

BOOK REVIEW  
*THE ANATOMY OF THE STATE*  
by Murray Rothbard

DANIEL MORENA VITÓN

**The Contemporary Relevance of The Anatomy of the State**

The state continues to grow; we have a European Union that seeks ever greater centralisation, whose aim is to create a European federal state through an elite of bureaucrats educated in schools with pro-European values that run counter to true European <sup>Christian</sup> values<sup>1</sup>. Although Murray Rothbard wrote his work *The Anatomy of the State* (2021) in the United States in 1974, in the context of the New Deal, it is perfectly applicable to the European context. What was once a customs union, beneficial to free-market ideals, became a political union at Maastricht in 1992. Not content with that, in 2004 they sought to create a Constitution, but it was vetoed by French and Dutch bureaucrats. Nevertheless, in 2007 they signed the Lisbon Treaty, which established the Council, strengthened the Commission and acted de facto as a Constitution, since it placed European law above national law. For this reason, Rothbard's work may prove useful in this ideological battle between freedom and bureaucracy within the European Union.

**What is the State?**

Rothbard begins by explaining that almost everyone regards the State as a necessary means of achieving humanity's goals. Not only that, but with the democratic ideal in the West,

---

<sup>1</sup> This controversial statement was made by the former Polish MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke in his 2017 presentation to the Property and Freedom Society, recounting his experiences during his time in the European Parliament.

has equated the state with society. “We are all the state” is a phrase which, for Rothbard, violates almost every principle of reason and common sense (p. 7). If this were true, any harm inflicted by the state would be something voluntary and accepted by those affected.

Since “we govern ourselves” (p. 8), tax revolts are practically a thing of the past, unlike during the monarchical era. Hans-Hermann Hoppe asserts that in democracy “the distinction between rulers and the ruled, as well as the class consciousness of the ruled, becomes blurred” (Hoppe, 2001). A government based on private ownership ensures that it is known who is extracting rents from citizens, being a person with a first and last name. As J.R.R. Tolkien says: “If we could return to personal names, it would do a great deal of good” (Tolkien, 1943). Another issue that has lost legitimacy is tyrannicide, discussed by authors such as the Jesuit Juan de Mariana, which is unthinkable because the public considers it unjust to punish the “voice of the nation” that has been elected through a democratic process.

Rothbard asserts that the State is not the sum of its citizens, but rather the organisation that holds a monopoly on the use of force within a given territory. In his view, Franz Oppenheimer distinguishes between two mutually exclusive means of acquiring wealth: economic and political means (p. 13). The difference between them is that the former relate to production and exchange, whilst the latter relate to force and violence. The State is, therefore, the organisation of political means and, in Rothbard’s words, provides a legal, orderly and systematic channel for the plundering of private property (p. 13).

### **How is the State justified?**

There has never been a social contract; rather, the State has always come into being through conquest and, in order to perpetuate itself, has always required both economic interests and an ideological foundation (p. 14). Economic interests constitute the permanent bureaucracy originally established by absolute monarchs, which today manifests itself both in the civil service and in the

alliance between the state and large corporations. To ensure the active or resigned acceptance of the majority of subjects through ideology, the state has used ‘intellectuals’ (p. 19). They are ‘opinion shapers’ to whom the State’s bureaucracy offers a secure and permanent position, which would not be so assured in a free market (p. 19). It would be correct to add that this group includes not only social scientists and historians, but also journalists and natural scientists.

During the *pandemic*, we have witnessed one of the justifications for the state that Rothbard sets out, although it is one of the least popular in the long term. It is the greatness and wisdom of those in power. For some reason, those in power—and the ‘scientific experts’ they appoint—are able to deal with a pandemic, whilst citizens living in freedom are not (p. 22). Their main support comes from journalists who, rather than acting as a counterweight to the government, justify freedom-eroding measures that are clearly contradictory because, in truth, they are funded by the political establishment. From there, they construct a narrative in which the disobedient citizen is to blame for whatever ills occur.

The other justification is that the government’s power is necessary to prevent the evils that would result from its collapse. To this end, the State instils fear of the rulers of other States (p. 23), as when in Europe we hear talk of Vladimir Putin, whereas those who are truly harming us now in Spain are Pedro Sánchez and Ursula von der Leyen. Rothbard explains that the basic premise of the State is to identify with the territory it governs. For this reason, an interesting counterbalance to the monarchy, as explained by Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, is that “monarchs, unlike democratic leaders, are ethnically mixed. They usually have a foreign origin. Their relatives are foreigners” (Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 1952).

The significance of this lies in modern warfare. Wars are, in truth, conflicts between different ruling classes, but the state and intellectuals, when speaking of one state being attacked by another, seek to justify that the attack is directed against the entire population (p. 52). Thus, what were once conflicts between monarchs—who had to pay their own mercenaries and ceded or conquered

territory in open-field battles, yet without affecting innocent civilians in urban centres; have become wars of mass destruction, with compulsory conscription, in which civilian infrastructure is severely damaged and thousands die, with this being termed ‘collateral damage’. Not even the international limits that were established, such as the ‘right to neutrality’, are observed, and unless one possesses the necessary weapons, it is difficult to enforce neutrality (p. 48).

### **How does the state expand?**

According to Rothbard, people have always sought to devise methods to limit the power of the state (p. 29). Declarations of rights, the separation of powers and constitutional limits are examples that may have worked initially, but the state and its intellectuals have turned them into seals of legitimacy. Rothbard quotes Charles Black, who explains that a ruling of unconstitutionality can be a powerful check on the state, but a ruling of constitutionality a powerful weapon (p. 31). The courts are not independent of political power and have historically been dedicated to validating it. One example was the expansion of the US Supreme Court to validate the New Deal, that is, Congress’s powers to control the national economy.

One must bear in mind Charles Tilly’s theory, which explains that the state gradually distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and thus officials ended up applying violence more effectively and with greater consent from citizens. This relates to Professor Joseph Nye’s thesis on soft power. Whilst less sophisticated states rely on hard power, which is military and economic coercion; the more sophisticated ones rely on soft power, which is their influence on individuals through culture or diplomacy. Control

---

<sup>2</sup> Thesis discussed by Antonio Robles Egea (1992) “Coercion, capital and the European states, 1990–1990”

<sup>3</sup> See Nye (1990), “Soft Power”.

The control exercised by bureaucrats over everyday life through regulations and permits, or the end of cash, would be examples of this soft power, which can prove far more dangerous than hard power.

### **What does the state fear?**

The state fears losing its legitimacy. That is why its intellectuals reject and condemn all ‘conspiracy theories’ and all historical revisionism (p. 25). Conspiracy theories can cause the public to doubt the state’s ideological propaganda. The term was coined by the CIA to discredit theories about the Kennedy assassination. As Noam Chomsky says: “What does it mean to say that it is a ‘conspiracy theory’ to claim that key US planners devised plans that can be seen in the documentary record and carried them out, as can be seen in the historical record? It is not a conspiracy theory” (Chomsky, 2004).

Intellectuals have taken it upon themselves to accuse “conspiracy theorists” of various disorders such as paranoia, apophenia or a lack of empathy. Undoubtedly, pathologising one’s opponent is a sound tactic. Revisionism is not well received either, as it tends to challenge Francis Fukuyama’s liberal-democratic dogma of the ‘end of history’<sup>4</sup>. Harry Elmer Barnes wrote: ‘Since the Middle Ages there have not been so many powerful forces organised and alert against the affirmation and acceptance of historical truth as those active today’ (Barnes, 1953).

Finally, Rothbard explains which crimes are considered most serious in the state’s lexicon: treason, desertion, subversion, conspiracy, assassination or regicide (p. 45). One need only look at how ‘public opinion’ has treated Julian Assange for revealing state secrets or Ross Ulbricht for creating a completely unregulated marketplace. It is undoubtedly contradictory that the institution whose *raison d’être* is supposedly to defend the public should first and foremost be concerned with defending itself against the public (p. 45).

---

<sup>4</sup> See Fukuyama (1989) “The End of History?”

## Conclusion

Rothbard correctly defines what the State is, how it justifies itself, how it expands, and what it fears. By understanding the State as an organisation that monopolises violence within a given territory, one arrives at his analysis of wars as conflicts between ruling classes, which must undoubtedly be applied to geopolitics. If we wish to dismantle the State, we must make use of conspiracy theories and historical revisionism, which are the best possible ways to counter the intellectuals who legitimise the State. To conclude, Lysander Spooner says: ‘A man’s natural rights are his own, against the whole world; and any violation of them is equally a crime, whether committed by a single man or by millions; whether committed by a man who calls himself a thief (or by any other name that indicates his true character), or by millions who call themselves a government’ (Spooner, 1870).

## References

- Barnes, H. E. (1953). *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*. Idaho: The Caxton Printers.
- Chomsky, A. N. (2004). “On Historical Amnesia, Foreign Policy, and Iraq”. *American Amnesia*.
- Fukuyama, F. Y. (1989). “The End of History?”. *The National Interest*, 16, pp. 3–18.
- Korwin-Mikke, J. R. (2017). *The EU Parliament: A Report from Inside the Insane Asylum*. Bodrum: Property and Freedom Society.
- Kuehnelt-Leddihn, E. M. R. von (1952). *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of our Time*. Idaho: The Caxton Printers.
- Hoppe, H. H. (2001). *Democracy: the God that Failed*. London: Routledge.
- Nye, J. S. Jr. (1990). “Soft Power”. *Foreign Policy*, 80, pp. 153–171.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1943). *From a letter to Christopher Tolkien*. Personal communication.
- Robles, A. (1992). *Coercion, Capital and the European States, 1990–1990*. Madrid: Alianza.

Rothbard, M. N. (2021). *The Anatomy of the State*. Madrid: Unión Editorial.

Spooner, L. (1870). *No Treason: The Constitution of No Authority*. Boston: Published by the Author.