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Warfare and Redistributive Exchange on the Northwest Coast

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War on the Northwest Coast affected many areas of social life. The purpose of this paper is to investigate its relation to the pattern of redistribution of food and property. My thesis is that war made redistributive exchange between neighboring groups necessary; such exchange was a means of preventing attacks and building alliances in an atmosphere charged with potential violence. In a final section, I will show how this perspective relates to several established views of the potlatch.

Northwest Coast warfare was no game. As I discuss in detail elsewhere (Ferguson in press), war was deadly serious struggle. Sneak attacks, pitched battles, ambushes, prolonged attritional campaigns, treacherous massacres, sporadic raiding—these were facts of life from before contact to "pacification" in the 1860s. Casualties and captives, at least in some historic periods, occurred at rates certainly equal to any reported for non-state-level warfare.

Warfare was, in large part, a contest over control of valuable resources. Before depopulation, wars were fought over prime subsistence areas. Upstream, inland, or coastal groups tried to conquer rich estuarine territories. Groups owning no salmon streams sought to take them by force. Peoples from coasts exposed to the full brunt of Pacific storms tried to push their way into more sheltered locales.

Control of trade was another source of conflict. Before and after contact, middlemen interceded in long distance trade, commonly amassing considerable fortunes. Middleman positions involved geographic control of maritime trade routes, passes to the interior, or, after contact, western posts. In some cases, middleman activity was beneficial for all involved. But in most, the intrusion was unnecessary and resented by other parties. Aggressors in trade wars were attempting to establish themselves as middlemen or to avoid giving a cut to another group.

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Many raids aimed at capturing food, property, or slaves. Other commonly expressed goals were to obtain revenge or a fearsome reputation. In some cases these goals must be accepted at face value. In others, they apparently were part of a strategy of warding off future attacks or were rationalizations of more mundane interests. Wars fought solely to capture ceremonial titles or crests seem to have been rare, despite the prominence given to this motive in ethnographies.

The clear picture emerging from available data is that, up to the 1860s, peoples of the Northwest Coast were living in a constant "state of war." Endemic warfare can have a profound effect on other areas of social life. It may be the greatest single hazard faced by a people, a challenge that must be met. As one of Gunther's (1927:182) Klallum informants put it, "all they [his ancestors] wanted was enough to eat and to be ready for war." Throughout the Northwest Coast, preparations were taken against the threat of war.

Villages were located in or near defensible positions, with sophisticated defensive structures incorporated in their redoubts (Drucker 1951:67; Gunther 1972:75; Gormly 1971:158, 163; MacDonald 1980:12, 20; Niblack 1970:303; Vancouver 1967:I:324–333). The first explorers found an elaborate war armor and weaponry, including blades of precious iron (Drucker 1963:96–98; Gunther 1972:42–45; MacDonald 1978:16–29). After contact, a major portion of the wealth obtained in the fur trade was expended on weapons (Wike 1951:41–44). In some areas at least, specialized training and conditioning of warriors was highly developed (Boas 1966:106; De Laguna 1972:583; Drucker 1951:345–347). The strategic and tactical planning observed in the war accounts reveals an astonishing sophistication. The posture assumed at meetings with strangers displayed a tense mixture of peaceful overtures and demonstrations of military preparedness (Beaglehole 1967:298; Bolton 1971:323, 342; Dixon 1968: 206; Jewitt 1896:199; Smith 1940:153; Sproat 1868:57). In some extreme cases, the threat of external attack gave war leaders a great deal of power over daily life (Collins 1950:339; McIlwraith 1948:I:175; II:364–369). Another response to this threat was a pattern of redistribution enmeshing neighbors in networks of mutually beneficial alliances.

Food and property were accumulated and redistributed in a wide variety of quantities and contexts. In the following discussion, I will adhere to traditional usage by distinguishing "feasts" (redistributions of food) from "potlatches" (redistributions of property). It must be noted, however, that these two handy categories simplify a more complex reality, a continuum of redistributions ranging from simple sharing of food with kin to elaborate ceremonials involving the destruction of property (see Blackman 1976; Goldman 1975).

To understand feasting as a response to war, we must first understand an important feature of the regional subsistence base. Food resources were subject to unpredictable local fluctuations. Local variations in the quantity and

arrival times of salmon have been ample documented (Blackman 1976; Donald and Mitchell 1975; Langdon 1979; Neave 1958; New York Times 1979; Schalk 1977; Sneed 1972; Suttles 1960). Although some questions remain on the applicability of these figures to pre-commercial fishing times, the studies strongly implicate natural conditions as a major cause of the variation. Some of the more perceptive early explorers report fluctuations comparable to those of modern times (Brabant 1900:54; Jewitt 1931; Sproat 1868: 216). Other resources also varied according to localized environmental perturbations (Blackman 1976; Drucker and Heizer 1967:139; Suttles 1974).

These temporary inequalities among neighbors could be equalized by feasts. Feasts were common affairs in early times, given whenever anyone had a surplus of food (Drucker 1951:368–371; Drucker and Heizer 1967:35; Jewitt 1896:151, 172, 179; Oberg 1973:96; Sproat 1868;59). Jewitt (1931:9–12), for instance, recorded nine feasts among local Nootka in one month (June) alone. As Suttles (1960) and others have observed, redistributive sharing of food in an environment of localized resource fluctuations would have long-term advantages for all involved. But in the near-term, families or local groups might be tempted to retain surpluses for personal use. Consideration of warfare explains why they would share with their fellows even when, as is recorded (Jewitt 1931), a threat of imminent food shortage was perceptible. Hoarding food when your neighbors are hungry is a very dangerous thing to do. By redistributing food surpluses, potential enemies were neutralized. There is no need to take forcibly that which is freely and regularly given.

That accumulated food stores could invite a raid is not in dispute. After studying hundreds of pages of unpublished war texts, MacDonald (1980:24), concluded that the "first and foremost" reason for early wars among the Tsimshian, Tlingit, and Haida was to capture accumulated food. McIlwraith (1948:II:339) ascribes the same motivation to later Kwakiutl raiders of the Bella Coola further south. The idea that food redistributions occurred under the implicit threat of violence is supported by other observations. Drucker (1951:372–374) reports an instance when the takers of an early salmon run were prompted to give a feast by the grumblings of hungry neighbors. (Perhaps such grumblings contributed to the development of the regional pattern of ceremonial communal consumption of the first salmon catch of a season—see Drucker 1963:156). Oberg (1934:150) notes that, while the Tlingit considered trespass on resource territory a crime punishable by death, *powerful* intruders would instead be invited to feast. Drift whales provided critical food supplies to Nootka and Haida at times when other resources were at their lowest ebb. Whale flesh was a major feast food at these times (Jewitt 1931). But this feasting occurred in a context of competing claims to the whales—a competition that was often marked by quarrels and fights (Brabant 1900:59; Collison 1915:172; Sapir and Swadesh 1955:346–349, 383).

More than eliminating neighbors as potential enemies, feasting bound

them as allies. Neighbors had a vested interest in aiding people who regularly contributed to their sustenance. They often provided critical information, support, or refuge in wars over territory, trade, or slaves. Given the general militarist approach to resolving conflicts over resources, and the pervasive threat of attack from the outside, a strategy of local self-sufficiency in food production would be self-destructive.

Redistributions of property involved similar considerations. Accumulations of property far above the local norm could invite a raid. Such raids did occur (Boas 1969:93; Curtis 1915:114, 143; Piddocke 1960; also see Boas 1935:61). Two contrasting incidents involving windfalls of property illustrate the dangers of accumulation. When the Yakutat Tlingit overran a Russian post during the early fur trade, word spread of the wealth they had acquired and kept to themselves. Other Tlingit finally decided to "take it away from them." Most of the Yakutat were killed in the subsequent raids (De Laguna 1972:261–263). But when the Moachat Nootka plundered the trade ship *Boston* and other Nootka "from no less than twenty tribes" arrived within days, the wily chief Maquina avoided violence by giving away great quantities of goods in a potlatch (Jewitt 1896:76–82).

The complex web of debts and expectations of returns that linked potlatching groups worked against open hostilities. It made little sense to wipe out people who owed you something, or to watch passively while someone else did (see Adams 1973:114). A negative illustration of this is provided by McIlwraith (1948:I:230; II:376), who describes a war caused by the failure of one group to repay debts incurred in potlatching. Such a failure to repay was very unusual, and this is the only case I found of a regular potlatch relationship degenerating into open warfare. The affinal links upon which potlatch relations were built (Rosman and Rubel 1971) also inhibited warfare between linked groups. Ties of sentiment were considered in planning military actions, and the presence of relatives in the settlements of intended victims made it difficult to preserve the vital element of surprise (De Laguna 1972:583; Drucker 151:357–363; Garfield 1939:268; McIlwraith 1948:II:371; Sapir and Swadesh 1955:363).

The discussion so far has been concerned with exchanges between neighboring groups. Most potlatches involved neighbors (Donald and Mitchell 1975:325; Drucker and Heizer 1967:79, 142, 145; Garfield 1939:193). This redistribution-as-military-alliance perspective can, however, be applied to relations between more distant groups that had mutual interests in trade or war. Potlatching and marriage between such groups became more common during the height of the western trade than they had been (Drucker and Heizer 1967:42–44; Garfield 1966:37; Goldman 1940:340–353; McIlwraith 1948:II:357–359; Sproat 1868:99). But the military alliance aspect of potlatching was sometimes eclipsed in the historic period, when a few local groups became so wealthy and powerful that they were immune to attack (Fisher 1977:46; MacDonald 1980:20; McIlwraith 1948:II:339; Wike 1951:99).

Several lines of evidence support the argument that redistributive exchange was used to forestall aggression and build alliances. Gifts of food, property, and women were used to prevent attacks (Boas 1935:61; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:51; Oberg 1973:99); to bring wars to an end (Boas 1970:378; Collison 1915:104, 221; Curtis 1913:34; Drucker 1951:357, 364; McIlwraith 1948:II:357–359; Swadesh 1948:80); to recruit allies in war (De Laguna 1972:581; Duff 1959:30; Garfield 1939:193, 268; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:13; Swadesh 1948:80); and to maintain alliances in warfare situations (Boas 1966:41; Grant 1857:296; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:51; Mayne 1969:258; Murdock 1935:40). Within the circle of potlatching exchange, groups generally did not make war on each other, and often acted together in war (Donald and Mitchell 1975:325; Drucker and Heizer 1967:39, 75, 142–145; Mayne 1969:263; McIlwraith 1948:I:22; Piddocke 1960:46; 1965:150 n.; Sanger 1959; Smith 1940:151). The similarity of peace-making ceremonies and potlatches has been noted (De Laguna 1972:147; McClellan 1954:96), as has the extensive warfare imagery in potlatch ceremonies (Codere 1950: 119–123; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:14; McClellan 1954:86; Smith 1940: 108; Snyder 1975:153). Some accounts suggest that the frequency of potlatching increased in proportion to the intensity of regional hostilities (Brown 1896:17; Murdock 1935:240). Meares' (1790:267–268) observation in 1788 is particularly interesting:

> the Nootka nations are not only in frequent hostilities with more distant tribes, but even among themselves . . . they can never be said to be in a state of peace: They must live in constant expectation of an enemy, and never relax from that continual preparation against those hostilities and incursions which doom the captives to slavery or to death. The chiefs of this country have a custom which . . . appears to be derived from the wars of the different states with each other. . . . This custom consists in yielding up their wives to, or interchanging them with, each other. . . . [A] woman is sometimes found necessary to sooth a conquerer, or to purchase a favorable article in a treaty.

Given the pattern of potlatching to one's affines (Rosman and Rubel 1971), it seems likely that these intermarriages were accompanied by regular redistributive exchange.

I have argued that war made redistribution necessary for survival. The tactical manipulation of exchanges for military advantage shows that the participants were clearly aware of their value in this context. As one Salish informant described this aspect of redistribution: "Potlatch is like shaking hands in a material way" (Snyder 1975:151). But if any local group failed to build alliances in this manner, war provided a mechanism for selectively eliminating such groups. Thus it can be seen why Northwest Coast peoples universally emphasized redistribution in spite of their diverse cultural backgrounds. It

can also be inferred that the emphasis on redistribution is as old as the pattern of military competition over resources. MacDonald (1979, and personal communication) has archaeological evidence for a developed war complex dating to ca. 1000 B.C. So the redistributive pattern is probably at least 3,000 years old, and perhaps much older.

If war can explain the necessity of redistribution in Northwest Coast economies, it cannot by itself "explain the potlatch." The ceremonial events we call "potlatch" were more than just redistribution. Anthropological speculation on the custom has often focused on aspects far removed from subsistence and survival. Anthropologists have studied the relation of potlatching to social structure, political economy, and cosmology, providing answers to questions not directly related to the issues discussed here.[1] But other explanations do overlap sufficiently to warrant reconsideration in light of that of war. These are discussed next.

From an ecological perspective, Suttles (1960), Vayda (1968), and Piddocke (1965) explain the potlatch as part of a self-regulating system involving exchanges of food, wealth, and prestige. Prestige was enhanced, they argue, by giving to the needy, so the system functioned to equalize local fluctuations in resources by transferring food from "haves" to "have-nots." Consideration of war preserves this last and basic point. In fact, it is strengthened. If redistributions were means to non-aggression/mutual defense alliances, their function in equalizing resources can be explained while avoiding objections to the current ecological model.

Critics (Drucker and Heizer 1967; Orans 1975; Ruyle 1973) have attacked this ecological model on several points. They dispute the aboriginal existence of the food-for-wealth accounting system posited by the ecologists, and assert that there is no evidence that redistributions raised carrying capacity by preventing actual starvation. The explanation of redistribution as a defensive tactic suggests neither point, but simply that a group with food or property in temporay abundance would be obliged to share with less fortunate neighbors.

By explaining redistribution as motivated by rational calculation of material self-interest, three other objections to the Suttles-Vayda-Piddocke formulation can be neutralized. First, in shifting the motivation of redistributors away from the pursuit of prestige, which ecologists have emphasized, this view avoids what Ruyle (1973:605) has called "an inherently mystical interpretation of the role of mentalistic phenomena [prestige-seeking] in a population's adjustment to its environment." Second, the redistribution-as-military-alliance explanation is not cast in functionalist form (see Orans 1975). It is based on the principle of self-interest, not system maintenance. Third, the distant origins of redistribution can be attributed to conscious strategy rather than to some vaguely defined process of random variation and selective retention (see Suttles 1960:304; 1973:622).

A variation of the ecological approach states that displays of wealth at potlatches resulted in the long-term reapportioning of popuation to available resources (Adams 1973; Harris 1980; Hazard 1960). The productivity of a local group's territory could be judged by the scale of their potlatches. Individuals would then, over time, shift residence from areas of scarcity to surplus. The factor of war can help explain why it was that nobles in rich but relatively underpopulated areas would want to attract more people. More men meant increased military strength.

Barnett (1938), Drucker (1939), Drucker and Heizer (1967), and Garfield (1939) have offered a "social validation" explanation of the potlatch. Their writings vary considerably in specifics, but they share the central thesis that the potlatch was a mechanism for obtaining social recognition or validation of a noble's claim to hereditary titles. The guests at a potlatch were, in effect, paid to witness the rite of accession. These titles included ceremonial and status prerogatives, but more importantly (for this review) they included titles of ownersip to productive resource territories and trade positions (Netting 1971:11–12).

All productive areas of the Northwest Coast were claimed by individual groups (Beaglehole 1967:306; Garfield 1966:14; Linton, in Drucker 1939:141; Service 1963:216; Blackman 1976). At potlatches a noble, as the representative of his group, obtained the recognition of others of his right to control these resource areas. By considering the factors of competition over resources and warfare, why the people went to such trouble to obtain recognition of their claims can be understood.

It is one thing to share a surplus by redistribution. It is quite another to have outsiders move into your territory whenever they feel like it. Most reports indicate that outsiders would be granted permission if they asked to use a group's territory, usually with some restrictions on the amount taken or requirements of payment of part of the take (Beaglehole 1967:306; De Laguna 1972:361; Krause 1970:16; Service 1963:216). But that tension existed over these restrictions is demonstrated by the common reports of violence related to unauthorized usage (Boas 1966:35, 110; Collison 1915:307–309; Duff 1959:30–36; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:12; Oberg 1934:149).

Ethologists have observed that many species, when in situations of competition over resources, employ behaviors that clearly demarcate territories. These displays are adaptations that result in the avoidance of open, costly conflict (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1979). I am *not* suggesting that Northwest Coast validation procedures resulted from a similar genetic adaptation, but by analogy that the validation aspect of the potlatch resulted in widespread recognition (and "sacralization"?—Rappaport 1979) of clearly demarcated claims to specific resources. This would certainly reduce the bloodshed that would otherwise result from encroachments on vaguely defined or disputed territories.

Mauss (1967), Levi-Strauss (1969), and Sahlins (1972) have emphasized

the multifaceted nature of the potlatch. They see it as a "total social fact" (Levi-Strauss 1969:58) involving the exchange of economic valuables and, more importantly, the complex manipulation of power, influence, and status. Through the potlatch, Northwest Coast peoples effected the transcendance of a state of "warre" (Sahlins 1972:173) between isolated, autonomous social groups. Their perspective would be enhanced by the conclusions developed here. The reality of the other manipulations they stress is not denied, but the economic significance of redistribution is deemed more important than they imply. And the antagonisms that are being transcended are not an abstract, Hobbesian "warre," but real, deadly warfare.

Codere (1950; 1961) has described the potlatch as a temporal replacement of war. She portrays war as primarily a quest for prestige, which was abandoned when the potlatch system floresced in the mid-1800s. Elsewhere (Ferguson in press) I have disputed both her characterization of Kwakiutl warfare and her claim that it ended with the take-off of potlatching. Potlatch and warfare were co-existing parts of one system. Codere's is the only theory of the potlatch in direct contradiction to the view presented in this paper, although this view might not have been developed had it not been for Codere's pioneering insight on the linkage of war and potlatch.

Finally, Ruyle (1973) explains the potlatch as part of a larger "incipient stratification system." It was, he believes, a mechanism by which nobles extracted "ethnoenergy" or surplus value from commoners and slaves. Ruyle bases this explanation on the fact that commoners contributed to the amassing of goods for a chief's potlatch. He (Ruyle 1973:615) then argues that at potlatches "less was distributed [by chiefs to commoners] than was obtained (a logical concomitant of the . . . fact that chiefs were wealthier and worked less than commoners)." But this logic is based on a questionable implicit assumption—that the wealth of the local group was internally produced. Ruyle would have done better to place more emphasis on the distinction he (Ruyle 1973:614) makes between internal and external exploitation.

The primary sources of wealth for the wealthiest groups of the historic period up to the 1860s were raiding and, more importantly, the control of trade (Ferguson in press; and see MacDonald 1980). At times this trade control seems to have operated through forced unequal exchange at potlatches, in which cases the potlatch ceased to be a mutually beneficial exchange between military equals and became instead a means of exploiting military inferiors. Success in raiding and trade control required the support of a sizable, loyal force of men-at-arms. Many authors, including Ruyle (1973:615), have noted that nobles were intensely interested in attracting and holding followers (Adams 1973:116; Jewitt 1896:216; Oberg 1973:60; Rosman and Rubel 1971:78; Vayda 1968:175). It would seem to be not only a logical possibility but also a practical probability that nobles seeking to maximize their own wealth adopted a strategy of sharing part of the wealth they extracted from

outsiders within their own group. Commoners then would have received more wealth than they directly contributed to the nobles, although less than what the nobles gained from outsiders. These observations would not apply to the condition of slaves. The primary sources leave little doubt about the accuracy of Ruyle's portrayal of slaves as being consistently exploited.

Ruyle's argument cannot be treated quite so simply, however. The potlatch changed with the times.[2] Under a certain combination of circumstances related to war, trade, and Western contact, his description of the potlatch as a mechanism of intragroup exploitation in an incipient stratification system appears to be more accurate. I (Ferguson in press) have been able to document this combination of circumstances and the apparent development of an unstable stratified system only for the Clayoquot and Moachat Nootka of ca. 1785–1802. (Much of the data supporting Ruyle's argument pertains to these two groups.) While similar developments probably occurred in other instances, it is clear that they were definitely a result of contact, and atypical even in the post-contact period. So Ruyle's analysis may be accurate for some cases, but not of general applicability. As with the other theories reviewed above, consideration of war and related factors can put his explanation in proper context.

Throughout this paper, I have followed the lead of Swadesh (1948:76), who wrote of the Nootka: "the entire social structure of band and tribe, kinship and caste, as well as economy and social philosophy, are illuminated against the war background." My central point has been that the emphasis on redistribution in Northwest Coast economies can be explained as a response to a social environment of intense warfare. Exchanges of food, property, and women between neighbors were means of defusing potential conflicts over resources, and simultaneously building alliances needed in conflicts with more distant groups. The redistributive pattern is seen primarily as a result of conscious strategizing, but war is identified as a selective mechanism capable of eliminating groups that did not redistribute surpluses.

Notes

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1. To be precise, I include here the explanations of: Benedict (1932; 1934), Bishop (Chapter 12; this volume), Boas (1897), Dundes (1979), Fleisher (1981), Gold-

man (1975), Herskovits (1952), Murdock (1936), Rosman and Rubel (1971; 1972), Snyder (1975), and Weinberg (1965). See Irvin (1977) for a review.

2. Space limitations prohibit discussion here of potlatching after the end of warfare in the 1860s. In a future study, I hope to show that the perpetuation and fantastic escalation of potlatching in the late 19th century was a result of nobles' attempting to protect their positions against an onslaught of social mobility in a changed social and economic environment.

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