

An Anarchist View of Trotsky's "Transitional Program"

An Anarchist Review of a Central Text of Trotskyism

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This is a discussion, from the viewpoint of revolutionary anarchism, of Leon Trotsky's Transitional Program, perhaps the central text of Trotskyism. (Trotsky 1977)

There are huge differences between anarchism and Trotskyism, centered on the state. Yet there is also a significant overlap. Both are on the far-left, opposed to Stalinism, in all its hideous varieties, as well as to social-democracy ("democratic socialism"). Both propose the overturn of the existing state and capitalism, by the working class and all oppressed, to be replaced by alternate institutions. There are many varieties of Trotskyism as of anarchism, some more in agreement than others.

Given this overlap, there have been quite a few Trotskyists who have become anarchists, of one sort or another—and anarchists who have become Trotskyists. Personally, I have done both. In high school I became an anarchist-pacifist, and then in college turned to an unorthodox version of Trotskyism. Eventually I became a revolutionary class-struggle anarchist-socialist. However, I still remain influenced by aspects of unorthodox-dissident Trotskyism (also by libertarian—"ultra left"—Marxism, and other influences.)

This is not a discussion of Trotsky's earlier years in politics, when he opposed V.I. Lenin's authoritarian approach (similar to Rosa Luxemburg's views). Nor of Trotsky's collaboration with Lenin in leading the Russian Revolution. Following which they created a one-party police state, the foundation for Stalinism. The Transitional Program is from the last period of Trotsky's life, when he fought against the totalitarian bureaucracy. This was until he was murdered by a Stalinist agent—about a year after the document was written. (For a critical overview of Trotskyism, from a libertarian socialist perspective, see Hobson & Tabor 1988.)

Anarchism and Trotskyism have certain things in common as well as major distinctions. It may be useful to explore these similarities and differences, from the perspective of analyzing Trotsky's Transitional Program. In my opinion, it is an important historical document of socialism, but remains deeply flawed.

The Program's Expectations

This document was adopted in 1938, as the founding program of the new "Fourth International" of Trotsky's followers. Its official title was "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International." It became known as the Transitional Program. Mostly written by Trotsky, he held extensive discussions about it beforehand. (Trotsky 1977)

Of course, a work written this long ago, before the upheavals of World War II, must be out of date in various ways. There is a section on the "fascist countries," although the explicitly fascist regimes are now gone. Another section is on the USSR, a country which no longer exists. One is on "colonial" countries, but the colonial empires of Britain, France, and so on have been mostly destroyed. Yet fascism, Stalinism, and imperialism are still with us.

We can judge the Transitional Program by comparing what it predicted to what actually happened. Trotsky's program is based on a belief that the world was going through "the death agony of capitalism." Aside from the Marxist analysis of capitalist decline, empirically there had been the First World War, the Great Depression, a series of revolutions (mostly defeated), the rise of Stalinism, and the rise of fascism. It was widely expected that a Second World War would break out soon—as it did within a year. The state of world capitalism looked pretty dismal.

Trotsky had expected the war to be followed by a return to Depression conditions. So did most bourgeois economists as well as most Marxist theorists. Under such conditions, he believed, there would be continuing revolutionary upheavals throughout the world. The Soviet Union would either be overthrown in a workers' revolution or would collapse back into capitalism. These developments would give the Trotskyists, although few at first, a chance to out-organize the Stalinists, social democrats, and colonial nationalists, and lead successful socialist revolutions.

In fact, there were upheavals and revolutions following the world war—from the huge wave of union strikes in the United States, to the election of the Labour Party in the U.K., to the big growth of Communist Parties in Italy and France, to the Communist-led revolutions in eastern Europe (Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece—the last failed) to the independence won by India and the great Chinese revolution, among other Asian revolutions. These were followed by decades of revolutionary struggles throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Despite the Trotskyists' best intentions, almost all the upheavals and attempted revolutions were led by liberals, social democrats, and "Third World" nationalists—but worst of all was the disastrous misleadership of the Communists. In places where they had a working class base, such as France and Italy, they followed reformist programs. In other countries they channeled popular revolutions into one-party, authoritarian, state-capitalisms (as in Yugoslavia and China, and later Cuba).

This could happen because the "developed" countries did not collapse into a further Depression. Instead they blossomed in a period of prosperity, often referred to as "Capitalism's Golden Age." The world war had reorganized international imperialism, with the U.S. now at its center. There had been an expanded arms economy, a concentration of international capital, and a major looting of the environment.

This period of high prosperity (at least for white people in the imperialist countries) lasted until about 1970. The Soviet Union had difficulties after this too, but lasted until about 1990. Then it finally fell back into a traditional capitalist economy.

In discussions before the international conference, Trotsky considered the possibility of a temporary period of prosperity. "The first question is if a conjunctural improvement is probable in the near future....We can theoretically suppose that [a] new upturn...can give a greater, a more solid upturn....It is absolutely not contradictory to our general analysis of a sick, declining capitalism....This theoretical possibility is to a certain degree supported by the military investment....A new upturn will signify that the definite crisis, the definite conflicts, are postponed for some years." (Trotsky 1977; Pp. 186-7, 189) At one point he even speculated that the U.S. might have "a period of prosperity before its own decline ...[for] ten to thirty years." (p. 164)

In other words, there might be a period of apparent prosperity within the general epoch "of a sick, declining capitalism." This possibility does not seem to have been taken very seriously by the Trotskyists. In any case, the prosperous period was not brief or brittle, as the Trotskyists expected, but lasted for decades.

In my opinion, Trotsky (and other Marxists and anarchists) were correct to conclude that we are living in the general epoch of capitalist decline. Developments since the 1970s have supported this belief. But he downplayed the probability of the results of the world war creating an extensive period of prosperity within the overall epoch of decline.

In particular, he overlooked the possible effects of the technological and ecological effects of the war and its aftermath. Of course, he could not foresee the nuclear bomb and nuclear power. Also, he did not realize that the massive use of "cheap" petroleum would provide a boost to

the capitalist economy. And then its aftereffects would create the ecological disasters of global warming, international pollution, species extinction, and pandemics. These are all signs “of a sick, declining capitalism.”

Few radicals of Trotsky’s generation focused on ecology. This is even though Marx and Engels had considered the negative effects of capitalism on the natural world (as has been examined by John Bellamy Foster and other ecological Marxists). Among anarchists, Kropotkin and Reclus had explored ecological issues. More recently, so has Murray Bookchin, even before the eco-Marxists.

In the current period, conditions of crisis and pre-revolutionary situations may be recurring—economically, politically, and ecologically. These conclusions imply that at least some of Trotsky’s proposals for a revolutionary program may still be useful for anarchists to consider, even as other aspects are rejected.

The Most Oppressed

Perhaps the most libertarian part of the Transitional Program is its insistence on revolutionaries reaching out to the most oppressed and super-exploited layers of the working class. Trotsky is not against better-off unionists, not to mention intellectuals, but he most wants to win the worse-off workers.

During militant struggles, he writes, factory committees may stir workers whom the unions do not reach. “...Such working class layers as the trade union is usually incapable of moving to action. It is precisely from these more oppressed layers that the most self-sacrificing battalions of the revolution will come.” (p. 119) “The Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class, consequently among the women workers.” (p. 151) “The unemployed...the agricultural workers, the ruined and semi-ruined farmers, the oppressed of the cities, women workers, housewives, proletarianized layers of the intelligentsia—all of these will seek unity and leadership.” (P. 136) “Open the road to the youth!” (p. 151) (Elsewhere, in his discussions with U.S. Trotskyists, he criticized them for not reaching Black workers.) Bakunin, who always looked to the most oppressed, could agree!

Councils and Committees

When the working class was in a militant and rebellious temper, Trotsky advocated that revolutionaries advocate the formation of councils and committees—not instead of existing unions but in addition to them. In particular, he called for “factory committees” which would be “elected by all the factory employees.” (p. 118) These would begin to oversee the activities of the bosses and their managers. They would organize regular meetings with each other, regionally, industrially, and nationally—laying the basis for a democratic planned economy. He also writes of “committees elected by small farmers” as well as “committees on prices.” (pp. 126-7)

This focus on democratic committees of workers and others does not (to Trotsky) necessarily contradict a belief in governmental economic action. He is all for “a broad and bold organization of public works.” But this should be done under “direct workers’ management.” (p. 121) Further, “Where military industry is ‘nationalized,’ as in France, the slogan of workers’ control preserves its full strength. The proletariat has as little confidence in the government of the bourgeoisie as

in an individual capitalist.” (p. 131) This last sentence is certainly one with which an anarchist would agree!

The Transitional Program considered how a new workers’ revolution in the Soviet Union would change the economy. It would have a “planned economy” but in a democratic form—managed by committees. “[To] factory committees should be returned the right to control production. A democratically organized consumers’ cooperative should control the quality and price of products.” (p. 146)

Anarchists might agree that society should be organized through radically democratic committees. But anarchists would disagree with the notion that all committees should be representative. The Transitional Program does not mention face-to-face direct democracy. Perhaps, in Trotsky’s concept, the workers will gather together in order to elect the factory committee, and then go back to their work stations, waiting for orders from the committee? Anarchists are not against choosing delegates to go to meetings with other committees or to do special jobs. But an association of committees must be based in directly-democratic participatory assemblies, if people are really to control their lives.

A society of democratic committees should culminate in an association of overall councils or “soviets” (Russian word for “council”). “The slogan of soviets, therefore, crowns the program of transitional demands.” (p. 136) Under capitalism, these soviets would be a center of power which would be an alternative to the state—a “dual power.” In the course of a revolution, the soviets would replace the bourgeois state as the center of society. To Trotsky, this would make it the basis of a “workers’ state”—“the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Instead, anarchists work towards the federation of councils and committees, of the workers and all oppressed, federated with all voluntary associations. They would form overall councils (although we probably would not use the term “soviet”!). This federation would be the alternate to capitalism and the state.

The Transitional Program states that the soviets must be pluralistic. “All political currents of the proletariat can struggle for leadership of the soviets on the basis of the widest democracy.” (p. 136) Democracy would include “the struggle of various tendencies and parties within the soviets.” (p. 185) Presumably this would include anarchists as a “political current” or “tendency.”

Trotsky proposed the competition of various parties and tendencies within the soviets, implying that one would eventually win the “struggle for leadership.” He does not mention the possibility of mergers, alliances, and united fronts—as if one tendency could have all the best militants and all the right answers. Yet the October Russian Revolution was carried out by a coalition of Lenin’s Communists, Left Social Revolutionaries (peasant-populists), and anarchists. The first Soviet government was an alliance of the Communists and the Left SRs, supported by the anarchists. It was the Leninists whose policies created the one-party state, and made it a matter of principle.

In the Transitional Program, Trotsky never explains why Lenin and himself established the Soviet Union as a one-party state. In all his writings, he never explained why they made a principle out of it. Within the USSR, the Trotskyists opposed Stalin, bravely going to their deaths, but still advocating a one-party state. It was only in the mid-thirties that Trotsky came out for multi-party soviets.

A federation of soviets and of committees in workplaces and neighborhoods would be able to take care of overall problems, including economic coordination, collective decision-making, settling of disputes, setting up a popular militia to replace the police and army (managed through

committees), and so on. But anarchists insist that it would not be a state. A “state” is a bureaucratic, centralized, institution, over the rest of society. Inevitably it would serve a ruling minority. The Trotskyists regard a soviet-council system as the basis of a new (“workers’”) state, once it is led by (their) truly revolutionary party.

This might seem like an argument over phrases. But once accepting that your goal is a “state,” then you are not limited to a radically-democratic council system. Trotsky continued to call the Soviet Union under Stalin a “workers’ state”—if a “degenerated workers’ state.” He fully recognized that the Russian working class (not to speak of the peasant majority) had absolutely no power under Stalin’s bureaucratic dictatorship. Nevertheless, Russia kept “nationalization, collectivization, and monopoly of foreign trade.” (p. 143) That, to Trotsky, is what made Russia still a “workers’ state”—however much “degenerated.” Trotsky advocated the revolutionary overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but meanwhile it had to be defended from capitalism.

To Trotsky then, the key criteria for a state of the working class was not that the “state” was the self-organization of the workers, but that property was nationalized, etc.

Following this logic, the “orthodox” Trotskyist majority regarded the new Communist states after World War II as “deformed workers’ states.” The countries of eastern Europe, China, etc., all had nationalized property and monopolies of foreign trade. So they too were “workers’ states”—just “deformed.” And Cuba and maybe Vietnam were “healthy workers’ states.”

A minority dissented. They regarded the Soviet Union (like its imitations) as a class-divided society, ruled by a collectivized bureaucratic class, which exploited the workers and peasants. Some called it “state capitalism,” others a “new class” system. Anarchists agree overall with this view—but believe the system’s roots lay in Lenin and Trotsky’s policies.

The key question is not so much the analysis of the Soviet Union, a country which no longer exists (replaced by Putin’s Russia). It is: What is meant by socialism (or a “workers’ state” or a society moving toward socialism)? Is socialism defined by nationalization of industry, or by the freedom and self-management of the working people—the anarchist view?

National Self-Determination

Most of the world was (and is) the victims of imperialism. Therefore the Transitional Program expected “colonial or semicolonial countries to use the war in order to cast off the yoke of slavery. Their war will be not imperialist but liberating. It will be the duty of the international proletariat to aid the oppressed nations in their war against the oppressors.” (p. 131)

Historically many anarchists similarly supported wars of oppressed peoples “against the oppressors”: Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, and many others. (See Price 2022; 2023) But today quite a number do not. They do not accept that imperialism divides the world between imperialist and exploited nations. They reject all wars between states without distinguishing between oppressor and oppressed countries.

This issue has divided anarchists over the Ukrainian-Russian war. Yet to many of us, the situation seems clear: the Ukrainian people are waging a defensive war of national self-determination, while the Russian state is engaged in imperialist aggression. Anarchist-socialists must be on the side of the oppressed, especially when they fight back.

It is possible that another imperialist government—in competition with the one oppressing the rebellious country—might give aid to that country (as the USA is aiding Ukraine). The Tran-

sitional Program says that revolutionaries should not give support to that “helpful” imperialist state. “The workers of imperialist countries, however, cannot help an anti-imperialist country through their own government....The proletariat of the imperialist country continues to remain in class opposition to its own government and supports the non-imperialist ‘ally’ through its own methods....” (p. 132)

At the same time, “...the proletariat does not in the slightest degree solidarize...with the bourgeois government of the colonial country....It maintains full political independence....Giving aid in a just and progressive war, the revolutionary proletariat wins the sympathy of the workers in the colonies...and increases its ability to help overthrow the bourgeois government in the colonial country.” (p. 132) This is not nationalism but internationalism. “Our basic slogan remains: Workers of the World Unite!” (p. 133)

In contemporary terms, revolutionaries should be in solidarity with the Ukrainian workers and oppressed people in their military struggle—“giving aid in a just and progressive war.” (Interestingly, several current Trotskyist groupings do not support Ukraine against Russian imperialism, despite their formal belief in “national self-determination.” This says something about the present state of Trotskyism.) Yet revolutionary socialists do not give political support to Biden’s US government nor to the Zelensky Ukrainian government. Our goals are the eventual revolutionary overturn of these states, as well as that of Putin’s Russia. The same approach goes for other anti-imperialist national struggles around the world, most of which are directed against the U.S. and its allies.

[This was written before the latest irruption of the Israeli-Palestinian War. Following the above approach, revolutionary anarchist-socialists should be on the side of the Palestinian people struggling for national self-determination against the Israeli state, while opposing the reactionary politics of Hamas as well as its reactionary and criminal tactics. Again, many Trotskyist groups of today do not follow this approach.]

An anarchist perspective on national self-determination would be in agreement with that of the Transitional Program—with one important difference. Like Trotsky, the anarchists’ ultimate goal of supporting a nation’s struggles is to “overthrow the bourgeois government,” in both the imperialist and oppressed countries. For Trotsky, this is to be followed by establishing “workers’ states.” But anarchists want to replace all bourgeois governments with non-state associations of councils, committees, assemblies, and self-managed organizations.

The Transitional Method

Trotsky objects to the traditional Marxist approach to program, as developed by the social democratic parties (especially in pre-World War I Germany). That approach had two parts: a “maximal” and a “minimal” program. The maximal program was the ultimate goal of socialism. It was raised in speeches at yearly May Day parades. Like the Christian’s hope of heaven, it had little to do with day-to-day living. The minimal program was one of union recognition, better wages and conditions, public services, and democratic rights. These demands were limited to what could be achieved under capitalism.

Trotsky was concerned with the wide gap between the objective crises of capitalism in decay and the consciousness of most workers and oppressed people. He proposed a “bridge” between

the crises and workers' thinking. These demands would offer a "transition" from the old minimal, partial, and democratic demands to socialist revolution.

"This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat." (p. 114)

For example, to deal with the effects of inflation on wages, he proposed "a sliding scale of wages." All wages, salaries, and public benefits should be attached to the level of prices. Wages would automatically rise when prices rose (judged by committees of working class consumers).

Unemployment should be dealt with through a "sliding scale of hours." The more unemployment, the shorter hours should be overall, without losses in pay—as in "Thirty Hours Work for Forty Hours Pay." These are essentially socialist principles: the total amount of wealth produced should be divided among those working and dependents; the total amount of work that needed to be done should be divided among those able to work. The title of one section in the Transitional Program pretty much summarizes the method: "The picket line/defense guards/workers' militia/the arming of the proletariat".

Unlike the minimal program of liberal union bureaucrats or of social democratic politicians, transitional demands are not limited to what the capitalists can afford—or say they can afford. The transitional demands start with what people need. If the capitalists are able to pay this (in wages or public services), then they must be forced to do so. If they cannot pay what people need, then they should no longer be allowed to run society for their private benefit. Let the working people take over and run the economy to satisfy everyone's needs. "'Realizability' or 'unrealizability' is in the given instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle." (p. 116)

The revolutionary implications of this method were clearer in a period of severe economic crisis, when basic needs could not be met for most working people. This was the case in the depths of the Great Depression. But in a period such as the 1950s post-war boom, there was an even greater gap between immediate, limited, demands and the need for revolution. A large proportion of white workers and newly middle class people were living better than ever before (in the U.S., and then in other imperialist countries). The underlying threats (of nuclear extermination or ecological destruction) could be downplayed. The transitional method had less usefulness.

Now the post-war prosperity is over. With periodic ups and downs, world capitalism has overall been stagnating and declining. Wars are continuing and ownership of nuclear bombs is spreading. Despite efforts by climate reformists to find ways of limiting the damage, global warming is crashing through the veneer of capitalist stability. Something like the Transitional Program—or at least the method of transitional demands—is needed more than ever.

Along with Trotsky's demands, there needs to be a program of ecological transitional demands: democratic ecological-economic planning; worker's control/management of industry to transition to non-polluting, green, useful production; expropriation of the oil-gas-coal corporations; socialization of the energy industry under workers' and community control; public subsidizing of ecologically-balanced consumer coops and producer coops; support for organic farms in the country and in towns and cities; etc., etc.

Revolutionary Organizations

The “Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International” was written as a program for a specific organization, intended to be an international revolutionary party. It was hoped that this body, beginning small, would replace the Second (Socialist) International and the Third (Communist) International (or “Comintern”). And thereby save the world.

It begins: “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” (pp. 111)

The fundamental crisis of decaying capitalism periodically inspires the mass of the working class to rebel. This shows the possibility of successful revolutions. But, during the preceding non-revolutionary periods, the leaderships of the main workers’ parties and unions have “developed powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime.” (p. 117-8) The anarcho-syndicalist unions were included in this. As a result, the unions and parties (which the workers had previously come to trust) hold back the revolution. They lead the people to defeat.

“In all countries...the multimillioned masses again and again enter the road of revolution. But each time they are blocked by their own conservative bureaucratic machines.” (p. 112)

This generalization was most observable during the revolutionary years after World War I, up to the rebellions following World War II. During the post-war prosperity, there was less likelihood of the “multimillioned masses” becoming revolutionary. Therefore, even the best revolutionary party (or federation) would have had difficulty overcoming bureaucratic “tendencies toward compromise.”

Yet there were revolutions and almost-revolutions. As mentioned, there were upheavals in poorer Southern countries, including the Vietnam war of national liberation, the Cuban revolution, and the South African struggle against apartheid. In eastern Europe there were attempted revolutions, such as the 1953 East Berlin workers’ revolt and the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Western Europe had the almost-revolution of France’s May-June 1968, among others. In all these cases, a revolutionary leadership might have made a difference (perhaps preventing the victory of Stalinism in Vietnam and Cuba).

Among anarchists, many have also advocated revolutionary organization. This includes Bakunin’s Brotherhood, the St. Imier anarchist continuation of the First International, the syndicalists’ “militant minority,” the views of Errico Malatesta, the Platform of Makhno, Arshinov, and others, the Spanish FAI, and Latin American *especifismo*.

These conceptions agree only somewhat with Trotsky’s perspective of a political organization, composed of revolutionaries who are in general agreement. An anarchist grouping does seek to coordinate activity, to develop theories and practice, and to influence bigger organizations and movements (such as unions, community associations, anti-war movements, etc.). They try to win the workers and others from the influence of their political opponents, including reformists and Stalinists.

Trotsky sought to build a centralized (“democratic centralist”) Leninist party internationally. While supposedly democratic, the International and the national parties would be managed from the top down. Anarchists have proposed organizations which are internally democratic and organized in a federal fashion. And, unlike political parties, no matter how radical, their aim would not be to take power, to rule over the councils and committees. They want to inspire, organize, and urge the oppressed and exploited to free themselves.

Anarchism and Trotskyism

In the Transitional Program, Trotsky mentions anarchism (or anarcho-syndicalism) only a few times. In France, he points out that the union federation once organized by anarcho-syndicalists had turned into a business union (and had supported World War I). During the 1936-9 Spanish Civil War, the leaders of the anarchist federation—and the union federation they led—had betrayed the revolution by joining the capitalist government. From the viewpoint of revolutionary anarchism, his criticisms in these situations are legitimate.

Trotsky lumps the anarchists overall with the social democrats and Stalinists as “parties of petty-bourgeois democracy...incapable of creating a government of workers and farmers, that is, a government independent of the bourgeoisie.” (p. 134)

If the term “government” is used as a synonym for “state,” then anarchists have had no interest in creating any kind of “government.” However, the word could be used to mean democratic coordination of popular councils and workers’ organizations. This is what the Friends of Durruti Group advocated during the Spanish Civil War. In that sense, the question is whether anarchists can lead in organizing society “independent[ly] of the bourgeoisie.”

Trotsky ignores the revolutionary anarchists who denounced the French and Spanish union officials for betraying the program and principles of libertarian socialism. It is such anarchists, eco-socialists, syndicalists, internationalists, anti-state communists, and true revolutionaries on whom an up-to-date revolutionary program depends.

The Transitional Program has virtues and insights, which have been pointed out here. The “method of transitional demands” remains valuable—even more valuable now than in the recent past. The vision of a federation of councils, committees, and assemblies is important, if we leave out Trotsky’s conception of a centralized “workers’ state.” To anarchists, the Transitional Program remains as an important document in the history of socialism, but one which still has serious flaws.

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