



Our Enemy, the State

Albert Jay Nock

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This edition is the only one with an alphabetical and a quotation index. The introduction is by Edmund A. Opitz, founder, the Nockian Society.

Our Enemy, the State Details

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From Reader Review Our Enemy, the State for online ebook

Shane Hawk says

An excellent piece of political writing. Nock is lucid and accessible despite writing this 83 years ago. His discernment of FDR's policies at the time was spot-on. It is broken down into six parts; each exploring a differentiated "State" from "government."

One of my favorite bits out of many:

"Thus while the American architects assented 'in principle' to the philosophy of natural rights and popular sovereignty, and found it in a general way highly congenial as a sort of voucher for their self-esteem, their practical interpretation of it left it pretty well hamstrung. They were not especially concerned with consistency; their practical interest in this philosophy stopped short at the point which we have already noted, of its presumptive justification of a ruthless economic pseudo-individualism, and an exercise of political self-expression by the general electorate which should be so managed as to be, in all essential respects, futile."

Nick says

Albert Jay Nock's 1935 Our Enemy the State takes to task Paine's statement that government is a "necessary evil." It isn't government that is evil, it is the state that is unnecessary and evil, and we are better off without it. Jefferson's Declaration recognized the right of the people to alter or abolish their form of government once it becomes abusive.

Nock distinguishes between government, the means by which living together we ensure our rights and duties to one another, and the state which exists solely to protect itself, enriching a minority of the population. The state's authority is a monopoly on the initiation of force; its very existence violates people's rights, for no other reason than its own authority. In reality the state depends on the consent of the population, implicitly or explicitly. The rulers of the state being a parasitic institution have to be a minority of the population who depend on the population to both enforce and obey the laws. Nock distinguishes social power from state power, the former owing to cooperation for mutual benefit and the latter to exploitation of one group in favor of another. The former is the economic means of accumulating wealth and the later is the political means of accumulating wealth. As the state grows, people become more dependent on state functions and shirk responsibility, such as Scrooge's justification of not giving to charity: are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?

Nock endorses the view of Henry George that private ownership of land beyond what one occupies and what improvements have been made is illegitimate, a rent which would not exist without state power which deprives those who work the land the fruit of their labor and those who need somewhere to live due to absentee perpetual ownership. This may sound socialistic as meaning common ownership of land, but amounts to either a tax on land rent or no legal right to any more than one uses or labors which is libertarian.

Nock defends the Articles of Confederation as a free government, as opposed to the constitution which began as an attempt to amend the Articles. What turned out was a document that over time centralized government in favor of creditors and speculators. Nock notes that once government intervenes this both creates new

problems for the state to intervene in and justifies further future intervention. We must reject the authority of the state in favor of self-government.

Fabricio Terán says

Un ataque liberal al liberalismo clásico, o más bien al orden político al que se lo asocia, llegando a conclusiones anarquizantes. Nock ordena el libro con estos conceptos que es necesario tener claro para su correcta comprensión: poder social o medios económicos versus poder político o medios políticos que es una clasificación propiamente liberal, la diferencia entre gobierno y Estado que es la teoría más anarquista del libro, el proceso histórico de pasar del "Estado feudal" al "Estado comercial" que es su análisis de clases sociales, su definición del liberalismo como una teoría de los derechos individuales y el republicanismo como una teoría de la soberanía popular.

Según Nock el Estado comercial nunca defendió los derechos individuales ni la soberanía popular que tradicionalmente se le asocia, pues en tanto Estado su fin es proveer acceso de los medios políticos a una clase a expensas de otras. El Estado comercial ha incrementado su poder inicialmente promoviendo lo que hoy llamaríamos "corporativismo" para desembocar en el intervencionismo asistencialista. Su revisión histórica de los procesos constitucionales americanos recuerda la crítica que Lysander Spooner hiciera al constitucionalismo liberal.

Autores que parecen haber ejercido importante influencia en los conceptos del libro usados en el libro son Herbert Spencer, Thomas Jefferson y Henry George.

Tough says

There should be a warning on the cover of Nock's book stating, "Reader beware, your level of cynicism toward your government will rise exponentially after reading this book." Nock's polemic is a incisive critique of the State. He doesn't offer much hope to those looking for a solution to the State problem--he sees Statism as too entrenched--but, IMO, helps remove any notion that the State is anything but our common enemy against social power (individuals exercising their personal liberties to creatively address/solve societal problems/challenges). Read this book and then join me in cursing the State.

R says

An insightful analysis of the difference between the legitimate government versus the tyrannical state--both philosophical and historical, ranging upon issues such as the state's relationship with religion, property and class interests. Nock justifies libertarian values, but in the end appears pessimistic against the inevitable rise of state control in a sham democracy.

Pastor Ben says

This book isn't what I thought it would be. I thought he would attack the government of his day (1935) and

point back to a time when we went astray. I expected to learn some fundamentals with the hope of seeing what a better way forward might be from a libertarian point of view.

I was delightfully confounded, especially in the conclusion, by Nock's complete lack of hope. The State has got you by the balls and you're not going to wiggle out of it and don't even try to get hopeful ideas about winning the next election and righting the ship! Why is this delightful? Isn't this just base cynicism? When you consider the history lesson he gives from his vantage point under FDR, and you line that up with America under Obama, it makes a good deal of sense. Obama isn't the cause, he's the logical result of the system. His predecessors did the very same kinds of things. Perhaps he's been worse in degree, but not in kind. And this is liberating because I don't have to obsess over the political game. Because the State is going to grow no matter who wins and liberty will shrink. Hope is not found in a country. Look for hope in your family and in your faith. Live like a free person to the extent you can and don't obsess over what's beyond your control.

Jimmy says

Beware: your orthodoxy is about to be challenged.

Coyle says

An interesting book, worthy of closer study (I distractedly listened to the audio version). Nock makes several arguments about the nature of the state in general, the nature of the traditional American state, and the planting of the seeds of totalitarianism.

Nock argues that the expansion of state power always comes at the expense of what he calls "social" power. That is, power which exists across the rest of society. For example, before 9-11 (obviously not Nock's example), the need for security on airlines was met by society, sometimes airports themselves, sometimes local communities, sometimes the states, and sometimes private companies. Now, the government does it all, and that social power has been transferred to the state. Nock further argues that:

- 1) it is in the nature of the state to continually expand its power at the expense of society.
- 2) it is in the nature of people to allow the state to do so, either out of greed and lust for power (on the part of those in the state working for expansion); or out of laziness (on the part of the rest of us who would rather let it happen, than actively fight the expansion of state power).

(I think Nock misses something here that was true even in his own day: he was using the Fascists and Commies as his model, and applying those lessons to the nascent American welfare state. But, even in the 1930s, the expansion of the American national state was not done out of a lust for power so much as it was done from a misdirected and fuzzy sentimentalism. C.S. Lewis better identified the source of Western liberal tyranny:

Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*

Here at least, I think Nock was off in his analysis.)

The critical stage is the time immediately after the assumption of a new power by the state. This is the point

at which civic virtue will either resist the state, or die. In a famous example, Nock discusses the effect of the welfare state on the traditional civic virtue of charity. In the past, he argues, if a man asks you for a quarter, you would give it to him if you could spare it, since it was your duty as a citizen. Once the state has started to tax you in order to support the man, you will no longer give the quarter, considering that you have already given through your taxes, whether you wanted to or not.

From this point, Nock argues that the state will increasingly cement its power first by gradually outlawing the exercise of it by any other institutions (again, re: the TSA). Then it will begin to conscript citizens to perform the now "necessary" functions which the state has taken on itself, at which point we are reduced to slavery, in that we are reliant on a service only provided by the state, and simultaneously forced to perform that service.

Nock draws his examples primarily from three places: from the transition of the Ancient Roman Empire from the Enlightened rule of the Antonines to the despotism of the Severan Dynasty, from the rise of the Fascists in Europe, and from the rise of the welfare state in America.

Overall, an interesting read. I'm not sure I disagree with the general outlines (his views of the nature of government and of the nature of people I think are spot on). I merely question his application. Liberals (in the modern sense of the word), are not fascists or communists. There isn't the same lust for pointless destruction that so marked the death camps and the gulag.

Having said that, this book is still worth reading for all interested students of American politics.

Jim says

Excellent review of how the state usurps freedom. It was written in 1935, but a lot of what Mr Nock predicted came true, including some of the unintended consequences he warned about.

Yogy TheBear says

Very harsh, pragmatic and pessimistic critique of the (concept of) state.

Basically he rejects all forms of state from state as a bunch of thieves who manage human resources (feudal) to the state as an entity that can be tamed in the interest of all.

He argues that as long as there is state humans will be inclined to use it for the political power it gives in order to circumvent the economic way of being prosperous, no state no matter how pure and good it's founding principles can escape this degeneration. But yet humans always choose the political mean and out of a system of government (meaning for the author natural law and only negative interventions; similar to modern an cap and ultra minimal state) a state will arise in a way or another. This is pure pessimism.

Yet even so I personally found bits of hope in his text. In a way as Nock points out it is our moral duty no matter how futile the cause to promote true morality in society.

Otto Lehto says

Nock's book is a good summary of the laissez-faire liberal ideology. It is extremely readable and lucid. For someone who is relatively new to these topics, this might be a good starting point - or might HAVE been 70 years ago. Today there are probably better alternatives.

My main issue is that it doesn't do much to ADD to the tradition from which it draws its sustenance. It borrows heavily from people like Herbert Spencer, whose collection of essays, "Man versus the State", is not only referenced by Nock quite often (even obliquely in the title), but is moreover a better book. If Herbert Spencer is "The Beatles" of libertarianism, A.J. Nock is "The Monkees."

Nock's work doesn't offer much in the way of innovation.

But, of course, innovation is not everything. Sometimes a good popularizer is just as important. And Nock is not a mere "parrot" of received (anti-state) wisdom; his topical insights are often lucid. It is easy to see how his writing could inspire a generation of libertarians after him. Even Ayn Rand.

I just don't see much reason to visit this work today, except for historical interest. Those looking for more substance can go read Spencer, while those looking for modern summaries can go to Mises.org.

Dusan Vilicic Held says

Un libro muy bueno que tiene muchas reflexiones y ejemplos interesantes sobre la voracidad y prejudicialidad del Estado. Parece argumentar en favor de una especie de Estado mínimo (que Nock llama "gobierno" en contraste con un "Estado"), pero no deja muy en claro su extensión ni forma. Al ser georgista, tiene una fijación excesiva con la propiedad de la tierra, lo que lamentablemente le deja ciego a varios temas interesantes de abordar, además que a veces parece guiarlo a conclusiones al menos incompletas. Un buen libro en todo caso, lectura fácil y amena.

Sobre la edición de la Editorial Innisfree, considero que la traducción deja mucho que desear. Comparé varios segmentos con la versión original en inglés y encontré una buena cantidad de errores graves. Segmentos omitidos, traducciones deficientes que no transmitían el sentido del texto original, errores de escritura, y hasta al menos un caso en que la traducción decía lo contrario que lo que decía la versión original.

Carol Apple says

To summarize:

There are two ways that human beings can fulfill our needs and desire: the economic means (applying labor and capital to natural resources and producing something useful) and the political means (living off the labor of others). The State – in whatever external form it takes, whether Monarchy, Communism, Socialism, Fascism, or Democratic Republicanism – exists for no other reason than to function as legally-sanctioned organization to enable its members to live by the political rather than the economic means. In other words, the State exists to enable one group of people to exploit another group (producers, serfs, slaves, whatever) so that its members can get what they want - things such as wealth, power, and luxuries, without working, or at least without working very hard.

Every State-run civilization that has ever existed has followed the same trajectory - it continually grows for perhaps 400 years by feeding on its producers until it begins to suck them dry. Then trouble ensues as the people begin to suffer scarcity and the civilization begins to fall into disrepair and, exhibiting cynicism and dissolution as signs of decay, eventually weakens to a barely functioning hulk of rusted-out machinery.

When some calamity, such as natural disaster or barbarian invasion occurs, the it collapses and not having the strength or resources to recover, dies. Centuries later its ruins get dug up and studied by archaeologists.

Not that anything can be done about it, Nock says, but when we see our civilization collapse like every civilization that ever existed before it, we will understand why. At the end of the book, Nock explains why, if nothing can be done about it, he even bothered to write the book: because he thinks it's true and perhaps there might be a reader or two who is interested in knowing the truth of things for no other reason than because they are true. Since I happen to be one of these type readers I liked the book very much and think Mr. Nock makes a compelling case for his premises, but I can certainly understand how many people might not enjoy it so much. Whether you enjoy the ideas presented or not, the book is written in a very clear and direct way that is pleasant to read and easy to understand.

Ryan says

Your view of government or The State will likely change after reading this classic. Although written in 1935, the themes ring true today. Have a dictionary on hand when reading this as Nock is a true wordsmith.

Jon says

This book is available for free from Mises.org in audio and pdf format.

This book was pretty cynical and didn't offer any solutions (be prepared to be depressed after reading it). Written in 1935 it was fascinating to read pretty much exactly what has transpired since then. It makes you realize that we do just repeat history, over and over again. This book is a must read for anyone that wants to have a deeper understanding of human nature and "the state". Understanding history and philosophy is definitely important in understanding the political system around us. I would like to add that it doesn't matter what system of governance we have, if the people are wicked so shall be the government and its destruction and vice versa.

The book is broken up in six parts:

- 1) It goes over how the state gains power. He also makes observations about the US (one interesting one was how the two party system started from the beginning and how, since 1910, the two parties are not any different).
- 2) Then he goes over the difference between government and the state.
- 3) Then goes over the early history of the U.S. and its experiences with Britain. He then goes on to tell how the State took over the U.S.
- 4) He then goes over the relationship of the state and land rights.
- 5) He then goes over how people consider the state to be social in nature but is truly anti-social.
- 6) He continues to go over how the state gains more and more power over the mindless masses taking every opportunity to increase its power. He says there is nothing you can do about it and that eventually it will topple just like all the other great civilizations of the past.
