

The Coldest of All Cold Monsters

Peter Werbe

a review of

The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the Modern State by Eric Laursen, Foreword by Maia Ramath. AK Press 2021

Politics in the U.S. are so skewed to the right that tepid reformers such as Congressional Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (AOC) and Senator Bernie Sanders are characterized as the radical left for advocating universal health care and free college tuition.

That label was historically applied to communists and socialists who called for the dictatorship of the proletariat or at least the nationalizing of the means of production. However, having veered sharply from their traditional confrontation with capital, not even left groups or parties any longer speak in those terms. They, too, it seems, will settle for health care and free college provided by the State.

Not bad ideas in themselves, but not ones that address themselves to the fundamental construct of modern life comprised of the capitalist economy and its administration and protection apparatus, the political State. Eric Laursen's new book may be the most complete dissection in a long while of its role, its functions, and, as the subtitle promises, an anarchist analysis detailing how it operates.

As most readers of the *Fifth Estate* know, the State is a relative newcomer in human affairs. One that was established several thousand years ago as a racket by the elite once societies separated into classes and there was surplus wealth to accumulate and protect.

But, as Laursen lays out, simply men under arms was insufficient to maintain power and privilege. The necessity to dispatch men with spears or guns to quell dissent indicated a failure of the mythology affirming the sanctity of the division of rulers and ruled. A culture of the State had to be constructed that declared nothing was possible outside of the State.

Seventeenth century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously wrote that before the State was established, life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." That the exact opposite was true under Hobbes's patron, King Charles II, who presided over squalor, poverty, plague, war, and environmental destruction, didn't dissuade those who wanted to inculcate the tyranny of the fact of State rule.

Anarchist author B. Traven, widely known for his *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, also wrote a six-volume series known as the Jungle Novels portraying the oppression of Mexican indigenous people. In the first book, *Government*, a political functionary from Mexico City is sent to a small, isolated village to establish the State's authority. His first task? Set up an office where taxes must be paid, and behind it, a jail.

He employs men to enforce his rule, actually to steal wealth, but finding that the Indians have none, shanghai's them into debt-slavery and ships them off to mahogany plantations where their lives are, indeed, "nasty, brutish and short." Traven's description is a distillation of original wealth accumulation based on super-exploitative slavery, and a basic definition of capitalism and the State based on theft and violence.

Laursen fleshes this all out in such a succinct and solidly-argued manner that if you brought his book to a liberal friend or neighbor whose vision goes no further than Sanders' and AOC's, they wouldn't dismiss you as a hopeless

and unrealistic utopian. Although, on second thought, they might. Agreeing with the anarchist critique of the State is one thing. Thinking its elimination is possible is another.

To this Laursen writes: “The State’s control of the narrative imposes a series of false choices that force us to debate our future only on the State’s terms.” Its terms are inherently hierarchal, patriarchal, and planet destroying. There have been uprisings against the State and its social construct since antiquity, but usually unsuccessful, and repressed with great ferocity from the protectors of the State. Successful ones in the 20th century under the banner of communism only served to secure the rule of the State more tightly.

Laursen’s look at the intricate workings of the Operating System demonstrates that the State isn’t just one oppressive institution among many. It is the core that makes all other systems function. It runs capitalism which, contrary to Marxist thought, can be located at the moment things became central to human affairs and the pathology of rulers and ruled arose.

Slaves in pharaonic Egypt or in the Americas, or early wage workers in mines and manufacturing would think a debate about when capitalism arose to be a bit off-point. To workers who labored through the ages, forced by the apparatus and the conventions of the State to provide labor for products and the enrichment of the rulers would have trouble distinguishing between the neat epochs laid out by Marx.

Without the State, one realizes upon reading Laursen’s book, the human species probably would not have been able to expand its population to the point that it endangers itself and the planet’s other creatures.

It is the State in service to capital that takes on the mega-projects, from pyramids to interstate highways, creates self-justifying myths of its immutability and necessity, inculcates the ruled and the rulers with its dominant ideology, systematizes work and leisure, makes perpetual war to extend its territory at the expense of other States, and organizes official violence to police the poorest, and to blunt challenges to its ultimate authority.

If small band and tribal society had continued, one could speculate that our species would not have grown to the cancerous proportions that now dominate all others.

Even rebels against how society is presently constituted, who demand a State based on precepts of fairness and equality, take the State and its society as a given. They hope that fixes, ones that are certainly dreadfully needed, can create a world of justice and environmental sanity they envision. The reformers take the State for granted as a rational formation to administer human affairs, one that can be made to serve humans, not exploit them.

Anarchist science fiction writer, Philip K. Dick’s *Clans of the Alphane Moon* has a sharper critique of the State’s institutions than what the reformers take for granted. On Alpha III M2, a former satellite-based global psychiatric institution for colonists, the structures of the modern, contemporary State on Earth are all there.

But, it is a funhouse mirror, a madhouse where those who are considered the norm of our culture on Earth, have organized themselves into psychiatric diagnostic groups. The Pares suffer from paranoia and are the politicians. The Manes who experience mania are the warriors. Skitzes, who suffer schizophrenia are poets and the religious, and so on. Dick’s very clear suggestion that what we take for granted is, in fact, quite insane.

The difficult question Laursen confronts towards the end of his book is how do we move beyond the State and eventually leave it as a bad, somewhat short in terms of human existence, experiment in how to administer life? He advocates that “we first have to free our minds of the State.” That doesn’t mean never participating in thrusts to protect people and the planet.

In fact, the opposite.

The idea to make demands that are unrealizable by capitalism and the State isn’t a new concept among revolutionaries, and shouldn’t be done instrumentally. But stopping a pipeline, demanding that Black Lives Matter, defunding the cops, supporting women’s reproductive rights have the potential to grow into the death of a thousand cuts for the State if they take on enough momentum and mass involvement.

In the last chapter of *The Operating System*, “We Create Our Own Reality,” Laursen writes that opponents of the State have more tools at hand than we may think. He points to “the general strike, mutiny within the armed forces, seizure of government facilities and key businesses, and mass refusal of the State.” All to be used at the appropriate time, but those presuppose a crisis situation that hasn’t arrived and organizing which has not developed.

What to do while waiting for the insurrection against the State and capital? Something we’ve always done. Create prefigurative projects and communities that carry with them the vision of the world we want. An infoshop, a

book fair, or community gardens may seem like a weak weapon against the all-powerful State, but it can be where we start. If not there, where?

Peter Werbe is a member of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective. His book, *Summer on Fire: A Detroit Novel* is in its third printing. He lives in the Detroit area.

Attacks Against the State & Capital Following the George Floyd Murder (text box)

Although the massive demonstrations in Summer 2020 following the murder of George Floyd were mostly peaceful, at least 28 people died in the wave of social unrest that rocked the United States.

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 from 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. These are undoubtedly low estimates.

Thousands of hours of video footage, mountains of arrest data, and hundreds of personal stories and narratives demonstrate that this attack on capitalist and State infrastructure was massive, widespread, popular in nature, and done by oppressed peoples acting in coordinated and intentional rage.

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