

In and Against the State

London Edinburgh Weekend Group (2020) *In and Against the State*, London, Pluto Press, pbk, 192 pages, 9780745341811, £14.99

Review – In and Against the State

In and Against the State began as a pamphlet published in 1979 on the eve of the election of the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. It was then published as a book by Pluto Press a year later. The 2021 edition is both a reprint of the Pluto Press book and a look at how its arguments still hold up in a very different context.

The writers of the book were a group of socialists working within the state who were questioning the contradictions and potential opportunities of their position. The members of the group travelled between Edinburgh and London and hence the group name, The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group.

The 2021 edition updates the book with a forward by John Holloway, one of the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, an introduction by editor Seth Wheeler and an interview with John McDonnell. McDonnell was part of the Greater London Council until its demise in 1986 and is now a Labour MP who was in Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet.

I came across the book in the mid 2000s and thought it might be interesting historically but not very relevant to the current context. However, reading it in 2022, it seems all too relatable. The people – both 'clients' of the state and workers - featured in the book are facing stagnant wages, inflation, worsening conditions and cutbacks to services. And this was before the Conservatives were elected. The dilemmas the workers faced – in trying to be both within and against the state – seem very familiar too.

The book begins with how people – a single mother, a bus conductor, advice centre workers, teachers, community health council workers – encounter the state in their personal lives and in their work lives. We get to see the contradictory nature of their relationships with the state – the value of education and health care and advice on one hand, and the ways the state defines and restricts them as citizens and workers. The

reader will find many ways in which their own experiences match those and yet there are so many differences too.

The predicament we find ourselves in – then as now – is that we need what the state can provide but we pay for it by being complicit with our own oppression. And for most of us, we cannot detach from the state – our livelihoods, our health, our very lives are dependent on it.

In and Against the State argues that we must understand this predicament and understand that the state's role is to protect capitalism not its citizens. One way the state represses us is by splintering us – taxpayer vs worker, service user vs professional. We need to find new forms of opposition to bring us together and an analysis to better focus our activism and resistance. As this book reminds us, if we do not resist, we are perpetuating our resistance.

There are of course many changes since the original book was written. A key change is about how the state has at the same time withdrawn from its responsibilities and at the same time has increased its control over people. Community workers and adult educators are more like to be working for the voluntary sector than for the public sector as the voluntary sector has taken over many of the functions of the state, at lower cost.

Another obvious change is the rise of technology and its impact on the workforce. The original book sees it in terms of cutting back on jobs which I had expected. But the book also looks at the potential use of technology in surveillance and repression. The writers could not have foreseen the extent to which IT dominates our personal lives as well as our work lives.

The relationship between us as citizens and workers with the state has become even more oppressive – one key example is how social security has become a punitive and deadly system for disabled people (Disability News Service, 2022). Another is how so many many of us in our work operate as Borders Control – having to assess if people eligible for our services because of their migration status and checking people's right to work in the UK.

Trade unions have been in a steady decline too – though it is heartening to see how many strikes have been called in the UK in 2022. Community-based activism and coalitions addressing a range of issues are increasing as well.

Wheeler’s introduction to the 2021 book gives a political context to the original book and connects with the situation in 2021. I would have appreciated more engagement with the lived experience of workers and citizens as the original book did. It is very focused on the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party and on Momentum, the left-wing movement within the Labour Party. The interview with John McDonnell, also focused on the potential and downfall of Corbynism. Wheeler’s introduction draws on analysis of different theoretical approaches on the left which are new to me so I was unable to engage with them as much as I would have liked. In some ways, I found the focus on Momentum more dated than the original book. Maybe in time, I will find the introduction more useful.

The book’s subtitle is Discussion Notes for Socialists but I think many groups of workers and activists find themselves caught in the contradictions of being in and against the state. It should lead to fruitful discussions and more informed activism. However, I am still not sure where I stand on reclaiming the state – which I think this book is arguing for – and going beyond the state. As John Holloway asks in his preface, “[w]hat do we do to take apart the system that is killing us?”

Anne O’Donnell

PhD Student, University of Edinburgh

Disability News Service (2022) ‘MPs’ silence on deaths evidence ‘shows they have abandoned benefit claimants’ 28 July 2022

<https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mps-silence-on-deaths-evidence-shows-they-have-abandoned-benefit-claimants/> [accessed 29 July 2022]