



Our Enemy, the State

Albert Jay Nock

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What does one need to know about politics? In some ways, Albert Jay Nock has summed it all up in this astonishing book *Our Enemy the State*, the influence of which has grown every year since its publication. Albert Jay Nock was a prominent essayist at the height of the New Deal. In 1935, hardly any public intellectuals were making much sense at all. They pushed socialism. They pushed fascism. Everyone had a plan. Hardly anyone considered the possibility that the state was not fixing society but destroying it bit by bit. And so Albert Jay Nock came forward to write what needed to be written. And he ended up penning a classic of American political commentary, one that absolutely must be read by every student of economics and government, *Our Enemy the State*. Consider his opening two paragraphs: If we look beneath the surface of our public affairs, we can discern one fundamental fact, namely: a great redistribution of power between society and the State. This is the fact that interests the student of civilization. He has only a secondary or derived interest in matters like price-fixing, wage-fixing, inflation, political banking, "agricultural adjustment," and similar items of State policy that fill the pages of newspapers and the mouths of publicists and politicians. All these can be run up under one head. They have an immediate and temporary importance, and for this reason they monopolize public attention, but they all come to the same thing; which is, an increase of State power and a corresponding decrease of social power. It is unfortunately none too well understood that, just as the State has no money of its own, so it has no power of its own. All the power it has is what society gives it, plus what it confiscates from time to time on one pretext or another; there is no other source from which State power can be drawn. Therefore every assumption of State power, whether by gift or seizure, leaves society with so much less power; there is never, nor can there be, any strengthening of State power without a corresponding and roughly equivalent depletion of social power. The theory is good enough and strong enough for the forging of an entire apparatus of libertarian thought, which he does here. But then he pushes the envelope. He discusses American history in a way that you will never read in the civics texts. He praises the Articles of Confederation as the closest model of American freedom. And he blasts the men who hammered out the Constitution as nothing but usurpers engaged in a coup d'etat. Far from heralding the drafters, he exposes them as public creditors, land speculators, money lenders, and industrialists looking for privilege. They tossed out the Articles and used unscrupulous methods to ram the Constitution down the public's throat. It was in this stage of American history, Nock says, that the state was unleashed. Next came the party system, and the dynamics of statism that causes "every intervention by the State" to enable another so that "the State stands ever ready and eager to make" interventions through deceit and lies. One realizes many important points about Albert Jay Nock when reading this. First, he was brilliant, original, and courageous. Second, he hated politics -- indeed he hated politics so much that he wanted a society that was completely free of it. This is why he is often described as anarchist. Third, he surely was one of the great stylists of the English language in the history of 20th century writing. Those who have read Nock know that there is something about his writing that tugs very deeply on one's conscience and soul. This book will linger in your mind as you read the daily headlines. He makes his points so well that they become unforgettable. This book is the ultimate handbook of the political dissident. If you aren't one yet, you may find that Albert Jay Nock is a very persuasive recruiter into his informed army that makes up the remnant who know.

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