

# **Our Morals and Theirs**

**Means and Ends in Anarchist, Liberal, and Marxist Morals**

Wayne Price

May 15, 2020

# Contents

<b>Trotsky's Argument</b> . . . . .	4
<b>John Dewey's Argument</b> . . . . .	5
<b>Determinism and Indeterminism</b> . . . . .	6
<b>The Popular Front and Victor Serge</b> . . . . .	7
<b>Means and Ends for Anarchists</b> . . . . .	8
<b>Conclusion</b> . . . . .	8

In 1938, the Marxist revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, wrote an essay, **Their Morals and Ours**—usually reprinted with a sequel from a year later, “The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism.” (Trotsky, Dewey, & Novack 1966) His subject was the relation between means and ends in politics. In particular he sought to counter the claim that the methods of Marxism, as carried out by Lenin and himself during the Russian Revolution, led to the horrors of Stalin’s mass-murdering totalitarianism. His follower, George Novack, believed, “*This treatment of the problem of means and ends in collective action and individual conduct is one of Trotsky’s most valuable contributions to Marxist theory.*” (6)

Some months after Trotsky’s first essay, there was a critical response by the philosopher, John Dewey: “Means and Ends.” (Trotsky et al. 1966) The leading U.S. philosopher of pragmatism (experimentalism), progressive education, and liberalism, he had met Trotsky earlier. Dewey had gone to Mexico in 1937 to chair the International Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials (also known as the Dewey Commission). This had given Trotsky a chance to testify under cross-examination, to defend himself against Stalin’s charges that he had worked for fascists to betray the Russian Revolution and sabotage the Soviet Union. The Commission had concluded that Trotsky was innocent and that the charges were a frame-up.

Trotsky never got to respond to Dewey’s comments on his essay. In 1940, he was murdered in Mexico by an agent of Stalin. There have been various discussions of these expressions of views by Trotsky and Dewey, mostly by liberals and Trotskyists. As far as I know, there has not been a discussion of these opinions from an anarchist perspective. This is even though Trotsky repeatedly stated that, to a major extent, he was directing his arguments against anarchists. His opening sentence stated his opposition to “*Messrs. democrats, social-democrats, anarchists, and other representatives of the ‘left’ camp.*” (13) He sneered at “*idealistic Philistines—among whom anarchists of course occupy first place...*” (21-22) “*But perhaps the most lamentable role is that played by the anarchists.*” (27) Much of the sequel essay is an attack on Victor Serge, a former anarchist. This suggests that an anarchist response may be useful.

It might be objected that anarchism has so little in common with either liberalism or Trotsky’s Marxism that not much can be learned from examining either. It is true that both ideologies are committed to the use of the state in changing society—a fundamental difference from anarchism. But revolutionary anarchists shared with Trotsky the goal of overthrowing the capitalist system and the existing (capitalist) state, and replacing them with alternate institutions. (I am speaking of the school of revolutionary anarchism, from Bakunin and Kropotkin to the anarcho-syndicalists and communist-anarchists.) And anarchists share with Dewey’s version of liberalism the goal of a society which is cooperative, non-capitalist, radically democratic and self-managed, rooted in neighborly communities and workers’ managed industries, and intelligently experimental. Dewey was quite to the left of most liberals, then and now. For example, he opposed Roosevelt’s New Deal, and the Democratic Party, from the left. (For the relation between Dewey’s pragmatist/experimentalist philosophy and anarchism, see Price 2015.)

Philosophically, both Trotsky and Dewey rejected supernaturalism or a divine basis for morality. They believed that morals were rooted in human activities, interests, and institutions. Trotsky regarded himself as a “materialist” while Dewey called himself a “naturalist.” They believed that moral actions should be judged by their consequences, rather than by absolute standards. In this sense, “the ends justify the means.” But ends could only “justify” means if the means really resulted in desirable ends.

Trotsky declared, “*In practical life as in the historical movement, the end and the means constantly change places.*” (19) This is “*the dialectic interdependence between means and end...*” (42) Likewise, Dewey referred to the “*principle of interdependence of means and end.*” (56) Means are good if they produce good ends (not just what someone claims will be good ends, but really results in them). Good, desirable, ends justify the means only if they can be reached by these means—and if they lead on to further, valued, means-and-ends.

Neither Trotsky or Dewey looked to “final ends,” but Trotsky did propose a standard for judging ends. “...*The end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of the power of man over man.*” (40) Dewey agreed with this standard: “...*Others than Marxists might accept this formulation of the end and hold it expresses the moral interest of society...*” (56)

Since Trotsky’s formulation may be interpreted in a patriarchal and “promethean” fashion, let me rephrase it: **The end is justified if it leads to increasing the ability of humans to satisfy their needs through productive interaction with nature and to the abolition of the power of some humans over others.**

Anarchists have held all sorts of views on philosophy and religion. Yet I think that most could agree with such an approach. However, it is extremely vague. Differences lie in the application of such abstractions.

## Trotsky’s Argument

Trotsky’s argument may be summarized in this way: from time to time, oppressed and exploited humans have risen up against their rulers. Whether slaves or colonized people or the modern working class, this resistance is justified. It may require mass violence, killing, sacrifice and suffering, the accidental deaths of bystanders, and all sorts of terrible things we otherwise want to avoid—but if necessary to liberate oppressed humanity, then we should not reject such means or despise those who use them.

He refused to equate “*a slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks his chains...*” (33) In the fight against the fascists in the Spanish civil war of 1936-39, “*Whoever accepts the end—victory over Franco, must accept the means: civil war with its wake of horrors and crimes.*” (31) He pointed out that the Spanish anarchists waged violent war against the fascist forces.

This does not mean that all means are acceptable. “*That is permissible...which really leads to the liberation of mankind...The great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, replacing it with worship for the ‘leaders.’ Primarily and irreconcilably, revolutionary morality rejects servility in relation to the bourgeoisie and haughtiness in relation to the toilers....The liberation of the workers can come only through the workers themselves. There is, therefore, no greater crime than deceiving the masses,..in a word, doing what the Stalinists do.*” (41–43)

As an anarchist I agree with these statements—in the abstract. Violence and armed struggle tend to be necessary when the exploited rise up and fight for liberation. But methods should not be used which discourage self-organization and self-reliance by the struggling people. This is well-argued and well-said.

**But does it actually apply to the theory and practice of Lenin and Trotsky?** Such arguments justify revolution, but do they justify the creation of a one-party police state? This is what Lenin and Trotsky built—before Lenin died, Trotsky was exiled, and Stalin solidified his rule. Trotsky claimed, “*The October Revolution...replaced the bureaucracy with self-government of the toilers...*” (28) “*...The Bolshevik Party...told the toilers the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*” (38) These claims were false, and he had to know it.

The Leninists did not state that their one-party dictatorship was a temporary measure due to difficult objective conditions; rather they justified it in principle. Even when in opposition in the Soviet Union, Trotsky and his Left Opposition had continued to support one-party rule. Such a state meant that the workers and peasants were powerless to develop alternate political policies, to chose among competing programs, and to govern themselves. It was not revolution (as liberals claim), but the party-state dictatorship which resulted in Stalinist state capitalism. (Trotskyists sometime point out that Trotsky eventually came to support a sort of pluralistic, multi-tendency, democracy in revived soviets and councils—in the 1938 “Transitional Program.” This is true, but he never wrote that Lenin and he had been wrong to adopt a one-party system nor explained why they had made this error.)

Trotsky said that the masses of workers and peasants should not be romanticized. Sometimes they are revolutionary, but often they are passive, beaten down, or even reactionary. Therefore a revolutionary minority should organize itself to fight for its program, to seek to persuade the rest of the working people. So far, like many anarchists, I would agree. This is in the tradition of the Bakuninists, the platformists, the Spanish FAI, or today’s *especificistas*. But Trotsky concluded that “*a centralized organization of the vanguard is indispensable...The internal democracy of a revolutionary party...must be supplemented and bounded by centralism.*” (49) Why centralism (rule by a few from a center)? Why not a democratic federation? His view was consistent with the highly centralized vision of socialism which Lenin and Trotsky (and other Marxists) held—and aimed to create in Russia. Their aim was a centralized economy managed by a centralized state controlled by a centralized party.

Trotsky went on: “*...If the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the class is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.*” (My emphasis; 49) The “backward layers” are those workers who do not agree with the party. This is not the rule of the working class but the dictatorship of a minority (the vanguard party) over the proletariat—and everyone else. Presumably the “vanguard of the class” has the right to use a state to dominate everyone because it alone knows the Truth.

## **John Dewey’s Argument**

Dewey and Trotsky shared many values as well as underlying philosophical premises. From an anarchist perspective, in some ways Dewey was more radical than Trotsky. Dewey rejected state socialism in favor of British guild socialism (a reformist version of anarcho-syndicalism). To Trotsky, democracy was only instrumental. “*For a Marxist, the question has always been: democracy for what? for which program?*” (49) This fit with the centralized vision of socialism held by the Leninists. For Dewey, radical democracy was a central value. He believed the liberation of humanity was not possible without individual participation in collective decision-making, through local

communities, voluntary associations, and workers' self-managed industries. This was more than a form of state; it was "democracy as a way of life." (In my view, anarchy would be participatory democracy without a state.)

But Dewey (wrongly, I believe) objected to Trotsky's belief in the class struggle and revolution. Surely, Dewey felt, each situation should be examined in its concrete reality, on its own merits, rather than assuming that revolution was generally needed. Sometimes it was but often it was not. To assume otherwise, as Trotsky did, was to abandon the method of "intelligence" for that of "force," Dewey held. Instead, he charged, Trotsky arbitrarily and dogmatically insisted on the class struggle and revolution as absolutes.

*"One would expect, then, that with the idea of the liberation of mankind as the end-in-view, there would be an examination of all means that are likely to attain this end without any fixed preconception as to what they **must** be, and that every suggested means would be weighed and judged on the express ground of the consequences it is likely to produce. But this is **not** the course adopted in Mr. Trotsky's further discussion."* (57)

This criticism would apply just as much to any revolutionary socialist as to Trotsky, such as revolutionary anarchist-socialists or anti-statist/libertarian Marxists. It overlooks the enormous amount of experience which Marxists and anarchists have had with revolutions and near-revolutions. Marx as well as Bakunin lived through the European revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871—and wrote about them. Kropotkin wrote a history of the French Revolution. Trotsky himself was a leader of the Russian Revolution and author of a major history of the revolution. He also studied and wrote about revolutionary events in Germany, China, and Spain, among other places. There is a library of anarchist writings on both the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

These revolutionary anarchists and Marxists came to the conclusion that even the most "democratic" capitalist class will not give up its wealth and power without a fight, and that the capitalist state, which is its main defense, has to be overthrown and dismantled. If capitalism is to be replaced. Even in formal "democracies," forceful revolution will become necessary. (This is not a question in itself of how much violence is necessary, which does depend on circumstances.)

It is possible to argue that these theorists have been mistaken in their conclusions—but not to deny that their generalizations were developed on the basis of a great deal of experience and experimentation. A focus on the failures of Leninism—and its failure has been pretty clear—can lead to overlooking the history of "democratic socialism," with its peaceful, gradual, electoral strategies. These strategies have repeatedly led to defeat, electoral losses, the ascension of neoliberalism, the rise of fascism, and the discrediting of socialism.

## Determinism and Indeterminism

Still, Dewey has a point when he critiques Trotsky for his absolutist thinking, expressed most clearly in his determinist confidence in the inevitability of socialism. Trotsky wrote of "*That inner dialectic which until now has appeared in a succession of determined stages in all revolutions....The inevitability under certain historic conditions of the Soviet Thermidor [Stalinist counterrevolution—WP]....The inevitability of the downfall of bourgeois democracy and its morality.*" (23)

Lenin and Trotsky and their comrades thought that they could be absolutely certain about the future—about their knowledge of the Truth. Above all else, this justified—to themselves at least—

the rule of a righteous minority over the rest of the workers, including the “backward layers of the proletariat.” (I think that this belief, like their centralism, was rooted in aspects of Marx’s Marxism.)

Today however it would be hard to defend the idea that it is certain that socialist revolution will happen—inevitably— before ecological catastrophe or nuclear war. As Trotsky’s passage also states, we live “*in a world where only change is invariable.*” (23)

Further, “inevitability” implies that people cannot really chose socialism as a free decision; therefore revolution, like all history, is not something which people do, but which happens to them. This is different from the probabilistic analysis that certain forces are pushing the oppressed toward socialist revolution and other forces are resisting it.

Trotsky asserted that his comrades “*know how to swim against the current in the deep conviction that the new historic flood will carry them to the other shore.*” (43) There probably will be “a new historic flood” (a revolutionary movement) but it may or may not carry us “to the other shore” (socialism). We have to chose whether or not to risk the swim.

Dewey appears to go in the other direction, toward indeterminism. Not as a matter of his formal theory, but he wrote as if each revolutionary situation will be unique—there is little or nothing to be learned from previous revolutions. Supposedly there is no reason to expect conditions to repeat themselves. Yet, time and again rebellions have been defeated due to the resistance of the ruling class which mobilized the forces of its state. Repeatedly the ruling rich have organized fascist gangs, motivated the military to overthrow civilian governments, cancelled elections, sabotaged the economy, and set up dictatorships—until the working class and others have been beaten down. But liberals think that perhaps this time things will be different. Perhaps this time the capitalist class will permit itself to be “democratically” voted out of its wealth, standing, and power. Or so Dewey seems to have thought (and Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez believe today).

More generally, indeterminism is just as bad as a hard determinism. We are not free unless we can make choices. Choices are not real unless we can say with reasonable probability what the consequences of different acts are likely to be. We can predict with reasonable accuracy the increasing danger of global climate change or economic collapse. That is why revolution should be chosen. But suppose it were more likely that industrial capitalism will right itself and return to an era of prosperity, peace, and stability. Then it would be wrong to advocate revolution, with its suffering and dangers. Unfortunately, the first, threatening, future is more probable. A refusal to generalize from past experience is not “intelligence,” it is willful blindness.

## **The Popular Front and Victor Serge**

Other issues were raised in the pamphlet, many of which were just mentioned without discussion. This included disputes between Trotsky and the anarchists. He mentioned, in passing, “*Kronstadt and Makhno,*” (34) without expanding on them. Both refer to examples of Bolshevik treachery and murderous repression, which anarchists have condemned and Trotsky had defended.

Trotsky also pointed out that, during their civil war of the thirties, Spanish anarchists were in a coalition government together with reformist socialists, Stalinists, and pro-capitalist parties—the “Popular Front.” In my opinion, the main anarchist organizations (the syndicalist union federation

and the FAI) betrayed their principles in doing this and passed up the opportunity to make a revolution. As Trotsky wrote, they subordinated the revolution to “*the salvaging of this very same bourgeois democracy which prepared fascism’s success.*” (27)

In this case, Trotsky’s criticism was correct—but so was that of a minority of revolutionary anarchists who also condemned this betrayal, such as the Friends of Durruti Group. Anyway, this does not justify Lenin and Trotsky’s policies in the Russian Revolution.

In the second, follow-up, essay, Trotsky makes a vicious and unprovoked attack on Victor Serge, who had translated the first essay. A former comrade of Trotsky’s, he had gone from anarchism to Leninism and had supported Trotsky’s anti-Stalinist opposition. Trotsky and he broke over various issues, including Serge’s (mistaken) support of the participation in the Spanish Popular Front of the anarchists and the POUM (a revolutionary party). The first essay had been published in French with an anonymous “prospectus.” This summary had distorted and criticized Trotsky’s views. Trotsky drew the conclusion that this had been done by Serge. Serge denied any knowledge of the prospectus. Trotsky still furiously denounced him in much of this supplementary essay. He accused Serge of still being influenced by anarchism and not seeing the need for the centralized party. In fact, Serge was no longer an anarchist, but Trotsky’s attack on him was grossly unfair and irrational. It reflected his authoritarianism.

## Means and Ends for Anarchists

Like the anarchists, Trotsky’s Marxist goal was a classless, cooperative, self-managed society—without a state. Similarly, Dewey wanted a thoroughly democratic system, organized through cooperative intelligence, with only a minimum of coercion, if any. But both Marxists and radical-liberals thought that such a freely cooperative society could be won by using the state—which is a bureaucratic-military elite institution standing over the rest of the population. Either through elections (Dewey) or revolutions (Trotsky), the state would be the tool of the oppressed to transform capitalism into a liberated system.

But means and ends are intertwined. A free society cannot be won through authoritarian means. No doubt the ruling class would have to be disarmed and its institutions dismantled, over its resistance. However the means for doing this is not a centralized minority dictatorship but the self-organization of the mass of working people and oppressed. Nor can the existing state be used, through elections, to act against the interests of the class which created it in its own image. Only through struggle from below, with self-organization through federated workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies, can the working people free themselves.

## Conclusion

On an abstract level, anarchists may agree with Trotsky and Dewey on the interdependence of means and ends in political struggle. In Dewey’s terms, “*The liberation of mankind is the end to be striven for. In any legitimate sense of ‘moral,’ it is a moral end.*” (59) Means must be used which are productive of this end. Anarchists can further agree with Trotsky on the justification of the exploited and oppressed people of the world revolting against their domination and using force and violence to free themselves. A great deal of historical experience has demonstrated that the



revolution of the working class and all oppressed is the only practical means of achieving human liberation.

But this must only include methods which encourage self-reliance and self-consciousness for the working people. It must not, in Trotsky's phrasing, "*attempt to make the masses happy without their participation,*" because "*the liberation of the workers can come only through the workers themselves.*" Leninism did result in Stalinism, not because it had a revolution but because, believing that they knew the final Truth and had a highly centralized vision of socialism, they established a dictatorship of their party over the working people. The liberation of humanity means a self-managed, radically democratic, freely cooperative society, not the dictatorship of an enlightened few.

### **References**

Price, Wayne (2015). "Anarchism and the Philosophy of Pragmatism."

Trotsky, Leon; Dewey, John; & Novack, George. (1966). *Their morals and ours; Marxist versus liberal views on morality; Four essays*. NY: Merit Publishers.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Wayne Price  
Our Morals and Theirs  
Means and Ends in Anarchist, Liberal, and Marxist Morals  
May 15, 2020

<http://anarkismo.net/article/31889>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**