Why I Don't Owe 'Anonymous' a Lamp

A reply to the anonymous attack on my book, 'The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the State'

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Not long after my book, *The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the State*, was published in 2021, a review-cum-attack on it started appearing online, first (I think) on itsgoingdown.com, here.

The anonymous author says, or implies, that I am yet another leftist angling to coopt anti-State movements for the mainstream Left. My book, or elements of it, are "profoundly disappointing," "center-left denialist garbage," "objectively absurd and deliberately misleading," "ahistorical," "a disgusting spit in the face," "pure racist paternalism," "cringe-worthy," "a huge disservice to the popular, Black-led, and revolutionary character of the [post-George Floyd] rebellion," "bananas-ass garbage," an attempt to "lock us in a perpetual victim cage of his own making," an announcement of "spiritual death," "CNN style hot-take falsehoods," a form of "respectability politics," "excrement," and—the unkindest smear of all—"liberal."

For whatever reason, I only saw this review (let's call it that) a few days ago. Nobody brought it to my attention previously and I've seen no commentary on it online, so I have no way of knowing what degree of impact it has had. But since it's 5,000 words long, sometimes thoughtful, and verging on the very personal, I decided I had to respond. (I should mention also that I believe I know who the author is, and if I am right, they have published at least two books that I respect quite a bit.)

The review starts out with a complaint that I share, about the way the State is discussed, or not, in contemporary society. "Some part of this leviathan-monster is implied a thousand times a minute in 'public' discourse, but the State is rarely named *as such*." This "opacity" makes "opposition to this or that State policy or program easy, but opposition to the form itself particularly difficult." This is true of anarchists almost as much as everybody else, from Washington policy wonks to the general public.

Which is exactly why I wrote *The Operating System*: as a sketch of what makes the modern State unique in human history, including its remarkably consistent trajectory over the 500-odd years since it first appeared, how and why it has effectively taken over the world in the past two centuries, the existential crisis it has created in our time, and the challenges and opportunities for those of us who oppose it.

It was not meant to be the final word on the subject, however. As I wrote in an opening section, *The Operating System* is "the opening installment of a larger project to explore and understand the modern State from an anarchist perspective: an overview, to be followed by a series of closer-up, more detailed studies. I hope it will also be the start of a conversation, as more people offer their critiques and their own ideas of the origins, mechanics, and motivations of the modern State, from an outsider's point of view."

As this implies, I was hoping other anarchists would critique the arguments I make in my book, because the more we talk about and define the things we oppose—capitalism and the State—the better we will become at opposing and eventually overthrowing them. As Marx said (sometimes, he got it right), "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." But I have to push back when the critics misunderstand or misrepresent my analysis. The reviewer repeatedly misunderstands what I am saying, including spending more than half of their text attacking a one short passage for what they think it says about my commitment to popular rebellion. For these few sentences, they demand I pay them $14.99 plus tax for a lamp they threw across the room in a rage after reading it.

I don't owe them $14.99 plus tax, and I will get to the passage in question shortly, but first, let's examine the criticisms that lead up to it.

While they have no problem with my characterization of the modern State as analogous to a computer operating system like Windows or iOS, "an environment that aspires to create an encompassing social, cultural, and functional environment for its users," they object that I don't explain why this is "needful or useful." They seem not to have read my very next sentence, which explains that the State "molds and directs [people], limits and guard-rails their aspirations and ambitions such that they conform to and support its objectives." Getting rid of the State doesn't just mean overthrowing a system of government and control, but ridding ourselves of a way of thinking, a feeling that insinuates itself into our social psychology and colonizes our imagination. Understanding the State as an operating system helps us to understand how it controls us and to focus on finding ways to live—to *be*—without it.

Likewise, the reviewer has no objection as such to my analysis that every modern state has as its key constituency a Core Identity Group: "the ethno-cultural group it regards as its primary constituency, critical to its legitimacy and security." But they object that this is a "somewhat surface-level and ahistorical approach," since it suggests that "all of these examples of Core Identity Group hegemony exist in more or less equivalency," whether white Roman Catholics in early modern France or Javanese Muslims in the contemporary Indonesian state, since only the Europeans were responsible for imposing the State "on a *global* scale."

Again, this ignores what's clearly in my text. "The State is European in origin, and remains so culturally," I argue. "Every major feature of the State … was first developed by the European states; every society in the decolonized world that operates as a state adopted them and continues to incorporate them into its system of social organization … as their elites sought to guarantee themselves a seat at the table the Europeans were setting."

If there's any clearer way to understand the State as a European project intended to serve European interests, I'd like to know what it is.

Next, the reviewer charges that I underplay the role of slavery in the formation of capitalism and the modern State. Here's how they put it: "The Atlantic Slave Trade … was *uniquely* responsible for the formation of numerous individual states and, more relevant to the book, the entire

modern State system, including the trade and banking networks that helped that system come into being."

They hedge their bet by allowing that "a myriad of other factors and processes … allowed the modern State to emerge and continue to reproduce itself," but nevertheless criticize me for confining my discussion of slavery to "a couple [of] passing mentions."

If the yardstick here is sheer word count, they might have a point—but again, *The Operating System* is a survey, not an in-depth exploration of every aspect of the creature. And I don't "overlook" the role of slavery, as the reviewer charges. In fact, I discuss it in pretty much the same terms that they do. For instance, I note that "the British and Dutch East India companies, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Royal African Company (which funded and coordinated the African slave trade for Britain) not only built capitalism but began the work of spreading European dominion—and the apparatus of the State—into new parts of the world." I further explain that "the revival of slavery by western European elites … at the dawn of the modern State in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stemmed from the need to marshal economic forces—in this case, captive human labor—to build economic power."

I go a half-step farther than the reviewer, in fact, arguing that the current system of economic colonialism is still driven by a tightly-knit combination of the State and state-sponsored companies very similar to the one that created the slavery-dependent resource-extraction empires of the early modern era. For this, I cite the research of political scientists Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman into China's Belt and Road project, in which Beijing's cross-border investments are driven by state-subsidized private companies with close personal connections to the political and military leadership.

This brings us to the review's most "damning" accusation, that I "invisibilize" the "popular, Black-led and revolutionary" rebellion that rose against the police state in 2020 in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The passage that the reviewer takes issue with appears in the second to last (not the last) chapter of *The Operating System.* Here it is:

The violence that took place at many of the demonstrations and marches, the vast majority of which was instigated or provoked by police or far-right counterprotesters, would be used as another excuse to spy on leftists and anarchists, violating their privacy and further criminalizing dissent. One of the few major arrests following the marches in late May, ironically, was of "three alleged members of a militarized far-right movement" who were accused of "plotting to bomb government property and to stoke violence at a Black Lives Matter protest using Molotov cocktails," according to the *Wall Street Journal.*

"Populist" violence may bubble up from below, but seldom without encouragement from the State. In any society managed from the top down, either by an authoritarian ruler or a meritocratic elite, culture, including the place of violence in the society, is defined at the top.

My basic point here, which the reviewer acknowledges grudgingly, is that anarchists, antifa, Black liberation fighters, and others (broadly) on the left are used as scapegoats by the State whenever disruptions occur and whatever the degree of violence or property destruction that takes place, and that the latter are made yet another excuse to suppress them. But the reviewer goes further, accusing me of denying the existence of popular rioting or violent rebellion in 2020 and portraying the urban rebellions of that year as "some State-contrived scheme to justify spying on a tiny fringe minority of ideological radicals," obscuring the really revolutionary nature of the insurgency.

The reviewer cites Shemon Salam and Arturo Castillon's *The Revolutionary Meaning of the George Floyd Uprising* on the actual dimensions of the uprising, and they are worth noting here as well:

At least 28 people died in the wave of social unrest that rocked the United States from late May until July in 2020. In this 10-week period, there were 574 riots; 624 arsons; 2,382 incidents of looting; 97 police vehicles set on fire; and 12,241 people arrested for protest-related activities. In addition, at least 13 police were shot, 9 were hit by cars and 2,037 were reported injured in the riots, mostly because of the tossing of rocks, bricks, and other projectiles.

This uprising caused at least $2 billion in property damage, the "highest recorded damage from social unrest in US history," and forced more than 200 cities to impose curfews and mobilize 96,000 national guard troops in 34 states.

"From the Biden democrats to virtually all of the mainstream media not affiliated with Fox News, to the Black Lives Matter™ people," the reviewer says, "the agenda pushed by all these groups is the claim that the insurrection did not take place."

This is true. What the media dismissed as a lot of vandalism and misbehavior was in fact a genuine, grassroots rebellion against the intolerable treatment of the African American community. And nowhere in *The Operating System* do I say the opposite. Nor do I ever suggested that the State "encouraged" the uprising. To accuse me of participating in some kind of "liberal respectability politics" aimed at demonizing Black insurgents who don't respect police cars, is a smear with no basis in my book, or anything else I've written, for that matter.

When I noted the "few major arrests" that took place in late May 2020, I was focusing on a very specific time period, not the entire period of the uprising, as Salam and Castillon were. Beyond this, the reviewer misses a crucial element of my analysis of the State's politics of repression. When I noted that "populist" violence seldom bubbles up without encouragement from the State, I wasn't referring to the uprisings against police within the Black community; I was discussing the violence that far-right groups inflict on the Black community, and that more often than not, they get away with.

The State has a double standard when it comes to violence. When it is a product of rebellion by the left, by people of color or other marginalized groups, it is denounced, cracked down on, and used to instill fear in the Core Identity Group. When it is used as a tool of repression by racists or other far-right "populists"—very much including the police—it is tolerated and even encouraged, because it reinforces State power while offering the State deniability. Here's the key passage from *The Operating System*:

Other [i.e., non-governmental] institutions and groupings that form part of the State furnish cultural and even paramilitary support to the social order, strengthen organized religion, and reinforce racial and gender stratification: for instance, the extreme wings of the nativist Alternative for Germany; the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India; and the American Legion, the Ku Klux Klan, the National Rifle Association, militia groups, the Proud Boys, and the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States.

Missing this point, the reviewer accuses me of "locking us into a perpetual victim cage of his own making," where we have to deny or disavow any genuine rebellion against the system, turning "peaceful" protesters" against insurgents and setting the latter up to be suppressed by the State. "Either way, we're forever hapless innocent victims, righteous but toothless," and I am somehow an unwitting participant in a counter-insurgency.

Nothing could be further from the argument I make in my book. "Among the most dramatic features of the modern era are the dogged resistance of subject populations and the State's efforts to beat them into submission." I note the long genealogy of rebellion, extending from (for example) the Peasants' War in Germany and the Pilgrimage of Grace in England in the 16th century to Stenka Razin's uprising in Russia (1671), Tacky's slave revolt in Jamaica (1760), the Whiteboy movement of landless Irish (1761), the revolt of Túpac Amaru II in Peru (1780), Nat Turner's slave rebellion in Virginia (1831), the Mau Mau revolt against British colonial rule in Kenya (1952–1960), the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania coal mines, and, more recently, the successive Palestinian intifadas, the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, and the Tamil Tigers' separatist insurrection in Sri Lanka, not to mention the continuing Zapatista uprising and occupation in Chiapas. On top of which I note the general strike and the Movement for Black Lives. Nowhere in this litany do I make an artificial distinction between "violent" and "non-violent" rebellion.

Elsewhere, the reviewer tries to convict me in a form of guilt-by-association by tying me to longtime activist Lisa Fithian, who they caricature as a "domineering, riot-shaming, and pacifism-championing presence all of us anarchists from the anti-globalization years learned to resent."

Lisa is a longtime friend who I worked with during those years and beyond. She also provided a blurb for the back cover of *The Operating System*. Like everyone else in the movement, Lisa has her own brand of organizing and resistance, which is very much non-violent, but I have never observed her attempt to control an action she volunteered to support or work against the planning of the people directly involved. (Lisa was inside Columbia University's Hamilton Hall last May, helping student activists take over and defend the building as part of their protest against the university's investment in companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. For her work, she was branded by the New York police as an "outside agitator" with "no known affiliation to the school at all," as if this somehow amounted to a criminal conviction.)

What's troubling about the reviewer's singling out of Lisa is the implication that any form of activism other than direct, violent insurgency is somehow not legitimately grassroots or anarchist. I disagree with this completely. I have worked repeatedly with pacifist and other non-violent activists, and respect their valuable contribution to the struggle. They have a place in it as much as do those of us who take a different approach, so long as they accept the principle of diversity of tactics. The important thing is that we all base our work on the necessity and logic of direct action.

In *The Operating System*, I quote Lisa's own book, *Shut It Down*: "Direct action is a way of life and lens through which to view the world. It is not about asking permission but rather doing what needs to be done to accomplish your goal as efficiently and effectively as possible…. Direct action is empowering, in the purest sense of the word. It allows people and communities to assert their power, to exercise their freedom. And to draw on their own wisdom to transform their lives." This—and especially that last sentence—applies whether direct action takes the form of a burning squad car or a peaceful occupation or blockade.

It also underscores what's truly disappointing about this review of *The Operating System*. In their repeated misunderstanding of my analysis of the State and the dynamic between the State and those of us who oppose it, and their zeal to excommunicate anyone who doesn't subscribe to their particular approach to direct action, the reviewer forecloses the opportunity to build the movement out: something it very much needs.

Toward the end of their text, the reviewer writes, "there is a deep ancestral wisdom contained in the ingenious ways that a crowd assembles a barricade, dispatches a team of medics, finds fuel to spread the fires, and distributes looted goods, as each of these collective activities amount to the most hallowed of spiritual offerings."

The term for this is direct action; these are just a few of the forms it can take. I'm happy to work with the reviewer in this great movement. But I don't owe them $14.95 plus tax.

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