get involved by the symbolic institution of philosophy itself. An emerging of a new symbolic institution (as the Achema one) is not completely an-anthropological and does not depend, as in Husserlian case, on the ultimate constitutive instance (Névot, 2023: 133). The symbolically settled sense (practice, ritual or song) can be captured at every stage through the carefully conducted fieldwork, that always exceeds any pre-adopted theory.

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«НЕ ТАК-ТО ПРОСТО СКРЫТЬСЯ  
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