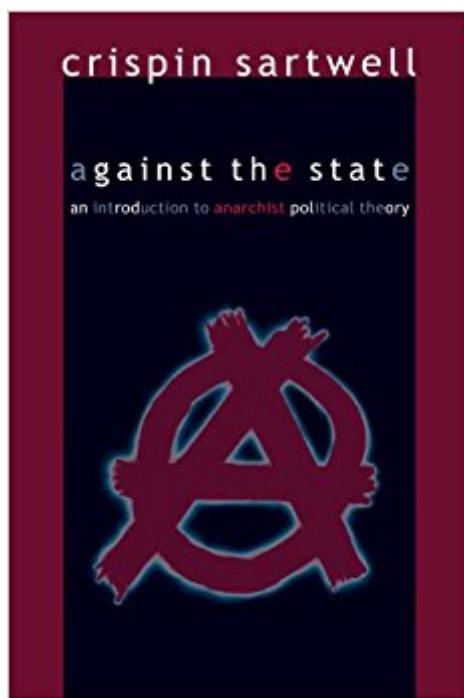


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# Against The State: An Introduction To Anarchist Political Theory



## Synopsis

Irreverent and incisive critique of liberal theories of the state. In *Against the State*, Crispin Sartwell unleashes a quick and brutal rejection of the traditional arguments for state legitimacy. Sartwell considers the classics of Western political philosophy—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Hume, Bentham, Rawls, and Habermas, among others—and argues that their positions are not only wrong but also embarrassingly bad. He separates the traditional pro-state arguments into three classes: social contract theories, utilitarian justifications, and judicial views, all while attacking both general strategies and particular formulations. Sartwell argues that the state rests on nothing but deadly force and its accompanying coercion, and that no one is under any obligation to obey the law merely because it is the law. He concludes by articulating a positive vision of an anarchist future, based on the individualism of such figures as Emerson and Thoreau. *Against the State* provides a rigorous and provocative foil to the classic texts, and also serves as a concise statement of the anarchist challenge. Sartwell's work stands in the Thoreauvian tradition he admires—“simultaneously lyrical and plainspoken, intensely personal yet theoretically compelling. Transcending the hackneyed opposition between individualist and communitarian approaches to politics, Sartwell's spirited, engaging, and insightful critique of the state reminds us of the essentially barbarous nature of that institution, forcefully engages the classic arguments on its behalf, and makes a vigorous and inspiring case for a humane anarchist alternative.” Roderick T. Long, Auburn University Sartwell is unabashed and unrelenting in pointing out the unquestioned absurdities at the foundation of the state's legitimacy. His refusal to accept any assumption on faith or to turn away from logical conclusions is the book's greatest strength. • “ Dana Ward, coauthor of *Political Reasoning and Cognition: A Piagetian View*

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## Customer Reviews

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--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

There's a lot of nonsense used to support social-systems of slavery, Crispin Sartwell does an excellent job of pointing it out. (And the nonsense just keeps on coming, like the 1 star comment on this book that makes the irrational conclusion that anarchy can't work because we can't have universal consensus.) For those not so deluded, give this book a read with an open mind.

So says author Crispin Sartwell in the Introduction to his *Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory*. In asserting this, he intends at least three things: to deflate the canard that anarchism is merely wanton destruction; to distinguish anarchism from ideologies which prescribe detailed blueprints for human behavior; and to gesture, in a typical bit of wit, at the irony of writing a book on anarchist "political theory," since the latter term typically suggests a systemization that seems incompatible with the free spiritedness of anarchism. "Mindful destruction" is also primarily what *Against the State* indulges in. Sartwell promises a future book on his positive anarchist vision. Here, his concern is to argue against conventional legitimations of the state. He goes after the three strongest defenses of what he takes to be the most legitimate kind of government, democracy: social contract, utilitarianism, and justicial (the position that the state is legitimated as the guarantor of social justice). Sartwell ultimately concludes that social contract models (Hobbes & Locke, primarily) rest on submission rather than consent, utilitarian models (Hume & Bentham) have no basis for claiming that the state produces more good than harm, and justicial models (Rawls, communitarianism, Habermas, with a side order of Randy Barnett), which

frequently embrace elements of social contract, are legalisms that are perfectly compatible with repressive states. Sartwell's "mindful destruction" of state-legitimizations is sandwiched between an opening chapter in which he clarifies what he means by terms like "coercion," "force," "government," and "state," and a concluding one in which he provides an outline of the positive anarchism he embraces. One of the strong features of the preliminary chapter is Sartwell's recognition that the terms are a bit boggy, and allow for gradations in practice--for example, democracies are surely less coercive than tyrannies. This of course raises questions of trade-off: even if democratic states are coercive in certain ways, is the coercion, if monitored and kept in check, a reasonable price for certain benefits conferred by the state? Obviously, Sartwell thinks not. But it seems to me that strong cases can be made otherwise. The concluding chapter, which I presume is a preview of a future book, is especially intriguing. Sartwell avoids collectivist anarchism on the one hand and the (to my mind) pseudo anarchism of capitalism cheerleaders such as Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard. Instead, he locates himself within the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, and Josiah Warren. One of the consequences of this is that he must try to juggle a rugged individualism ("each person is the owner of herself, or is self-sovereign," p. 99) along with the claim that each individual is intimately related to other humans as well as the natural order. Emerson made the connection by positing the Oversoul. Sartwell has no such convenient deus ex machina, and argues that radical individuality is enhanced by relatedness and therefore isn't incompatible with it. I find his argument unpersuasive. But in all fairness to him, the defense is presented more as a sketch than a fullblown argument, and he refers readers to his previous books for a fuller account (p. 110). Anarchism, if nothing else, is a valuable gadfly whose sting reminds the rest of us that the political institutions we take as part of the natural landscape in fact can be called into question. It's good to have Sartwell's book buzzing in our ears.

Best single volume introduction to anarchism around. Sartwell makes compelling and convincing arguments.

If you have any interest in Anarchist theory, or for that matter any political theories justifying the existence of States this is close to perfect. Bottom line, I recommend this to friends.

Crispin Sartwell gives a excellent overview why government is contingent on force and coercion. However he does not give reason why force and coercion are not necessary for an orderly society. Like most anarchists, he does not give the ways an anarchist society could come about and be

maintained.

This book served as a great introduction to anarchist theory and offered insightful analysis into the monotony of political theories we are all brainwashed into accepting as divine gospel.

I guess one star is as low as I can rate this "pamphlet" at only 115 pages of text it's hard to call it a book. In short this text is little more then a High School exercise in dicing 18th. and 19th. Century Political Philosophers like: Locke, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau etc. Marx is dismissed out of hand as being a "...dictatorship of the party." All the arguments are circular in nature and get back to the same conclusion that anarchy is anything that is not of an individual personal consent, which is fair to say, but also ends any consideration of any relationships then being alone without any contacts with another human being because a relationship that would be 100% consensual to two or more parties would be impossible because it would be coercion on at least one of the parties. Ok, so a state of anarchy can't possibly exist, wow big news. This book adds nothing to the dicussion of anarchy, in fact after reading it one has empithy for the lower divisional poly sci. students at Dickerson College who have to suffer Assoc. Professor Sartwell as an instructor.

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