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“The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the Modern State”

Review of Laursen’s new book on anarchism and the
state

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different book, but the argument against the state requires more of a vision of how society might function without one.

In summary, Eric Laursen presents us with an important attempt to develop anarchist theory about the state and its relation to capitalism and the rest of society. It is well worth reading, discussing, and thinking about.

nal conflicts in capitalism, the clash between the interests of working people and the corporate rich and the failures of the capitalist-supported state to serve the interests of working people, we might see the possibility of anarchists once again building “an effective mass revolutionary movement” (p. 17).

Conclusion

The state is the central institution in this society. It has drives of its own but is intimately tied up with capitalism in all aspects. It is also integrated with all other subsystems of oppression. To get rid of capitalism, to avoid climate catastrophe, to end racial and gender and all other oppressions, it will be necessary to overthrow the state. These concepts are raised in Eric Laursen’s book. They are essential ideas if anarchism is to become a coherent and effective revolutionary force.

However, there are some limitations in his book, from my point of view. His overriding metaphor of the state is as a master operating system. Whatever its advantages in showing society as dynamic and interacting, it leads to underestimating the internal conflicts within the society, such as between capitalists and the state. Particularly, it leads to downplaying the class conflict within capitalism. The book is also weak in considering what an alternate social system might be like. At times he makes passing references to the possibilities of people organizing themselves in decentralized, participatory, and cooperative ways, now and in the past. These are too limited. He does not address questions which are commonly raised, such as how will people be protected from antisocial actors, or from aggressive imperialist states? How will modern technology be used in a libertarian society? (I have previously discussed some of this.)⁸ I do not want to criticize Laursen for not writing a

⁸ Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State; Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

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be an armed struggle at some point... The State will not go away until we force it to” (p. 220).

Who will make this eventual revolution once events have become ready? Laursen writes of “activists [and] ... the majority of the population ... [when it] stops cooperating with [the present system]” (p. 220). However, most of that population majority is composed of the working class: people who work for wages or salaries (without being supervisors) and their dependents. These people are many things, including various races, religions, ethnicities, immigration statuses, ages, one of two genders, and various sexual orientations and identities. All of these are important and most have reasons to oppose the established power (call it the “operating system” or whatever). All these categories overlap with each other and especially with the working class. Together they have at least one advantage over the state: their numbers. This is counterposed to the minority ruling class’s money and armed power (but the ranks of the military are mostly the sons and daughters of the working class). Even more, the potential power which the population has against the state and capital comes with being mostly working class. It is as workers that they have their hands on the means of production, distribution, communication, transportation, and services. As the working class, the people can shut down all systems, and start them up again in a different way.

In his only reference to the working class, Laursen writes, “The working class has been divided and neutralized” (p. 44). This is true, but it means that the US population, largely working class, is divided and neutralized. Parts of it are liberal and some parts are quite reactionary. There has recently been a growth in the number of young working-class people who regard themselves as “socialists” and even as “anarchists,” although what these terms mean to them is uncertain. Yet this is still a minority. That almost all the US population—identified as workers or otherwise—is not in favor of revolutionary anarchism is what makes revolution a strategic goal, not an immediate project. However, if we look at the inter-

But a state remains a state, a bureaucratic-military socially alienated machine standing over and above the rest of society, serving a minority elite in exploiting the mass of the population. Laursen points out that “anarchism” is one of “the forms of socialism” (p. 15). It is anticapitalist and in favor of a collective, cooperative, and nonprofit economy. But “to get rid of capitalism requires getting rid of the State” (p. 111). Similarly, Laursen rejects reformist and gradualist strategies of anarchism. Many anarchists propose to live alternate lifestyles and to build alternate institutions, intending to ignore the state and big capital. They hope to work around the state and to peacefully create a new society with minimal, if any, direct clashes with the elite and its armed forces.

Still, Laursen favors building alternate organizations that do not depend on the government or big business, such as co-ops. And he favors building social forces in opposition to the establishment: community organizations; unions; movements against war, racism, or sexism. Even reforms are most likely to be won when the state is challenged from outside and below: “every important advance in working people’s material well-being and political status, from ... decent pay and dignity for industrial workers to racial equality, has been thanks to social movements that first formed outside the State and in opposition to its power structure, and ... those advances were lost when those social movements atrophied or were subsumed by the State” (p. 215). To turn such movements against the state requires “making demands [the state] can’t meet” (p. 205). These are sometimes called “transitional demands” or “non-reformist reforms.” In the end, Laursen insists, there will have to be a revolution, an overturning of the state and the institutions it supports. A revolution will require a period of build-up, when independent popular organizations and mass movements are growing, and a period afterwards, when new systems take root and solidify. In between, there will have to be some sort of insurrection, some kind of clash: “the State ... will fight to preserve itself at all costs.... There will almost certainly

“The people without its monarch and without that whole organization necessarily and directly connected with him is a formless mass, which is no longer a State. In a people, not conceived in a lawless and unorganized condition, but as a self-developed and truly organic totality—in such a people, sovereignty is the personality of the whole, and this is represented in reality by the person of the monarch.” So wrote Hegel in *The Philosophy of Law*.¹ The opposite of Hegel’s view is anarchism, which rejects the state and any rule by a “monarch” (whether an actual king, a dictator, an oligarchy, or a “democratically” elected president and congress). Anarchism is not only against the state but opposes all forms of domination, exploitation, elitism, and hierarchy—including capitalism, white supremacy, sexism, nationalism, anti-ecology, and homophobia, among others. Yet its opposition to the state is a major theme. Therefore it is a little surprising that there is not more current theorizing by anarchists on what the state is and does, how it is structured, and how it came into being. (I have reviewed a couple of such books).² Eric Laursen is remedying this lack of discussion with this work. (I have known Laursen for many years and have worked with him on various projects, such as the New York Anarchist Book Fair.) While there have been states for thousands of years, his subject is the “modern state,” which began in the sixteenth century. This century is often described as the beginning of capitalism.

Much of this book is an account of how the state actually performs a variety of social functions. He begins with a review of how states responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the

¹ Quoted in Dwight Macdonald, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), 58.

² Wayne Price, “An Anarchist View of State Formation—Review of Peter Gelderloos, *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*,” *Anarkismo*, December 13, 2018, www.anarkismo.net, and, “Post-Anarchism on the State—An Anarchist Critique,” *Arnarkismo*, September 9, 2018, www.anarkismo.net.

common claim that centralized national states are necessary to handle outbreaks of plague, he demonstrates how poorly the states actually did—and are doing. From the outbreak in China—originally denied, due to bureaucratic face-saving—to the disaster of Trump’s mishandling of all aspects of the pandemic to the unwillingness to share supplies and patents with all nations, the national states (and their profit-making big pharma partners) have made terrible errors. The scientific breakthroughs which have happened would have been better organized though publicly supported federations of scientists and community health agencies. Meanwhile, state-encouraged industrial agriculture prepares future pandemics as it ravages wild lands. Laursen reviews a number of other aspects of social functioning, such as education, climate change, and gender inequality, all poorly managed by the state. He focuses on the promotion of a state-supported and -supporting core identity group—such as the whites in the United States or the Han people in China. Such groups, while the majority of the oppressed population, are taught to identify with the ruling elites. They stand “above” those who are not “in” the privileged caste.

Theoretically, Laursen portrays current society as a network of institutions that are held together from above by a centralizing state. They are institutions but also active processes, an interlocking system. (I would describe “institutions” as the patterned, repeated, behavior of a large number of people—“behavior” including overt actions as well as private thinking.) Despite severe political differences, his view has certain similarities with Hegel’s. A disorganized society is pulled into a totality by the overarching state: “the State ... is a form of human organization that aspires to create an encompassing social, cultural, and functional environment for every one of its inhabitants, one built on the creation of wealth.... The State is ... a form and a set of institutions, a way of thinking” (p. 21). Like some other anarchists, Laursen distinguishes between the power-oriented state and “government,” which may mean general

Marx’s theory and I appreciate the work of those anarchists, such as Laursen, who focus on the state. My point is that it is possible to understand capitalism’s internal contradictions and class conflicts as basic to the functioning of society—and still to understand the autonomous “‘will’ and trajectory” of the state, its own dynamics, as described by Laursen. These bureaucratic drives interact with the dynamics of capitalism (and also with the dynamics of other subsystems, such as patriarchy or white supremacy). This is as true from a Marxist perspective as from that of revolutionary class-struggle anarchist-socialism.

Revolution

Laursen concludes that an anarchist transformation “is not just a socially desirable outcome to work toward, but an existential necessity” (p. 17). We face economic decline, pandemics, and wars (with the danger of nuclear war), as well as other social evils: “today with catastrophic climate change looming, we are fighting for more than a just society; we are fighting for survival” (p. 47). Often expressed as Rosa Luxemburg’s phrase, “socialism or barbarism,” this recognition does not rule out struggles for reforms and limited improvements, but it raises the strategic goal of a transformation of society. From his analysis of the central role of the state and its connection with capital, Laursen draws certain programmatic conclusions. He rejects the program of reformist state socialism (“democratic socialism” or social democracy). The state cannot be taken over through elections and then used to change the very system it exists to maintain. The same rejection applies to “revolutionary” programs of overthrowing the existing state and replacing it with a new state—and then using the new state to change society. Laursen compares this to “replacing iOS with Windows—swapping one version of the State for another.” (p. 204).

tent with anarchism. In Saul Newman's opinion, "Anarchism took Marx's notion of the Bonapartist State to its logical conclusion."⁶

Also essential to understanding the Marxist theory of the state is Frederick Engels's discussion of state capitalism. Marx expected the increased concentration and centralization of capital. His colleague, Engels, discussed the tendency toward the eventual merger of productive capital with the state. Individual bourgeois would become marginalized parasites while the stratified economy would be managed by bureaucrats ("salaried employees"). Yet this would still be capitalism: "the official representative of capitalist society—the state—will ultimately have to undertake the direction of production.... The modern state, whatever its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over the productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage workers—proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is rather brought to a head."⁷

Whether Engels or Marx expected this tendency to actually reach fulfillment is uncertain. However after the Russian Revolution, many Marxists accepted stratified capitalism as a form of "socialism" or a "workers' state." Anarchists, remaining true to their tradition, rejected it as "state capitalism." In short, it is a distortion to describe Marx's theory of the capitalist state, as Laursen does, as simply, "a creature and enforcer of bourgeois economic interest ... denying that the State has any 'will' or trajectory of its own ... as [no] more than the sum total of the selfish interests behind it" (pp. 56–58). My point is not to praise Marx or to criticize those anarchists who regard the state as the dominant institution of capitalist society. I am aware of the weaknesses of

⁶ Saul Newman, "Anarchism, Marxism, and the Bonapartist State," *Anarchist Studies* 12, no. 1 (2004): 38–39, theanarchistlibrary.org.

⁷ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Foreign Languages, 1954), 384–86.

self-organization, social coordination, and group decision-making. Contrary to Hegel, he believes "the State is just one way" of carrying out these functions (p. 28). The "classical" anarchists and Marxists had defined the state as a body of armed people, with prisons and weapons, plus bureaucratic specialists and politicians. It is a minority standing above the rest of society and dominating it, ultimately by force but also using ideological influence.³ Laursen does not reject this description: "the State relies on both 'hard' police and military power—domination—and various 'soft' forms of persuasion and inducement—hegemony—to enforce acquiescence" (p. 39), that is, "if violence is the State's first and last method of control, it relies day to day on complex methods of cultural hegemony to keep the population loyal" (p. 112).

His basic metaphor for the state (he prefers "analogy") is that of a master program, the operating system of an overall computer system. It directs and organizes all the subsystems, structuring them to conform with the overall pattern: "the State is a vast operating system for ordering and controlling functions and relations among human society, economy, populations, and the natural world, analogous to a digital operating system like Windows, Linux, or MacOS" (p. 59). This operating system metaphor rejects the view of society as composed of a bundle of static, parallel things, one of which is the state. It has the advantage of seeing society as a dynamic system with interacting aspects. But Laursen comes to present the whole system as one, and that one is the state. As Hegel saw all of society being organically held together in the person of the monarch, so Laursen sees everything, including the capitalist economy, as internal to the state. Like Hegel's monarch-as-organic-totality, the super operating system has its own motives and personality. It "aspires to create an ... environment" (p. 21); "the State [has a] knack for taking the long view" (p. 110); "it's the State that leads the way

³ Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State; Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

here” (p. 115); “the State has a sense of destiny. Just as we dream about the State, it dreams about itself—and us” (p. 152); “the State wants to know everything so it can predict the future” (p. 138).

Laursen is entirely correct in presenting the state as a system or set of relationships, even including ideas, rather than a static thing. But he goes too far when ascribing aspirations, plans, and motives to the state organization. Such a view makes it easier to mistake the state for an intentionally active organism pulling all of society together in an “organic totality.” It overstates the unity of society under the state. It underemphasizes the internal conflicts and contradictions. This book covers various subsystems of the authoritarian society, semi-distinct from the state but ultimately dominated by it and formed by it—as Laursen sees matters. This includes the oppression of women as well as racism (the Core Identity Group discussion). Of all the subsystems, the one he most considers is the economic, which in modern society is capitalism.

The State and Capitalism

In precapitalist societies—before the “modern state”—it did not make sense to distinguish between the state and the economy. Under feudalism, for example, the lords were the state (they were warriors who led armed vassals) and they were the economic ruling class (they were the landowners, who lived off their serfs). Other functions, such as religion or art, were pretty well integrated into the whole society. There was no state without its one official church. Similar points could be made about other class societies, not to mention preclass hunter-gatherer societies. However, under capitalism a functional split appeared. Those who ran businesses—the bourgeoisie—were not the same people as those who ran the government. Often, European states were managed by the remnants of the old aristocracy, while the bourgeois “middle class” (middle in social status, not wealth) was busily getting rich by

ten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode.... Force is ... itself an economic power”.⁵ Kropotkin agreed with Marx on the key role of the state in creating capitalism, but he criticized any implication that the state did not continue to maintain capitalism.

Marx developed his concept of the state further. This was expressed in his analysis of the French dictatorship of Louis Napoleon III in his 1852 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. He developed a concept of “Bonapartism,” which was also expressed in Friedrich Engels’s writings on Bismarck in Germany. They noted that the state was balanced among various class forces. Even within the upper class there were fractions of classes and agents of fractions of classes, which put conflicting pressures on the state. They saw that the state had its own interests as an institution and so did its bureaucratic, political, and military personnel. Sometimes the bourgeoisie had mostly direct control of the state, under parliamentary democracy. At other times, they were shut out, as under Louis Bonaparte’s “Empire” or Bismarckian Prussia (or, later, fascism), while the state pursued its own interests. Even without democratic rights, the bourgeoisie continued to exploit their employees and accumulate profits—which is their main concern.

According to Marx and Engels on “Bonapartism,” there is a tendency for the state—especially its executive branch—to develop increased autonomy relative to the rest of society, even under bourgeois democracy. This reaches its height under political dictatorship. The state is less and less directly controlled by the bourgeoisie, and may clash with the immediate interests of particular sectors. Yet overall, it maintains capital-labor relations, the market, the stability of the capitalist system, and the interests of its nation’s capitalists versus those of other nations. This conception is consis-

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (New York: Modern Library, 1906), 823–24.

Anarcho-Marxism

Discussing class conflict brings us to Laursen's opinion of Karl Marx's theories of capitalism and the state. From Michael Bakunin onward, many anarchists have held that there are aspects of Marx's work which can be useful. This includes his analysis of how society and the capitalist economy work (historical materialism and the critique of political economy). The appreciation of Marx's insights has not prevented such anarchists from rejecting his statist strategy or—especially—the degeneration of Marxism into an ideology of totalitarian state capitalism.

Laursen's opinion of Marx is highly critical, although surprisingly he acknowledges that the anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin held views similar to Marx: "Karl Marx considered the State to be a creature and enforcer of bourgeois economic interest.... The Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin agreed with Marx's definition, so far as it went" (p. 56). The problem, the author thinks, is that "Marx defined the groupings that control the State too narrowly, denying that the State has any 'will' or trajectory of its own. Kropotkin, likewise, failed to see the State as more than the sum total of the selfish interests behind it" (p. 58).

As a description of Marx's theory of the state, this is imperfect. (I will not go into Kropotkin's views here.)⁴ It ignores Marx's writings on "primitive accumulation." For Marx, capitalism began through state actions. States dispossessed European peasants from the land; seized colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (and Ireland); waged genocidal wars against Indigenous peoples; kidnapped and enslaved Africans; looted the environment; and generally promoted the centralization of wealth while creating a population of landless workers: "these methods ... all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to has-

⁴ Wayne Price, "An Anarchist View of the Class Theory of the State," *Anarkismo*, July 27, 2018, [ps://www.anarkismo.net/article/31082?search_text=Wayne+Price](https://www.anarkismo.net/article/31082?search_text=Wayne+Price).

exploiting its workers. Under "liberal democracy," the state is run by elected professional politicians, while the ultra-wealthy rule the semi-monopoly, multinational corporations (with no hint of internal democracy for their workers). To this day, conservative theorists insist on the independence of the state and the market economy. They claim to be fighting for "small government" and for "freedom" of the marketplace. Liberals insist that the government should intervene in the economy. But they start from the same premise, of the split between the state and market. They accept the basic independence of the semi-competing capitalist firms.

Laursen rejects this premise: "the distinction is false. The State is an economic entity, just as much as a corporation.... Modern capitalism ... couldn't exist without the State to supply the rules, enforcement, ... and, crucially, the credit backstop and subsidies needed to keep it profitable" (pp. 104–5). Further, "the State ... is ... built on the creation of wealth" (p. 21), whereas "anarchism ... fully recognizes the connection between capitalism and the State.... The fundamental problem isn't capital or the wage system, it's the State" (p. 20). The association of the state and capitalism is generally accepted by anarchists and Marxists. Some might agree with Laursen's view that they are practically one institution, organized by the state: "the capitalist system [is] a component of the larger system of the State" (p. 111), whereby, "most importantly, capital is part of the State" (p. 22). This view may lead to overemphasizing the power of the state over capitalism: "when the State wants to address an economic disruption, its power is virtually unlimited" (p. 53). Perhaps—in theory—but its willingness to use that potentially "unlimited" power is limited by the pressure of the capitalists.

These limitations were demonstrated by the Obama administration's barely adequate reaction to the 2008 Great Recession. More significantly, there have been a number of times in various countries when reformist socialists have been elected to office in the state. On the assumption that the state's power over the economy is more or less "unlimited," they sought to implement

socialist measures (or at least liberal ones). But the capitalists fought back, sabotaging the economy with “capital strikes” (shutting down businesses, refusing to hire workers, sending money overseas, etc.). Generally, the socialist politicians caved. If not, the big bourgeoisie could subsidize fascist gangs or use their influence to promote military coups. (This is the history from the rise of fascism in Europe in the twenties and thirties to François Mitterrand in France, the British Labour Party’s governments, Salvador Allende in Chile, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s Workers’ Party in Brazil, Syriza in Greece, and many other examples).

Unlike Laursen, some radicals see the unity of the state and capitalism as two systems that are intertwined and interacting, supporting each other in many ways, without being the same thing. It is the capitalist economy which produces necessary goods and services, without which society would instantly crumble. The state also produces some goods and services which are underlying supports for the productive economy. These include roads and public schools. However, most of the “products and services” of the state are economic waste: armaments, police repression, military bases, or regulation of the already existing capitalist firms. The state needs capitalism to provide the wealth of society, while capitalists need the state to protect them from the working population as well as from each other.

Most of all, capitalism is a mechanism for squeezing a surplus out of the workers, laboring to produce an extra amount of wealth for which the working class is not paid. This surplus is not only used by the capitalists for luxuries and for reinvestment in an expanding economy—but it is necessary to pay for the state (mainly through taxes and loans). The core of the state—police, soldiers, politicians, bureaucrats—does not produce wealth. It uses up the wealth produced by the workers in the capitalist economy. If the state is necessary as the monarchical operating system to hold society together, the capitalist economy is necessary to provide that society. The state may be the necessary top of society, but capital-

ism is the necessary base—“necessary,” that is, for this authoritarian society, not for all possible societies.

Laursen understands that capitalism is a mechanism for expanding wealth, for growth and accumulation, which is essential for the modern state. It is not clear if he understands capitalism as a system of exploitation, of pumping surplus labor (value) out of its work force. Instead, he focuses on selling on the market and mass consumption as the source of profits: “for capital, the objective is to create markets that are as large and uniform as possible, since this makes them more predictable and easier to extract maximum profits from” (p. 112), and also “the desire of capital and the State to encourage consumption ... promote[s] the capitalist model of relentless economic growth” (p. 179). This view would make it difficult to understand the attack on the living standards of much of the world’s working class since the end of the post-World War II prosperity (around 1970). In the United States and internationally, the capitalist class and the state have cut back benefits, driven back unions, and lowered wages. Laursen knows this and describes the process. But it would make no sense if profits were primarily dependent on expanded consumption rather than on increasing the rate of exploitation.

Perhaps more importantly, this view leads to seeing capitalism as lacking much internal conflict. Both the capitalists and the workers would seem to have a common interest, namely in raising popular consumption. In reality, the interests of the workers (and their families and communities) clash with those of the capitalists, over how much they are paid and worked. Capitalism is fundamentally conflictful, competitive, and contradictory. Therefore, there is a popular class which has a self-interest in overturning capitalism and its state.