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Eric Laursen on Modern Anarchist Conceptions of The State

Eric Laursen & The Final Straw Radio

13 June 2021

TFSR: So today I'm talking to Eric Laursen, who is the author of the new book *The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the Modern State*. And I want to welcome you to the Final Straw.

Eric Laursen: I go by he/him/his pronouns. I am, I guess, a longtime journalist-activist. And I've made a study of the state, partly as a result of not only my activism and my involvement in the anarchist movement but also just some of the work I've done as a journalist over the years on finance capital, corporate structure, aspects of the economy. So it all comes together in this book, which I call *An Anarchist Theory of the Modern State*. But I think of it also as an introduction to that. I want it to be a conversation starter for people, especially in the anarchist movement itself to think a little more systematically about what is this thing that we're so opposed to? What is the state? We know what capital is, we think we know what the state is, but do we really, do we really understand the connec-

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tion between the two as part of anarchist theory? And where does that get us? What I'm trying to do in the book is to throw out a new way of looking at the state or thinking about it, and then get more people involved in a discussion around that. It's something that I think should appeal to non-anarchists as well, simply because, like most of us, people in the general public think of the state and they think, "Well, yeah, I understand what that is, that's government or whatever." But really, it's more than that. And I think that anybody who wants to understand better what kind of a society we have needs to think about the subject very seriously.

TFSR: The book, I also think it comes at a really opportune time because we have this post-election where Biden's coming in and it's possible that people who are driven to organizing or movement work, because of Trump, might start pulling off from that when there's apparent low of the really egregious harm that we can see so clearly with Trump's administration. You say that, in more recent anarchist analysis, there's been a loss of the focus on the state, in favor of analyzing power more generally, or in the forms of race, gender, and sexuality, but tracing anarchism back to its beginning, in the 19th century, it was distinguished by its anti-state stance. Why do you think it's important to refocus an anti-state argument in our liberatory politics? And why is it not enough just to focus on capitalism? One more part of this question is how does the analysis of state help us understand better these other aspects of oppression like race, gender, sexuality, citizen status, etc.?

EL: Well, yeah, that's a good question. I do want to say just at the outset that I'm not complaining about the direction that anarchist analysis and thought have taken over the last 30-40 years. I don't think you can really have up-to-date anarchism unless you address all of the subjects that you just mentioned in a specific way. There has to be an anarchist angle on racism, class, obviously, on colonialism, imperialism, and so forth. All of those things. What I think is that the answer to your ques-

tion is that the state is the organizing principle for these oppressions. You can look at it this way: Can you understand racism unless you understand how it helps promote and bolster the state? How can you understand sexism or gender inequality? Unless you look at them in the context of how do they serve the state? There's a lot of analysis among Marxists about how capitalism benefits from these sorts of oppressions, but not a lot about how the state specifically does. And we have a tendency, the way we were brought up to think of the state as the solution to these problems, that through the courts, through the legal system, through legislation, and so forth, that those are ways to tackle gender inequality. What I'm suggesting is that ultimately, that is not the case, that the state has a stake in maintaining gender equality, maintaining racism, maintaining other forms of prejudice and inequality. And that we have to bring it back into those discussions before we can really deal with those problems.

TFSR: Right. So I guess before we go too far, if you can share what your definition of the state is. You said it is a sort of organizing principle, but is there more that you would like to expand on how we can understand what the is?

EL: Yeah, definitely. One of those rhetorical things I do in the book is I think of the state in two ways. There's the state with a small 's', which could be the United States, or Egypt, or Russia, or Mauritania, or any number of states that we have in the world. But then I also refer to the State with a capital 'S'. And the state with a capital 'S' is a system that all of these individual states have adopted in one manner or another. The State, I argue, originated in Europe, and it's been exported all over the world. It's probably the most successful export of all time, on a certain level, at least in the intellectual sense.

So what does all that mean? State with a capital 'S' is what we're really talking about in this book. And that is a system or a way of organizing reality, or the perception of reality. I compare it – and this is where the title of the book comes from – to a

computer operating system, like iOS or Windows or something like that. And what that means is that the state is an attempt to create a framework with which we can organize reality and manage our lives within that reality. It struck me in researching computer operating systems that really, they attempt to be all-encompassing. Microsoft wants you to use Windows, so that everything you can do, more and more of what you do can be done within that operating system. You pay your bills, you get entertainment, you write, you create, you design art, you do all of these things. You manage your relationships with people in every part of your life.

And that there's a continual effort to make these operating systems encompass more of what you do day to day. The state, the modern state, which is about 500 years old or a little bit more, is an attempt to do the same. It creates a framework that every aspect of our lives operates within. It's how we govern ourselves, how we organize our economic life, the economic life of the country. It's how we educate ourselves. It's what creates everything from educational standards to weights and measures. The fact that we use inches rather than meters is something that the state came up with. It's something that was decided upon by this institution. Capitalism is part of the state in the sense that capital is needed to promote economic growth, which is needed to help the state expand, strengthen itself, expand outward, expand deeper into the population. There are various aspects of this. But the basic statement I'm making is that the state is not just government, it's an entire system that has been set up to essentially satisfy all our needs and it's a framework in which all of our day-to-day planning takes place, all of our aspirations can be theoretically achieved within this framework of the state. It's something that's, I guess you would call it a totalizing thing. It's continually to try to absorb more of the things we do that are new. Suddenly, we decide we need to travel internationally, which is something that people really for the most part didn't do until a few hundred, couple hundred

TFSR: Yeah, that seems like the other side of that contingency or that it's not inevitable that the things that we have, the so-called fruits of the state could have come in other forms, and aren't worth the pain and violence that we have to experience to have them. That's a really helpful and important point. Well, thank you so much for talking to me, explaining some of the ideas, and refocusing our analysis on the state. I'm really excited about this book and I loved our conversation. So thank you for your time.

EL: I got to say your questions were great. And you pressed me on some points that are really good to press me on. So I appreciate that actually. Because, as I say, I want the book to start a conversation, not to end it.

TFSR: Exactly. I think it will, it's making a really important contribution, and I hope it will help inject this focus on the state into the regional mutual aid networks and projects that are going on right now in such a dire time.

EL: That's really encouraging.

years ago. The state needs to regulate that. Everything we do, the state finds a way to fit into their framework, otherwise, it suppresses it. The question is, after 500 years, do we still want our lives to be regulated and directed in this way? That's the challenge. But I hope that gives you some idea of the basic conception here.

TFSR: Yeah, the last thing you said reminded me of another point that you make is that the state intercedes, interjects itself in every relationship that we have, so that we have to go through the state to do anything, basically, more and more things. One line that you have in the book that really struck me is, and you talk about it in various ways, but I'm gonna quote you: "the state has trained us to think of it as a substitute, or perhaps, a shorthand for the collective, or the community." And in a way, this calls to mind for me Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, and also the totalizing aspect that you talk about reminds me a bit of different analyses of fascism and totalitarianism. But I wonder if you have any thoughts on the way that your operating system analogy helps us to think about that totalizing aspect that the replacement, the image, imitation of life, and maybe how technology fits in that? Because you're specifically outlining or elaborating on the technological aspects of that.

EL: Yeah, I like the fact that you use the phrase "imitation of life." What I meant by a substitute is that the state provides us with something that, without the state, we might think about providing for ourselves through small-scale organizing, direct democracy, communal cooperative forms of economic production, and so forth. The state is a substitute for that. You don't have to do this, we will provide you with the superstructure you need to do these things, we'll make it easy for you. There's a sense in which the state is a product that's been sold to us. Because, yes, we understand that as human beings, you need to cooperate and work together in order to produce food, to reproduce, to tame the environment, or get what you need out

of the environment. But we're going to provide a framework that makes it easy for you, you can do it all through us. It is an attempt to relieve us of taking responsibility for ourselves on a certain level. It's the same as if you buy a house with an alarm system, rather than actually having to get to know your neighbors and forming a community with them, we will sell you an alarm system so that you can sit in your house and not have to worry or think about the other people out there. That underscores a little bit the connection between capitalism and the state, that capitalism is one of the tools that the state uses to fulfill these needs and to make itself into this substitute that you're talking about.

TFSR: I really like the way that your book includes an analysis of capitalism, but as necessarily linked to the state. Because sometimes we might focus so much on capitalism as this worldwide system, that we don't think about how it operates through the state. But one thing that really comes into relief in your analysis to me is the fact that both the state and capital get the benefit of the doubt, as being permanent, inevitable, perpetual. And I was wondering why you think that is. You have said a couple of times maybe that it proposes itself as the solution to our problems, even though, as you're pointing out in this book, they're both also the cause of our problems. So why is it so ingrained in our mind, and why do we accept it?

EL: This is where we get to the cultural part in a way. The state has been one of the things very adept at creating an emotional link between itself and the population, in other words, us. In the early days, in the 15th-16th century, Renaissance period, when modern states really first appeared in Europe, there was the monarch, there was the king, or the Emperor, or what have you, who had a personal connection. There was an attempt made to make people feel a personal connection with these sovereigns, that there's a sort of a godlike quality to them. Really, what they were at that point was dictators or warlords, if you look more closely, but the attempt was to say, "Alright,

like things that you want to bring to our listeners' attention that we didn't cover, or that you'd like to expand on as a way to close it out?

EL: Yeah, I'd like to suggest something actually. We touched on this a little bit earlier. There's an anxiety people have when they think about life without the State. Well, there are so many things that we have acquired that we like in the last 500 years. We have fine art, we have computers, we have music, we have access to all kinds of culture that we didn't use to have, people have much more of an opportunity to rise out of their social class, all these various things, and there's an automatic fear that if we didn't have the state, we wouldn't have a framework where we could get all these things. And what I want to suggest is that that's something we have to get over. It's not true.

The example I like to give is, if we hadn't had the state for the last 500 years, we would probably have computers now, we would have software systems, they'd be different. They'd maybe be less hierarchical, they'd be organized differently, but we would have got there. Would we have not had an Einstein, if there hadn't been institutions of higher education to nurture people like that? Well, we probably would. They'd just be less hierarchical, and they wouldn't be designed to reproduce an elite the way they are now. So the framework the state creates, it creates the mentality, a lack of confidence in the world outside of that framework. And that's something we have to try very consciously to overcome. It's not just that there won't be chaos, it is that we can have all the same things that we really, really value now, that we value for good reasons, for honest reasons. And we don't need this framework in order to get them. I think that's an important lesson for people. And it's something that is very hard for people to get over this sort of fear factor, or this feeling that we have to stay in the sort of womb of the state or else we're going to lose everything. That's the ultimate big scare we have to get over.

more complicated project than just using the State to tame this thing. That doesn't work. And I think this is becoming more obvious to us over the last few decades.

The second thing is that anarchism doesn't just look forward, it encourages us to look backward and to look around us for other systems, or elements of other systems that might work. So, anarchism is an invitation to think creatively about how we organize society. There's nothing determinist about it the way there is a lot of times about Marxism, like we must go through this stage of historical development before we can do this. No, we can look at the way people are organizing things in indigenous communities, we can look at the way people were organizing things in fourteenth-century Europe, we all have these things, our ideas and tools and notions that we can put to use. So that's the exciting part of anarchism is that it tells us that we're not bound by some historically determinist process. We can change the process. These tools are here, if we want to use them, we don't have to go through a hundred more years of capitalism in order to think we're ready for it. So there's an exciting creative element to this. That's not something I talk about a lot in my book, because I'm talking about some fairly depressing things in my book, but that's the part that has a lot of promise, where there's something really optimistic we can grab onto.

TFSR: Yeah, that's like a really helpful way of putting it because something that struck me in reading your book and other things I've been thinking about is that we get caught in the status way of thinking, even when from this a lot of leftist traditions, by agreeing to the inevitability of the state and inevitability of capital. And anarchism allows for a way of viewing history as more contingent, unless evenly developed on this road of progress or whatever, that allows for the creativity that you speak of. I could ask you so many different questions. And a lot of things came up in my mind that I hadn't even prepared for while we were talking, but to wind it down, are there any

let's form a tight emotional bond between Elizabeth I of England or Louie XIV and the people." So they felt like there was almost a family that you were part of with these people. The next thing you had was the nation-state or the national state, where the state was the embodiment of a larger community that you were part of. And so, there was the family of French people or English people, etc, that you belong to. So that's another form of an emotional tie. Fascism, you could say, is sort of the end result of that. That's the ultimate in the nation-state connection. Although it's really built much more on pushing other people, excluding certain other groups, rather than including the group that you're a part of.

Then you have what I guess is known as the social-democratic or welfare state, which is something that we had in the mid-20th century before neoliberalism came in, and the idea of that was that the state is something that can really substitute for socialism, or for anarchism, or these other revolutionary ideologies that grew up. Yes, we can have racial equality, we can have reform, we can have a social safety net, the state will provide it. You don't have to think about it anymore. Or you can give us your suggestions, send your representatives to Congress. The emotional bond there is this sort of bond over welfare, over safety and the ability to feel secure in yourself. Nowadays, we have what I call the neoliberal state, which has abandoned a lot of that. The neoliberal state is all built on the idea that "we give you the opportunity." We don't give you welfare, but we give you an opportunity to do wonderful creative money-making things and that's the key thing. So each stage along the development of the state over the last 500 years has been a different rationale and a different way of building a connection between people and the state that the state relies on to legitimize itself. So that's the cultural aspect of the whole thing.

TFSR: Yeah, that analysis, in your book, I found really helpful because it points to the way that we exist now in the hang-

over of the post World War II era where there was this welfare state, and also the concessions that were made to various civil rights-oriented movements, and even among like anarchists and other anti-authoritarians, you can see people who have an anti-state analysis will still have this knee-jerk reaction that the state would provide us some solution or is there for us in some way.

EL: And that it will again again if we push it hard enough, and we try hard enough to reform it.

TFSR: Right, which in a way explains a lot of the repetition of protest movements, because we end up repeating these old forms that no longer really working. To bring that to the present moment, what was one another aspect of your book that's so helpful is that you wrote this in the wake of the pandemic, and also the uprisings after George Floyd's murder, and we're talking today after another black man was murdered in outside of Minneapolis, while the police officer Derek Chauvin is being held on trial. So there's still this rebellion going on. But you incorporate this analysis of the virus and the pandemic and the very literal, invisible state violence into your analysis of the state. So it's very up-to-date. And as the pandemic started, I started having some hope that the contradictions would be so stark to everyone, that we're expected to pay rent and bills and we have no health care and the horrors of this all would become clear to everyone, but in ways, I'm seeing that go away. And I wonder if you have any thoughts about what events in the crisis like a pandemic provide us an opportunity for resistance and how we can avoid it being co-opted?

EL: That's a really challenging question. And I think that ultimately it's something that has to happen independently of any particular choices. But you're absolutely right that when something like the pandemic happens, it makes starkly clear how incapable the state is and the system we have are coping with this problem that at a certain level it created. It's the same thing with the death of George Floyd, for example, or this most

the world in one way or another. And ultimately, that's going to make it less likely for the state to be able to continue its path of all-devouring economic development. I bring this up a little bit in the book and the more fanciful thinking that people in the economic and political elite have about spaceships and space stations and colonizing other planets.

You see the talk about that among people like Richard Branson or Jeff Bezos, you can see that talk multiplying as it becomes clear that we've already devastated huge parts of this world. Well, let's just go somewhere else and do the same song and dance there. The problem is that leaves the vast majority of us stuck with a basically alluded world. And so that's the thing that I think is going to create a crisis. Again, global warming is part of that, but there are multiple facets to it, that we can take advantage of, where we can point out, this is what essentially the plan that these people have for us is, we have to do something about it. So we need to point out where they're essentially creating a world we don't want to live in, they don't want to live in.

TFSR: Yeah, because they're preparing the rockets. We've been talking for a while, and maybe I'll ask a question about anarchism. Anarchism, specifically, was developed in a particular context, historical context and geographical context in Europe as a response to a specific stage of state development and capital development. It also calls to these stateless societies that have existed and do exist and existed before the state and capitalism. I wonder how you feel anarchism, given that historical origin, serves us today in this context, and why it still is so helpful for thinking about the path towards liberation?

EL: In two ways, anarchism is more relevant today, or more clearly relevant today. Number one, I hope my book is reflecting a certain amount of thinking on the part of other people who already said it, is that we're not dealing with a situation where all we have to do is end Capitalism or tame Capitalism in order to get out from the dilemmas that we face now. It's a

us as a means of redress or something. Your analysis helps us keep trying to de-link from the state in various ways.

EL: Right. That's what we need to push for constantly, is that capitalism, the state are enormously adept at co-opting. That's what they do. That's one of the ways they evolve is by co-opting things that are done on a community level by individuals outside of the system. It is honestly hard to avoid. But, as I say, in terms of the social safety net, is that it is possible to find gaps, to find places where there's a vacuum, places that the state has not entered into yet, or the state has withdrawn from, in fact, because it doesn't think it needs to address these things anymore. Like having a social safety net. That's been the hallmark of this sort of the neoliberal era is just eroding the social safety net. And like I say, that gives us some opportunities to fill those gaps with something different. We still have to guard against being co-opted, because the State might come running back in and say, "Hey, looks like we better do something about this." But we can at least be sensitive, and we can be aware and we can keep pushing into those areas.

TFSR: Another tactical question for me is do you see a flaw in the totalizing desires of the state? And furthermore, where would you locate right now the biggest threat to the state on the side of freedom, not on the side of further fascism or something like that?

EL: When you say flaw, you mean something that is a weakness in the State, a chink in its armor?

TFSR: Yeah, exactly.

EL: Okay, something that makes it vulnerable?

Well, a lot of it is actually very physical right now, and I'm talking from a high level here, the way relentless economic development has destroyed parts of the world itself. You have places like the Sahel in Africa that are basically being desertified, that used to be farming areas, you have the Amazon that's being destroyed. Global warming is one piece of this, but you have devastation of the physical landscape going on all over

recent atrocity we had, that it makes starkly clear that this is a pattern, it's not a freak event, this is something that somehow must be in the interest of the state to allow, that the system is not broken down here. This is how this is supposed to behave. So yeah, these crises do make a lot of things very crystal clear to us that worked before.

The problem is that the State does have ways to recoup when these things happen, the state can throw money at developing vaccines. It can prosecute someone like Derek Chauvin and use that as a demonstration that "yes, we can do the job that we're supposed to do in terms of making sure that everybody is treated fairly and equally." Those are not permanent solutions. They don't address the fundamental issue. In the case of the pandemic, the problem is that globalization has created a situation in which and the advance of industrial societies into wilderness areas, wildlife areas has made it almost certain that we're going to have more pandemics going forward. And yet the state has not developed the ability to cope with them. It treats them all as emergencies rather than improving public health systems and so forth that would help us to be prepared for this thing, it has not done that.

In terms of the issues that are raised by the movement for Black Lives, essentially, no real reform or real fundamental change is made in the system of policing. It stays in place, it is never really reformed except in cosmetic ways. And things just go on as before. What I argue in the book is that we have to think of revolution as a two-part process. And that contrary to the way we've tended to think of it in the past, the social revolution has to come first. We have to start thinking about organizing in and beyond and outside of the state so that we have some conception of what we would put in its place, rather than simply... If a revolution happens tomorrow, and the United States government is swept away, we can put something in its place that's better, that we've already conceived and we've already begun to implement, rather than essentially having to rebuild

the state in an emergency, which is what has tended to happen with revolutions in the last 200-odd years. So that's a big order. But I think that we have an opportunity in a weird way because the state has withdrawn from certain parts of our lives.

Under neoliberalism, the state has decided that the social safety net is not something that needs to provide or something it can provide only in a very limited way. That gives us some space to recreate something like that along more cooperative or collective lines. We can start to create a more humane community ourselves outside of the state because the state isn't competing with us so much in that area. The interesting thing about the Biden administration, for example, is that there's some understanding of this and some understanding that they have to do something to make it look to us as though the state is actually able to be effective in our lives and helping to improve our lives. It's not going to last, it's not going to work. The opposition to it is huge, and it's not going to go far enough. What we're going to find at the end of the day is that we do have to start implementing something new ourselves. This is something that goes back to the early, classical thinkers of anarchism, Bakunin and Kropotkin talked a lot about this, they didn't use the word "prefiguration", but the need to start the revolution now among ourselves, so that we have something to put in place this genuinely different. So that's the challenge that I see.

TFSR: You talk about how the revolutions that some leftists will hold up as successful always end up reproducing the state in various ways. Because, I guess you're arguing, that because that social revolution hasn't happened, or the ingrained Statist thinking doesn't get critiqued enough to say that we can't actually use the state to achieve freedom. And something I really appreciate your book is that you use the State to talk about... you don't make these distinctions among the states, because essentially, this larger system of States functions in a similar way, even if various tweaks happen from one state to the next.

that that's not possible anymore, that these are problems that cannot be met by the State because of the State's own interests clash with any attempt to really address these problems seriously. That's where that discussion has to go. I hope that people will go on upon reading this book.

TFSR: Putting all this critique of the State into an accessible and easily digestible form... These are things that I'm aware of, and yet putting them all at once and seeing how glaring the failures of the State are, when listed off in this way and analyzed in this way.... I don't know, I think it really makes it even more imperative. And then, as you emphasize, the anarchist aspect of it, anarchism always gets dismissed by even Leftists as impossible. When you put the word impossible on the state as the solution, we see that anarchism doesn't look so impossible anymore, because it's actually perhaps one of the few hopes that we have to actually get at something like surviving.

EL: Yeah, in a way it's the attempt to continue to use the state to achieve something that it's not interested in achieving. That is unrealistic, that is impossible. And we can continue to beat our heads against that wall, or we can try something else. I'm really sensitive to the fact that in this book, in terms of dealing with the problems that the state creates, I don't suggest any magic bullets or any quick fixes, or here's how we organize... here's the step by step, this is how we organize in order to overthrow this thing and to do what we need to do. These are not easy things. There are no easy solutions. But the beginning of it continues to be organizing locally, understanding our needs as a community, being our communities, and working from there, that's a step that we can't skip. There's no way to finesse that.

TFSR: It might be suspicious even to have a clear blueprint, but one of the things that I see your book really insisting that we do as anarchists and people who are getting opened up to these ways of thinking is to see to what extent we still contain these vestiges of the state in our attempts to solve the problems of the state, or we get caught up in the traps the state sets for

request that we be able to continue to live a healthy life on this planet, the state system has proved pathetically unable to meet that. It's for a very simple reason, which is that the State is built on this model of rapid economic growth at all times, it cannot reconcile itself to a world in which that is directly antithetical to survival, it can't do it. And so, essentially, we asked the State to address this problem of climate change in a realistic way. It falls back on things like carbon trading, or efforts to sort of shoehorn this back into the private enterprise system in some way or other, clunky innovations, desalinization and removal of carbon from the air and so forth. Innovation is going to solve the whole thing. Don't worry about the inequality part. Once we start to ask for reasonable things, that the state can't deliver, we start to expose the workings of the State, its MO, the way it operates, and how the way it's operates is antithetical to the lives that we want to have. So it's a matter of exposing what's hidden there, essentially.

TFSR: Going back to a discussion of the pandemic and the response to demanding an end to state violence is more state violence. Those moments heighten the hypocrisy of us relying on the state to solve these problems.

EL: ...more of the same and getting the same results. Sorry.

TFSR: Right, exactly. I was interested in your use of the term of making a reasonable demand that's impossible for the state to fulfill. I see people and using the impossibility theoretically within anarchist or anarchist-influenced or adjacent ideas, and I wonder what your thoughts are on that category of impossibility as part of our thinking through, shaking off the State, as you said?

EL: Right, that's where we have to have a dialogue with other people on the Left, essentially, we agree about the demands with other people on the Left, who are not necessarily identifying as anarchists, also want a healthy planet, they want an end to racial injustice, and so forth. But they think that it can be done through the State. And what we need to get across is

And they rely on the system to stay together. I wonder if you have any more thoughts on that failure of revolution, or the way that State thinking gets replicated? Or leftists get caught in the feedback loop of Statism?

EL: Yeah, it's really powerful when you take a close look at it, because if you look at the Russian Revolution, the big one of the last 100 odd years, the first thing the new Soviet state started to do after it came into power was to essentially re-assemble the Russian Empire that had disintegrated just before the October Revolution happened. The process of suppressing ethnic minorities or Russifying them continued, geographic areas that had succeeded were pulled back in, an immense military establishment was built up once again, an immense prison establishment was built up once again. Really, the pattern was put right back in place that had existed before the Soviet Union, maybe it was a little more efficient this time, but essentially, the ambition of that state was the same.

You can look at it similarly, if you look at sort of post-colonial states. You can look at India, which is a country that never existed really in that form until the British imperialists put it together. They created literally an Indian Empire. When Britain pulled out, it essentially turned that whole structure lock, stock, and barrel over to the indigenous people. And specifically to people who were English-trained, who were trained to think about the state as something fundamental, to think of economic development as something that powers the state. And who essentially ran that Empire along, in a lot of ways, remarkably similar lines. This is why I say that the state has been something that's a European export because it's essentially sold to at least a small stratum of people in each of the places that it comes in contact with. And they'd set up something that's ultimately along the same lines, where there are territorial boundaries, there are certain kinds of institutions that are common, there's a nationalist thinking in each of these places. And that's essentially what we get. It

doesn't always work. We have failed states all over the place. But that's the aspiration. And the remarkable thing, of course, is that if you look back even 100 years ago, there were vast parts of the world that had no state, where the State really only existed in name. Today, it's very, very different. Almost everything is encompassed by the State now, and the parts of the world that still resist or lie outside of it, such as, for example, people in Amazonia, there's tremendous pressure upon them as well. So, the reality is that the State has almost become supercharged in the last 100 years. And anything that's resisted it or stood in this way is being undermined increasingly rapidly and quite violently, in a lot of cases.

TFSR: Thinking about the way that the state has come to settle itself all over the globe is helpful too to think about it as that colonial export, especially since Settler State comes into more focus in a lot of critiques now within indigenous-led movements. But I wonder if also there's a way that the State is used to try and consolidate power after a revolution. But there's this other problem. And maybe this pertains to the system of states that you're talking about, where if there was a revolutionary movement or freedom movement that was isolated, how does it exist as a non-State structure, while the system of states at large exists and would continuously exert that pressure for it to conform in some way? Do you have any thoughts on that?

EL: Yeah, that's a problem. The answer to that, ultimately, is resistance. And in the book, I talked a little bit about the idea of insurgency, rather than revolution. And this has been an interesting topic lately, amongst other writers as well, is that insurgency is something long-term. It involves creating a prefigurative or an alternative community within the present State while we are resisting it. Insurgency is something that could include anything from the Zapatista movement in Mexico to the Landless Movement in Brazil, even in some respects to the agricultural Farmers' Movement in India, where people are forced

about what's needed to win this war. He stressed over and over again, there's a need to go to the people and find out what they want. Don't tell them what they want, but to find out what they want, and to give them the power to get those things for themselves. That was a big part of why the National Liberation Front was accepted in so many parts of the country because there was this constant emphasis on putting the question back to the people themselves and helping them to organize. And maybe it was a little bit phony, maybe people were induced to think this. The North Vietnamese system was fairly monolithic. But I think that he was right in terms of what the emphasis has to be for any liberatory movement. It's got to constantly go back to that local level.

TFSR: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And yet, in your book, you also keep an eye on the fact that there are these huge problems that affect everyone, like the climate catastrophe that is happening and worsening constantly, it is inescapable for everyone to some extent, and then you also talk a lot about the forced migration and displacement of people that are being caused by climate, by state violence, by economic and trade agreements. I want to get to the strategy that you articulate at the very end of the book. You talk about making a reasonable demand that is impossible for the state to fulfill. Can you explain that strategy and how that relates to these very big problems that we're facing?

EL: Yeah, with climate change, it's easy, in a way. There's nothing easy about climate change, but it's easy to address that point with it, in that if you look at the measures that are contemplated through the Paris Accords to deal with climate change, they are inadequate. A reasonable request of the state in a time of climate change is to do what needs to be done so that we don't all die, so that the planet doesn't become uninhabitable for us. Nothing that has been proposed, including the proposal the Biden administration has made over the last few weeks or started to formulate, will do it. Well, it is a reasonable

monalities with people in other places and to share tools and methods of organizing that can work in more than one place. So there's essentially getting creative thinking about how to organize going completely outside the state, but also outside of state boundaries, outside of specific state boundaries.

TFSR: That seems important. One of the things we're talking about here, and you talked about in the book, too, is the State's so good at scaling up, and I hear this often within anarchist organizing groups, that's a problem that we have. We have our mutual aid network with our town, and maybe some neighboring towns, but how do we scale that to the region? Scaling, in a way, sounds like it could end up reproducing that state form. How do we think about doing that across the state lines and not within a state idea of bigness and totality?

EL: Well, the first thing is to keep in mind people's specificity. Not everybody's struggle is exactly the same everywhere. And so to be sensitive to that, I should back up a second. You said the magic word, which is "scale". That's the ultimate argument for the state: we have the resources, we have the reach, we have the depth, we have the technology and the expertise to do beneficial things on a large scale, you don't. Okay, so that's the primary argument for the State's existence today. What we need to do is rather than thinking about scaling, to begin with, we need to think about addressing local needs and local desires. The federative part comes later. And if you structure an organization that's built around fulfilling the needs of people in a local community, and doing it in a directly democratic way, there's less likelihood of putting together a federated structure on top of that, that subordinates everybody to some big idea. That's ultimately what you don't want to do. But it has to originate at that local level. And they have to be focused that way.

You're going to be a little surprised to hear this, but I would direct people to look at some of the things that Ho Chi Minh wrote during the Vietnam War, in terms of when he was talking

to organize outside of the State because there's literally no way that the State can address their demands, however reasonable those demands are. And so you start to develop something that is outside the state, and that can eventually create institutions that can replace it.

Now, I don't say this in the book, but I've thought this for a long time, is that ultimately, if the State is going to be brought down, most likely the process is going to start in the developing world, where state structures and power are more tenuous. They're not exercised as uniformly literally in the geographic space. And where there's room for people to develop alternative institutions. Most likely what we're going to see is developments like this growing and really metastasizing in the developing world, and then perhaps extending to places like the United States, Western Europe, and so forth. Because I think also there are, in those places, more of the remnants of traditional ways of life that alternative structures can be built around, and this is something that goes back to the beginnings of anarchist thinking. In the 19th century, Russian anarchists looked to traditional peasant communities, as offering models to develop some an alternative system around, rather than this European state that's been grafted on to the place. And I think that that's going to continue to be something that we see.

Just getting back to the point we were talking about a second ago, one of the things that the Soviet Union did once it got into power was it essentially completed the job of destroying those traditional communities in Russia, which has begun under the Czarist regime. The Soviet Union essentially completed that task. So that's the thing we see in empires or restored empires, even when they have leftist governments. I think that the answer is to start at home and to start locally, and to consciously, really consciously create structures where the intention is not to let them be co-opted by the State.

TFSR: You make the argument in the book that all the so-called good things that the state has provided, particularly in

the last 100 or 150 years, maybe extending to that long have been co-opted: from community-based solutions and versions of mutual aid. Do you want to elaborate on the history of how those things have come to be seen as state-based programs that really came from communities?

EL: Sure. The example I use a lot because I wrote a book about the subject is social security. The social security and medicare systems in this country are something that really was born out of cooperatives from mutual aid associations that workers formed in the 19th century. You have people pouring into large industrial cities from the countryside, there was no social safety net, there was a need for people to provide these things for themselves. And so they did. Welfare systems or social insurance systems like Social Security and Medicare, in this country, were created as a way to nationalize that. In the early 20th century in the United States, when universal health care systems were starting to be discussed, there were people in the American labor movement, who literally said, “We don’t want to do this, we don’t want to back this because we feel that the state is going to at some point snatch back, it’s not going to be forever. They say it will be but it’s not, we have to organize this ourselves.” And that thinking died out.

But I think that these days, there’s a real need to revisit it and to look at institutions like Social Security, for example, or unemployment insurance, or these social safety net systems, and think about whether this is something we can essentially denationalized and turn into something that’s run on a cooperative basis. Because, again, what we have seen is the state makes a commitment to these kinds of programs over the last 100 years, let’s say, and then withdraw out of that commitment, they said, “Well, maybe this was a bad idea, maybe we need a lot less of this.” Well, no, we don’t need a lot less of this, but the state thinks we do. There’s a need to revisit that element of the social contract that the state imposed on us.

TFSR: To pivot our discussion more to revolutionary aspects. One thing you say is the state exists because we choose to let it, and that feels really empowering to think about as a way to, not choose to let it. But to me, it also calls to mind some of that social contract idea that keeps us within the circle of the state that we’re all here by some form of consent. Right? So I was wondering, what are your thoughts on and how do we choose not to let the state exist? What does that look like?

EL: I can give you a little bit of a visual. It looks a bit like the Capitol Hill occupation that happened in Seattle a few months ago. It looks like people rejecting the police, rejecting the presence of the police in their communities. It looks like people essentially forming in small clusters to self-govern themselves and then reaching out to other groups that are doing something similar. It can seem very small scale, it can seem minuscule compared to the power of the state itself. That’s the challenge. But I think that the answer to that is what used to be known as internationalism. In other words, smaller communities, right from the get-go need to link up and network with smaller communities in other places that are doing something different. We need to have a network that is as widespread and as diverse as the community that the state itself governs. We have to create a new, larger federal structure that is consensual, cooperative. We need to figure out how to do this.

An interesting model, actually, if you want to think about it, is, although there are problems with this model on a certain level, the committees of correspondence that existed in the colonies before the American Revolution, which is essentially people who were interested in independence, interested in freedom, who essentially formed a letter-writing collective among themselves. There wasn’t a lot of transportation or travel between the states or the colonies at that point. So you use the mail to essentially create a community that wasn’t there before. It’s a prefiguration of the internet and of social media, and what can be done with that. But the point is to find com-