

A Modest Response: My Review of Gabriel Kuhn's Review of The Operating System

By Eric Laursen

When I wrote *The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the Modern State*, I was hoping to spark a new round of discussion within the anarchist community of the institution we all claim (at least) to be organizing against. So I was very pleased when Gabriel Kuhn posted his review of my book, especially as Gabriel is the author of [Revolution Is More than a Word: 23 Theses on Anarchism](#), one of my favorite texts on what it means to be part of this movement, with its strong reminder that to achieve our goals requires a transformation of values. (It bears repeating: "As long as we want all the stuff that is produced, we will not be able to downsize the political and economic system to a level that is both ecologically and socially sustainable").

So I was disappointed to see that Gabriel's review doesn't really engage with the central thesis of my book, which is to draw a distinction between the small-s state, which is the legal entity of government and the institutions closest to it, and the capital-s State, which is something much bigger and broader. Here I'd like to flesh this out briefly, then move on to Gabriel's additional criticisms. In *The Operating System*, I say that 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."

"The State is at once a political, social-cultural, and economic entity. Like [a computer] operating system, it networks together institutions, organizations, and less formal groups including government but also corporations, banks, and other financial institutions (state-chartered, as it happens), and other underpinnings of capitalism; eleemosynary (non-profit and charitable) institutions; so-called civil society groups, political parties (especially 'established' parties like the Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., which have evolved into quasi-state institutions) and even basic units like families and households. Also forming part of the State are institutions and groupings that furnish cultural and even paramilitary support to the social order: for instance, the extreme wings of the nativist Alternative for Germany; the American Legion, the Ku Klux Klan, the National Rifle Association, militia groups, the Proud Boys, the Southern Baptist Convention in the U.S.; or in India, the Hindu-nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); and other organizations that reinforce militarism, organized religion, racial and gender stratification."

One of my reasons for writing *The Operating System* was a dissatisfaction with how the relationship between capitalism and the State (both with a capital-s and a small-s) is understood in both Marxist and mainstream free-market political theory. Both, I suggest, make the mistake of seeing them as two distinct things. States have existed for millennia. So has commerce of one sort or another. What makes the modern State different is that it is a much more specifically economic entity than any political order that came before it.

“The [modern] State was the original capitalist, and it remains the greatest. Its fundamental aspiration is to incorporate every inch, every corner of the society over which it presides into a vast wealth-producing machine. The capitalist class (i.e., the class of owners of property and other forms of capital) steadily emerged as its critical component because it served the State’s [endless] need to marshal resources for economic growth. This prompted states to charter trading companies, explore the world for essential resources and seize them, and nurture the growth of banking and financial systems that could help them leverage these assets for even greater growth. It also led the State to support the development of science and technology in its search for new and better ways to solidify its material dominance, and shape the society and culture to generate even more economic growth.”

I cite the sociologist-historian Charles Tilly: “The elimination of internal rivals and development of the capacity to extract resources is the process of statemaking. In the long run, the quest inevitably involved them in establishing regular access to capitalists who could supply and arrange credit and in imposing one form of regular taxation or another on the people and activities within their sphere of control.”

The modern State and capitalism are so intimately bound together, in other words, that you can’t have the one without the other. Capitalism, as economists from Adam Smith to John Maynard Keynes at least partially recognized, would devour itself or be overthrown without the State to defend it (through laws relating to private property) and save it from itself, not just during periods of crisis but every single day. The modern State, in turn, can’t maintain its dominance without the help of capitalism’s gift for growing the economy (and the wealth the State gleans from it).

Gabriel’s criticisms of *The Operating System* may stem from a misunderstanding of my thesis: particularly the distinction I draw between the small-s and capital-s State, and the closer relationship I find between the State and capitalism.

“Laursen tends to attribute most evil in the world to the state,” he writes. But that’s not what I say: it’s that we can’t fully understand any given oppression in the modern world without understanding the State’s role in it. That’s not the same thing as saying that the State is solely responsible for those oppressions.

Referring to my discussion of right-wing attacks on Social Security and Medicare, he notes that Medicare is “after all, a government program.” This misses the point that, structurally and philosophically, Medicare and Social Security are rooted in mutual aid, in that they are forms of cooperative social insurance: self-funded systems relying on contributions from the people who will later draw benefits from it. That’s different from a “pure” government program, and the key reason the right (in the US, anyway) is so hostile to it: because conservatives are opposed to any form of collective provision, outside the for-profit economy. The idea of social insurance originated with Proudhon, and was then coopted by Ferdinand LaSalle and then Bismarck. It

was their idea to organize it through the State, but the core element of mutual aid remains. (See my earlier book, *The People's Pension: The Struggle to Defend Social Security Since Reagan*.)

Gabriel certainly has a point, generally, that “in times when anti-government rhetoric – and action – mainly comes from the far right, a passionate plea such as ‘anarchists view the demise of the state as a wonderful opportunity for humans and the earth’ can ring a little hollow.” But that’s only if you miss (or dismiss) my distinction between the small-s and capital-s State. It’s important to keep in mind as well that most “anti-government rhetoric” we hear today from the far right (and even moderate right) is phony. Most of these people are quasi-fascists who use this kind of language because it sounds cool. When it comes to military and police power, not to mention subsidies for their pet industries (e.g., oil and gas, Big Pharma), they are as statist as it comes. They just want to direct the power of the State to their benefit and against the groups in society who don’t like.

Gabriel objects to my assertion that “anarchism is the only theoretical approach that fully recognizes the connection between capitalism and the State” as a “caricature” of Marxist analysis. But again, I’m not talking about capitalism and (mere) government. I’m arguing that capitalism is embedded in the capital-s State: something much larger, that has a drive and trajectory all its own. Marx and Lenin tended to dismiss the state as having any will or direction of its own, absent the class interest that directs it; I think the relationship is more complex. (If this is a bit reductive—I understand that Marx and/or Engels explored more nuanced positions later in their careers—I still think it’s basically valid.)

I do believe, as Gabriel notes, that today’s anarchists “shy away from directly addressing the State,” and that this is one reason that anarchism has not (yet) resurrected itself as “an effective mass revolutionary movement.” But again, I’m talking about the capital-s State, not just government. Without analyzing and grappling with this overarching system, our movement can’t offer people solutions that don’t simply fall back on perpetuating the system it critiques (the basic problem with “working within the system”).

Failure to grasp my basic argument about the State may also account for another criticism: that my book ignores more recent publications in which anarchists address the state, such as Peter Gelderloos’s 2017 *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*. I wasn’t ignoring Peter’s book at all; it’s about the early state, mine about the modern State. I just wasn’t writing about the same thing. In any case, see my references to Tilly’s work, which analyzes the transition from earlier state forms to the modern State.

A final point. In my book, I identify Noam Chomsky’s work on “manufacturing consent”—the ways that the State, including the mainstream, media, get the people to go along with its decisions—as the kind of deep analysis of the State that I think anarchists should do more of. It’s curious that I would invoke Chomsky, Gabriel points out, since Chomsky “upset many anarchists” when he once said to Howard Zinn:

“Among the various kinds of oppressive institutions that exist, the state is among the least of them. The state, at least to the extent the society is democratic ... you have some influence on what happens.... As long as society is largely dominated by private tyrannies, which is the worst form of oppression, people just need some form of self-defence. And the state provides some form of self-defence.”

Gabriel’s point is valid so far as it goes, but a bit of a red herring. Chomsky is referring here to government: the small-s state, as though that was the sum total of the State. It’s curious that Chomsky could do such valuable work in other contexts, and at the same time, say what he said to Zinn. But that’s another matter.

I’d be most interested if Gabriel could address the core of *The Operating System*, because again, my desire is to stimulate more discussion of the nature of the State in anarchist circles. I couldn’t agree with him more when he says that we need “to make it clear why and how an anarchist world would make people’s lives better.... The usual references to concepts such as degrowth or *buen vivir* are not enough; we need ideas for how to implement these concepts on a mass-scale – without the help of the state”

I disagree, however, that *The Operating System* “falls short” in this respect, because I didn’t write this book to show how anarchism can make life better, only to illuminate the nature of the modern State. While I do point up some directions (degrowth, etc,) in which we should look for solutions, to lay out an overall strategy for doing so would require another book: one that I, or Gabriel, or someone will hopefully write soon. Gabriel is right that this will require us overcoming “a lack of material (economic) analysis, organizational strength, strategic perspective, and, indeed, vision.” But I insist that this in turn will require us to know the State—and not just the small-s state—better than we do now. That’s the direction I hope to push us toward with *The Operating System*.

.