

Labadie Reviews Nock

Laurance Labadie

1936

*Our Enemy, the State, by Albert Jay Nock*¹

Mr. Nock begins with the vital distinction between the State and society, showing in the course of his work, that the State, every State, originated and functions for only one purpose—conquest and economic exploitation. Although resting upon violence, the State, in the final analysis, exists by virtue of a state of mind which prevails toward it, a peculiar ignorance, delusion, and moral debility which, in the face of its unbroken record of doing nothing honestly and efficiently, tends to call on it to ameliorate any social predicament. We are all so used to being brought up under some form of State that we are more concerned with its form rather than its nature.

Quoting Spencer, who said that when State power is applied to social purposes its action is invariably “slow, stupid, extravagant, inadaptive, corrupt and [obtrusive]” and that in it corruption is unavoidable, Mr. Nock notes that nevertheless its “old trick of turning every contingency into a resource for accumulating force in the government,” in Madison’s words, is looked upon with tolerance even with hope that it will improve and mend its ways. Indeed there are perpetual attempts to improve its character, running at last to the fatuous assumptions of collectivists that when the State is given ALL power its activities will be identical with societal interests, an idea the puerility of which is demonstrated by its going to pieces against the iron law of fundamental economics—that man always tends to satisfy his needs and desires with the least possible exertion, politically rather than economically whenever possible. Appeal to the State is appeal to contravene natural law. He says “under a regime of actual individualism, actually free competition, actual LASSEZ FAIRE—a regime which, as we have seen, cannot possibly coexist with the State—a serious or continuous misuse of social power would be virtually impracticable.” Nevertheless, no political party, whether it be called Republican, Progressive, Democrat, Communist, Farmer-Laborite, Socialist or what not, is opposed to augmentation of State power, their interests being only to gain power, the greater it is the keener the competition to gain control.

But why labor the point when Mr. Nock himself has so briefly and distinctly summarized by saying, “Taking the State wherever found, striking into its history at any point, one sees no

¹ Editor’s Note: The above review of Nock’s little masterpiece was one of the very first reviews to appear. In view of the calumnies hurled Mr. Labadie’s way by many of Albert Jay Nock’s epigones it is instructive to quote Nock’s letter to Labadie in 1936. Nock wrote in his almost illegible script that he was “most appreciative of the sympathetic observations on my book, and even more, of the accurate ___? ___ of my position. It is unusual to find such fairness and kindness combined in a review...” He also said he “never met but one or two live anarchists.”

way to differentiate the activities of its founders, administrators, and beneficiaries from those of a professional criminal class.” Bravo! Mr. Nock. Bravo! Marxian scientists please note. I can see some preoccupied anthropologists a few thousand years hence, poking through the ruins of a degenerate society and picking up a crumbling copy of “Our Enemy, the State,” exclaim, “Well, well! Why they couldn’t all have had thick skulls at that.”

Mr. Nock makes special mention of the American State, the first to birth from the industrial revolution. The arising mercantile class, finding it difficult to reconcile the ideas of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity with a State, found it necessary to keep up the appearances of the former and retain the latter, to resort to—Parliamentarianism. In the United States Government the balance of power has rested, successively, in the hands of land owners, industrialists, and finally, financiers. Most of the prominent men mentioned in connection with the American Revolution were land grabbers and speculators among whom were George Washington, Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, Timothy Pickering, John Adams, Silas Deane, Robert Morris, James Wilson, Wolcott Stiles, Peletian Webster, Ethan Allen, Jonathan Trumbull, James Duanne—all prominent men—as well as the “Father of the Revolution” himself—Samuel Adams. Only one man, or possibly two, saw clearly the course of events—Jefferson, who said at the time, “our government is now taking so steady a course as to show by what road it will pass to destruction, to wit: by a consolidation first, and then corruption its necessary consequences. The Engine of consolidation will be the federal judiciary; the other two branches the corrupting and corrupted instruments,” and Thomas Paine. Jefferson also said, “When we must wait for Washington to tell us when to sow and when to reap, we shall soon want bread,” statements that seem strangely significant in these depressing days. But I shall go no further in violating my original intention except to say that Mr. Nock comes up to and includes the Roosevelt Regime.

I cannot refrain from mentioning the “kick” I got from reading Mr. Nock’s note that being unable to enslave the Indian the colonists had to expropriate them by conquest, as some of my rebelliousness I like to attribute to my Indian ancestors.

“Our Enemy, the State,” is not a large book. Ordinarily a reader should finish it in a few evenings. It is no laborious warming-over of socialistic jargon. It is entertaining, clearly written, provocatively stimulating and instructive. Truly “a gentleman and a scholar,” Mr. Nock, widely traveled and cultured and although an avowed anarchist manages to write probably one of the most lucid yet unorthodox books on human liberty without once mentioning a single anarchist “authority” (and, for a change, god bless him for it.) He winds up realistically if pessimistically by saying he does not expect the book to have any appreciable effect on curtailing the tendency of increase of state powers, until the day of reckoning, but that it was written for those who have an intellectual curiosity concerning “the august order of nature.”

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