

# **From Trotskyism to Anarchism**

Wayne Price

Sep 18, 2010

# Contents

Libertarian Socialists Who Were First Trotskyists . . . . .	3
The Questions . . . . .	5
Why Did They Join the Trotskyists? . . . . .	6
Why Did They Reject Trotskyism? . . . . .	9
What Could They Learn from Trotskyism? . . . . .	11
References . . . . .	14

A significant number of revolutionaries have gone from Trotskyism to some type of libertarian socialism. Why were they been attracted to Trotskyism in the first place? Why did they come to reject it? Did they get anything of value from Trotskyism? These are my questions.

There is a noticeable overlap between the broad tradition of class-struggle anarchism and the minority tradition within Marxism which is anti-authoritarian, anti-statist, and humanistic (Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009). This last trend is often referred to as “libertarian Marxism” or “autonomist Marxism” (Cleaver, 1999). Together with some similar schools, such as guild socialism (Cole, 1920/1980) or pareconism (Albert, 2003), these have all been included in “libertarian socialism” or “libertarian communism.”

Trotskyism would not seem to fit in, even with autonomist Marxism. Trotskyism’s aim is to create a centralized “vanguard party” which would overthrow the capitalist state in order to build a centralized “workers’ state,” as a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The centralized party would use the centralized state to manage a centralized, nationalized, economy. Trotsky had believed that Stalin’s Soviet Union was a “degenerated workers’ state” where the working class remained the ruling class, not because it had any actual power (he knew it did not) but because the economy remained nationalized. This does not sound very libertarian. It is not hard to understand why anarchists and anti-statist Marxists have rejected Trotskyism. But there remains the question of why so many had joined it in the first place.

## Libertarian Socialists Who Were First Trotskyists

Daniel Guérin was close to Trotskyism in the 1930s in France (Guérin, 1973, is regarded as a Trotskyist book). He became an anarchist after World War II. He was also a Gay activist and a militant supporter of the Algerian national liberation struggle. Identifying as an anarchist, he sought to integrate anarchism with the best of Marxism. His legacy still influences the *Alternative Libertaire* and his translated books are well known in the U.S. (e.g., Guérin, 1998).

Grandizo Munis was the leader of the main Trotskyist group in Spain during the civil war/revolution. He became close to Jaime Balius, the main writer for the anarchist Friends of Durruti Group. In exile in Mexico, they shared a house. He abandoned the vanguard party and Trotsky’s belief that Stalin’s Soviet Union was still a “workers’ state” (if “degenerated”) in favor of a “state capitalist” theory (Guillamon, 1996; Hobson & Tabor, 1998). He was a friend of Natalia Sedova, Trotsky’s widow. He probably influenced her to abandon the “degenerated workers’ state” theory and to break with the Trotskyist Fourth International over its support for the Stalinist North in the Korean war. (To say that the Soviet Union was “capitalist” is not to deny the existence of a collectivized bureaucracy in charge; it is to assert that its mode of production is through the capital/labor relationship.)

After World War II, Cornelius Castoriadis, of Greek background, was the most influential of the French *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. Splitting from the Trotskyists, he replaced the “workers’ state” concept with a theory of “bureaucratic capitalism.” He developed into libertarian Marxism, and then came to abandon Marxism altogether. Never calling himself an anarchist, Castoriadis used the label “libertarian socialist” (Castoriadis, 1997).

He had co-thinkers in Britain, who similarly split from British Trotskyism. They translated many of Castoriadis’ works and did original work of their own. Calling themselves the Solidarity Group, their main writer was Maurice Brinton (Brinton, 2004).

In the United States, libertarian socialists often came out of the dissident wing of Trotskyism, led by Max Shachtman (and including Hal Draper). In 1940, this split the U.S. Trotskyist organization (then the Socialist Workers' Party—no relation to today's SWP in Britain) in half (forming the Workers' Party and later the International Socialist League). They rejected the Trotskyists' support of the Soviet Union as a supposedly "degenerated workers' state" in the upcoming inter-imperialist war. They replaced this theory with "bureaucratic collectivism": that the Soviet Union was neither working class nor capitalist but a new kind of class society (similar to the recent pareconist conception of "coordinatorism"; Albert, 2003). However, while the Shachtmanites had broken with Trotsky himself as well as with his orthodox followers, they continued to regard themselves as Trotskyists. They continued to hold many Trotskyist goals (e.g. the vanguard party and the workers' state). But by the '50s, Shachtman himself had evolved to the pro-imperialist social-democratic right (Drucker, 1999).

However, a group known as the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" had also split from the orthodox Trotskyists together with Shachtman. They were led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya (also Grace Lee, later Boggs). As a Trotskyist, James had already developed a brilliant conception of the autonomous role of the African-Americans in the U.S. revolution (James, 1996). The group worked out a Marxist theory of the Soviet Union as "state capitalist" (in my opinion the best theoretical treatment up to that point). Over time, with various twists and turns, the tendency would reject Trotskyism and adopt their own libertarian Marxist perspective (Dunayevskaya, 2000; James, 1994). Eventually Dunayevskaya was to organize the News & Letters group, which still exists, despite recent splits.

Dwight Macdonald was a writer who stayed with the Shachtmanites when they split from Trotsky, but soon broke off on his own. During World War II, he published an influential one-person anti-imperialist journal, *Politics*. He developed from unorthodox Trotskyism into anarchist-pacifism. During the Cold War he became an apolitical liberal, but was re-radicalized in the '60s, in response to the Vietnamese war and the times (Wreszin, 1994).

One of the most influential U.S. anarchists of the 1960s and '70s and up to today was Murray Bookchin. First in the Communist Party, he became a Trotskyist and was a follower of Shachtman during the Second World War. After the war, he was influenced by ex-Trotskyists. He developed his own version of anarchism, in the tradition of anarchist-communism but rejecting a working class perspective. By his old age, he came to reject anarchism, at least as a label, although still accepting it as an influence (Bookchin, 1999).

An interesting example is Stan Weir. Coming from the working class, he joined the Shachtmanites. However, he was also influenced by C.L.R. James' group. In the '60s, he joined the attempt to revive a more-or-less revolutionary version of Shachtmanism, the International Socialists (Hal Draper was almost the only other former Shachtmanite of his age who also participated). But eventually he came to abandon the vanguard party perspective in order to emphasize the importance of rank-and-file workers' groups. He became increasingly opposed to the bureaucratic model of unionism (Weir, 2004).

Another ex-member of the I.S. was Loren Goldner, who developed into a libertarian Marxist specializing in the critique political economy. His analysis of the past relative prosperity and of the current crash is highly insightful, in my opinion (see his website, Goldner).

There was the group I was a member of, the Revolutionary Socialist League. Its most prominent leader was Ron Taber. It developed as an opposition in the International Socialists—the IS being based on the tradition of Shachtmanism as well as on the British tradition which led to

today's SWP of the UK (its U.S. organizational decedents today are the International Socialist Organization [ISO] and Solidarity [no resemblance to the one-time British libertarian socialist group]). We split from the IS to become revolutionary socialists. At first, we thought that this could be done by becoming orthodox Trotskyist except that we regarded the Soviet Union as state capitalist (Hobson & Tabor, 1988). Over 12 years, we became more and more libertarian, rejecting Leninism, and finally leaving Marxism for revolutionary anarchism (Taber, 1988). Eventually the RSL was dissolved, most members becoming apolitical, and a few joining with some anarchists to form the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, which lasted 9 years. (In my case, I might add that, as an adolescent, I had first been an anarchist-pacifist, influenced by reading Dwight Macdonald. I was then persuaded by a Trotskyist that a revolution was needed and that anarchist-pacifism was not a sufficient program—which I still believe. So I joined the IS and then went with the RSL, eventually becoming a revolutionary anarchist. My own history might be titled, "From Anarchism to Trotskyism and Back to Anarchism"; Price, 2009a.)

As I move among young anarchists, I often meet people who have been members of the ISO or close to it or to some other Trotskyist organization. Considering that the ISO is probably the largest single group on the Left, that it has a lot of turnover, and that there are many other Trotskyist groupings, this probably should not be surprising.

The Trotskyists like to throw in the anarchists' faces the example of Victor Serge, who went from individualist anarchism to Leninism to Trotskyism (Price, 2007). They usually leave out that he criticized the policies of Lenin and Trotsky, rejected Trotsky's theory of the "degenerated workers' state," and had a nasty break with Trotsky, for good and bad reasons. There have been others like him. But while Serge is an interesting person to study, I prefer the example of Daniel Guérin and the other revolutionaries who went from Trotskyism to libertarian socialism.

## The Questions

I do not wish to claim too much. Most Trotskyists did not become libertarian socialists and most libertarian socialists have never been Trotskyists. Anarchism has its own history, which began at least with Bakunin, independent of and opposed to most of Marxism. Libertarian Marxism has only been a marginal and minority current among Marxists. It includes tendencies which had never been close to Trotskyism, such as the European "council communists," who had broken with Lenin in the early days of the Third International (Mattick, 1978/2007; Rachleff, 1976). The Italian "autonomist Marxists" of the '60s and '70s and after, as well, did not come from Trotskyism but came out of the Communist and Socialist parties (Wright, 2002). As with many of the ex-Trotskyists, many of the autonomist theorists came to reject both the working class and the revolution (e.g. Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Neither "anarchists" nor "libertarian Marxists" are unified tendencies—let alone one unified tendency. As should be clear from the above lists, there are different types of Trotskyists, while anarchists differ widely from each other and autonomist Marxists also quarrel widely among themselves. Each grouping has disagreements with the other. So this is not a simple phenomenon ("Trotskyists" becoming "libertarian socialists").

Nevertheless, it is a fact that many influential radicals had first become Trotskyists before becoming some variety of libertarian socialist. Which leads to my three questions: What about Trotskyism first attracted them to Trotskyism? What about Trotskyism led them to finally reject

it? And was there anything about Trotskyism which might yet be found useful for libertarian socialists?

The answers might seem simple. First, radicals were attracted to Trotskyism because it was for international revolution by the working class and its allies. Standing on the tradition of the Russian revolution, the Trotskyists were opposed to both Western capitalism and the ruling bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. Second, libertarian radicals left the Trotskyists because it betrayed the vision of a free socialist society by accepting a totalitarian state as somehow a state of the workers. And, third, the best of the libertarian ex-Trotskyists continued to believe in an international working class revolution to create a classless, stateless, society (goals consistent with those of Marx and Bakunin). These answers are correct, but not sufficient. Let me go into them in more detail.

## Why Did They Join the Trotskyists?

Not the least of Trotskyism's attractions was the romance of Leon Trotsky's life. A leading Russian Marxist, independent of both the Mensheviks and the Leninists, he was elected as president of the mass Petrograd workers' council (soviet) during the failed 1905 Russian revolution. During the 1917 revolution, he joined the Bolsheviks, becoming Lenin's partner. Trotsky organized the forces which overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government and established the Soviet regime. He was the Communist government's chief foreign negotiator. In the following civil war and foreign invasions, Trotsky created the Red Army from scratch and led it to victory.

As the repressive bureaucracy, led by Stalin, established its rule, Trotsky fought against it. When almost every Communist leader capitulated to Stalin, Trotsky alone continued to fight (however well or badly). In consequence, he was removed from all posts and expelled from the Soviet Union. Capitalist governments denied him asylum. His followers in the Soviet Union were exterminated (and many Trotskyists in Europe were to be murdered by the fascists). He was slandered and denounced by the Russian state. His four children died, at least two directly due to Stalin's agents. Yet in opposing the Stalin regime he never gave any support to Western capitalism. In exile he wrote a number of major works, including the great *History of the Russian Revolution* (which is still well worth reading by libertarian socialists; Trotsky, 1932-3/1967). He tried to create a new, revolutionary, Fourth International, virtually by sheer willpower. Finally finding asylum in Mexico, he was murdered by an agent of Stalin (Segal, 1979).

(It should be obvious that I am deliberately not referring to the darker side of Trotsky's life in this section. Everything I just wrote is true, but it is not the whole truth. But remember that most Trotskyists did not know of any problematic aspects, especially new Trotskyists such as those who later became libertarian socialists. The darker side will be discussed in the next section.)

Consider the comments on Trotsky by Murray Bookchin, long after he had rejected Trotskyism and Marxism, and even the working class revolution: "Trotsky had many faults... But in the late 1930s he stood up against Stalin—the counter-revolutionist par excellence of the era—and he did so almost entirely alone. All the liberals at the time supported the Stalinists... If only for his heroic stance as an anti-Stalinist revolutionary, Trotsky won my deep admiration and ideological support" (Bookchin, 1999; p. 44).

Further, Bookchin adds, "Trotsky's ideas became increasingly democratic toward the end of life..." (p. 46). The culmination of Trotsky's program was the "Transitional Program" of 1938 (more

properly titled *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*; Trotsky, 1977). In this work, he abandons the one-party dictatorship. Instead he advocates that the bourgeois state of capitalism and the bureaucratic state of Stalinism should be replaced by a system of councils (soviets) which would be pluralistic. "All political currents of the proletariat can struggle for leadership of the soviets on the basis of the widest democracy" (p. 136). The soviets would grow out of factory committees and other popular councils formed in the struggle against capitalism. The central planning of the economy, he wrote, should be balanced by workers' control of production and a democratic consumers' cooperative; collective farms would be self-managed (p. 146).

These are the bases of proletarian democracy and steps to a classless communist democracy. In the Transitional Program and elsewhere, he also championed struggles which were based on the traditional program of bourgeois democracy: land to the peasants, self-determination for oppressed nations, free speech and civil liberties against the state, the rights of women, and soon. This is reminiscent of Lenin's *What is to be Done?*:

"The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects: who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat." (Lenin, 1970; p. 183; Lenin's emphasis)

In the course of this work, Lenin proposes not only workers' defense of big groups such as peasants or oppressed nationalities or women, but college students, rank-and-file soldiers, minority religious groups, censored writers, and so on. This appears side-by-side with the more authoritarian aspects of *What is to be Done?* such as the claim that "socialist consciousness" can only come to the workers "from outside" the class struggle. Later Trotsky was to assert that Lenin had abandoned that conception (Daum, 1990; but see Tabor, 1988).

Trotsky argued that the most revolutionary forces could be found among the people where class exploitation overlapped with denial of bourgeois-democratic rights, due to gender, age, nationality, race, etc. (today we would include sexual orientation). It was these sections of the working class which had the fewest privileges, which had "nothing to lose but their chains." The Transitional Program states, "Opportunist organizations by their very nature concentrate their chief attention on the to players of the working class and therefore ignore both the youth and the woman worker. The decay of capitalism, however, deals its heaviest blows to the woman as a wage earner and as a housewife. The sections of the Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class, consequently among the women workers. Here they will find inexhaustible stores of devotion, selflessness, and readiness to sacrifice" (1977; p. 151).

Trotsky's programmatic thinking started from the belief that capitalism was in a fundamental crisis (hence the title *The Death Agony of Capitalism*). Based on Marx's analysis that capitalism would eventually reach a point where it could no longer progress, Trotsky, like Lenin and Luxemburg before him, concluded that this was the epoch of capitalist decay, parasitism, monopoly, and

imperialism (Price, 2009b). Reforms might be won here or there, but not lasting ones. The same was true of the bourgeois-democratic rights of oppressed people which could not be won on a lasting basis in this epoch; they required the socialist revolution to be firmly established (the central idea of the theory of “permanent revolution”). The years from 1914 to 1945 supported this, as the world staggered through a world war, the Great Depression, failed revolutions, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, and, Trotsky knew, a coming second World War. Therefore an international revolution was needed by the workers, together with all the wretched of the earth.

In order to win this revolution, said Trotsky, a revolutionary party had to be built on an international scale. The first line of the Transitional Program is, “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat” (1977; p. 111).

Whatever its limitations, this concept at least did not blame the working class for the failure of the revolution (as, for example, Bookchin would later do). There is no point in blaming the workers, any more than there is in romanticizing them. From time to time, under the pressure of capitalist decay, the workers have thrown themselves into revolutionary uprisings, only to be misled by the leading organizations and individuals they had previously come to trust. These, in turn, had become integrated into capitalist society, corrupted by its privileges, and, at most, desired to become the new rulers, not to create a rulerless, classless, society.

Therefore, said Trotsky, let us organize a new, revolutionary International of parties. They would not be based on all the workers, since the workers have different opinions and living conditions: some are caught up in their privileges; others are ground down by oppression until shown a way out. But there is a radicalizing, advanced, militant, layer of workers, a minority as yet, who can be won over even during lulls in the class struggle. They can be won to a revolutionary pro-program, can sink roots in the masses and prepare for upheavals to come.

If this minority were to lead a revolution (becoming part of a majority), it had to be savvy in its tactics and strategy. It must not be reformist, such as the would-be revolutionary parties which joined coalitions with capitalist parties, in Popular Fronts to run capitalist governments. Alas, the main Spanish anarchist organization did this, in the '30s war/revolution. Trotsky bitterly opposed the anarchists' policy from the start (Trotsky, 1973), as later did the Friends of Durruti Group (Guillamon, 1996).

At the same time, Trotsky sought for ways his followers could keep from becoming isolated sects. The “transitional demands” themselves were one such way, by showing how current problems could only be solved by elements of the socialist program, for example, that unemployment could be ended by a massive public works program, with jobs for all at union wages. Or that companies which declared that they could not afford to pay decent wages should be expropriated and run through workers' management. The permanent revolution and the fight for all democratic rights for every section of society was part of participating in mass struggles while demonstrating that only socialist democracy could guarantee full democratic rights.

Especially he advocated forms of the united front and critical support. He called on his followers to enter mass unions and to work together with reformists wherever possible, in a non-sectarian fashion, while not hiding their own revolutionary politics. During the rise of Nazism in Germany, he wrote reams of argument calling on the members of the Communist Party to offer to ally with the larger Social Democratic Party to defend themselves from the Nazis and to drive the fascists from the streets (Price, 2009a). This was ignored by almost everyone, with what results we know.



So Trotsky could be interpreted as offering a revolutionary-democratic socialist program, based on a realistic analysis of the stage of capitalism, with a strategy for achieving an international revolution. Why did anyone reject this?

## Why Did They Reject Trotskyism?

Radicals rejected Trotskyism for good reasons and bad. Those who became anarchists and autonomist Marxists did so, at least in part, because of an awareness of its darker, authoritarian, side.

Trotsky was Lenin's partner in building the one-party police state that was the early Communist regime. Together with Lenin, by 1921 at the latest, he was involved in outlawing other socialist parties, outlawing opposition caucuses within the one legal party, and outlawing independent labor unions. They suppressed, and killed, Russian anarchists, suppressed and massacred the rebelling sailors of Kronstadt, betrayed and wiped out Makhno's anarchist-led partisan army in Ukraine.

Trotskyists rationalize these crimes by pointing to the objective pressures on the early Soviet Union: the poverty and backwardness of the country, the peasant majority, the civil war and foreign invasions, and—especially—the failure of the revolution to spread successfully. These pressures were all there, but they do not justify Lenin and Trotsky's authoritarian behavior in reaction to them. More democratic alternatives were possible (such as a united front with other parties which supported the soviet system) but they made their choices based on their politics.

Even during his conflict with Stalin, Trotsky and his faction continued to support the one-party dictatorship of the Communists. I hate to say it, but the Russian Trotskyists went to their deaths, supporting the single party dictatorship. In exile Trotsky still supported it until the mid thirties, when he gave it up (but never apologized for his past opinions and deeds).

Trotsky still regarded Stalin's regime as the state of the working class, even though he described it as structurally similar to Hitler's state. It was the continuation of nationalized property in industry and the land, and the economic planning, which he regarded as "conquests of the revolution." This made the nationalized property more important than workers' democracy in defining the "workers' state." As dissident Trotskyists pointed out, the state owned the economy, but who "owned" the state? Obviously not the workers! It was "owned" (that is, controlled and used for their own benefit) only by the bureaucracy as a collective body. It was collective "private property," that is, as a group they held the property separately (privately) from the workers and peasants, as their own property.

But Trotsky insisted that nationalized, collectivized, property went with the rule of the workers and only with the rule of the workers. The apparent rule of the collective bureaucracy was sort of an illusion, which had to very soon break down, he said. By the end of the coming World War II, either the workers would make a revolution and take back the nationalized property, or the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy would turn it all into traditional private property. This was consistent with his goal of a centralized state running a centralized economy, which he and Lenin had inherited from the social-democratic Marxists.

This was also part of Trotsky's erroneous predictions. Just as he was sure that Stalinism would end, one way or another, after the coming war, so he was sure that capitalism had reached its catastrophic end, and that post-war capitalism would only continue the Great Depression

(but note that most other Marxist and bourgeois economists also predicted this). These two errors went together, because the strength of post-war Stalinism was one of things which held together post-war capitalism, by holding back working class revolutions in Western Europe and else-where.

Oddly, Trotsky had made a comment, as late as 1928, “Even a new chapter of a general capitalist progress...is not excluded. But for this capitalism...would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the Soviet republic, and so forth” (quoted in Daum, 1990; p. 101). Which is essentially what happened, even though the Chinese and Russian revolutions were defeated through state capitalist deformations.

The implication of this statement is that the defeat of the working class struggles of the 1930s and '40s could result in a limited period of relative capitalist prosperity within the broader epoch of capitalist decay. Eventually the limited and uneven prosperity of the post-World War II boom would peter out and there would be a return to the conditions of economic decline of the epoch of decay—which actually began to happen by about 1970 and which is increasingly obvious. Along with this, the Soviet Union’s bureaucratic ruling class was able to maintain itself in power for 60 years before they returned to traditional forms of capitalism.

However, by the time of Trotsky’s Transitional Program, he no longer took in consideration the possibility of a period of limited prosperity within the epoch of decay. And he insisted that the Stalinist bureaucracy could not maintain collectivized property past the next world war. This drastically disoriented his followers when they were faced with the post-war relative prosperity in the imperialist countries, while watching the Stalinists not only maintain their collectivized system but create new collectivized economies in a third of Europe and China.

This error was part of the mechanical determinism which is embedded in much of Marxism. Trotsky argued that the bureaucracy could not be a new ruling class because it was not predicted by Marx’s schema of historical development; if it were a new ruling class then working class revolution would no longer be on the agenda.

The Trotskyists became completely disoriented after the war as a relative boom developed in the US and Western Europe and as Stalinism survived and spread. They could not explain the apparent prosperity: their leading theorist, Ernest Mandel, came up with a theory of “neo-capitalism.” They could not explain how Stalinism, which was supposed to be counterrevolutionary, seemed to be creating all these revolutions. The majority finally declared that the Stalinist states of Eastern Europe, China, etc., were “deformed workers’ states,” where the working class ruled even though it didn’t, because there was nationalized property. And Cuba was regarded as a “healthy workers’ state,” which did not need a revolution to overthrow the regime. In effect, the majority abandoned the revolutionary-democratic side of Trotsky’s thought (that working class revolutions and revolutionary parties were needed and that Stalinism was entirely counter-revolutionary). The majority became known as “orthodox Trotskyists” or “Pabloites” (after the leader of the Fourth International at the time). They supported the Soviet Union in the Cold War (while still formally for workers’ revolutions in the Stalinist countries).

As mentioned, there were dissident Trotskyists who rejected the theories of “degenerated” and “deformed workers’ states.” They believed that the bureaucracy was a ruling class, and that the system was either state capitalist or a new form of class economy. However, they were still Trotskyist, with the goal of centralized parties setting up centralized states to manage centralized economies—which would inevitably create monstrous oppression and inefficiency. For example, one of the better Trotskyists (who believes Stalinism was “statified capitalism”) refers to “... the

highly centralized character that a workers' state would need in order to ensure the rule of the working class...Many socialist opponents of Stalinism reject not only Stalin's dictatorship but also centralization...Their alternative of decentralization and 'democracy' means a return to the class-based norms of the bourgeoisie" (Daum, 1990; p. 123).

These unorthodox Trotskyists still defend Lenin and Trotsky's one-party police state after the Russian revolution. They regarded the Soviet Union as having still been a "workers' state" for years after Stalin came to power, until 1929 or the late '30s (Price, 2009a). So they agreed with the "orthodox Trotskyists" that there could be a "workers' state" with-out the workers actually ruling. Most of them were also dis-oriented by the post war relative boom, generally denying that the post-war boom would end and return to conditions of crisis (becoming reformists in practice). As mentioned,for example, Shachtman ended up capitulating to the US union bureaucracy and to US imperialism, supporting the invasions of Cuba and Vietnam and advocating labor support for the Democrats.

## What Could They Learn from Trotskyism?

It is clear that revolutionary libertarian socialists cannot be Trotskyists. But is there nothing positive we can learn from Trotsky and Trotskyism? It is often accepted that anarchists can learn from autonomist Marxists and Rosa Luxemburg as well as from other tendencies within Marxism such as the Frankfurt school and other "Western Marxists." Similarly, libertarian Marxists have been willing to learn from other types of Marxism,particularly in their more abstract theories. For example, the council communist Paul Mattick greatly admired the theory of capitalist crisis developed by Henryk Grossman, although Grossman was a Stalinist (Mattick, 1934). Could this also be true for Trotskyism?

Paul Le Blanc quotes the Marxist theorist Perry Anderson(who is not a Trotskyist as such), that " 'the tradition descend-ed from Trotsky...provides one of the central elements for any renaissance of revolutionary Marxism on an international scale.' Contrasting it to the politically passive yet academically prestigious 'Western Marxism,' Anderson noted that 'this other tradition—persecuted, reviled, isolated, divided—will have to be studied in all the diversity of its underground channels and streams. It may surprise future historians with its resources' "(from *Introduction to James*, 1994; p. 3). Note that Anderson regards Trotskyism as "one," but presumably not the only one,"of the central elements," and that he does not look to a single orthodox version of Trotskyism but is interested in all its"divided" and diverse forms.

We know that Marxist economic theory can be interpreted as consistent with anti-statist and anarchist-like goals, because that was done by various libertarian Marxists. Writings by Trotskyand Trotskyists should be considered in the debates over Marxist economics. In particular the notion of the epoch of capitalist decay, with the post-World War II boom as a period within this epoch, is essential to understanding our present situation (Price, 2009c). The questions of what causes the long term epoch of stagnation and what caused the 20 year period of limited prosperity have to be debated. In my opinion, the best current published discussion of these matters is provided by a Trotskyist group which started with the theory first worked outby Ron Tabor in the organization I was once part of (the RSL)and has further developed it (Daum, 1990; Daum &Richardson, 2010; but see Tabor's recent statement; 2009).

Libertarian socialists cannot accept the Leninist-Trotskyist conception of the vanguard “democratic centralist” party. We do not believe in an organization ruled from the center by a leadership which knows the answers due to its knowledge of “scientific socialism.” Nor are we for a party in the sense of an organization which aims to take state power, either by getting elected or by establishing a new state. Our goal is not to put a party in power but to put the working class and oppressed in power.

But we can agree that revolutionaries who agree on a (libertarian) program should organize themselves in order to spread their ideas and to oppose authoritarian organizations. Our narrower, more politically homogeneous, organization would participate in broader organizations such as unions, community groups, and—in revolutionary situations—in workers and popular councils. This view of a democratic, federated, anarchist organization overlaps with the concept of the revolutionary party while being in sharp disagreement with the Leninist-Trotskyist approach. We agree that the majority will not join our organization at any time before the revolution, and that we hope to reach only the minority of radicalizing workers. This self-organizing of a revolutionary minority is not counterposed to the self-organization of the working class; it is an essential part of it.

Organization has been a subject of great debate among libertarian socialists. Many have opposed any sort of organization and still do, except for local collectives and projects. But there has long been a pro-organizational trend in anarchism and autonomist Marxism, such as the Platformist anarchists, the current South American especificist as, the FAI of Spain, and others.

Unlike the Trotskyists, we do not call for a “workers’ state,” whatever that would be. Especially, libertarian socialists deny that some party or individual or bureaucracy can rule a state “for” the workers, “standing in” for the people. We reject “substitutionism.” Some of us identify with the Spanish Friends of Durruti. We call for replacing the state with a federation of workers and community councils, associated with an armed people (a workers’ militia). This is not a state because it is not a bureaucratic-military-police machine standing apart from and over the working people.

I think that anarchists and others can agree with Trotsky on the need to support the most oppressed sectors of society and to support every struggle for democratic rights and against injustice. Again, there are libertarian socialists who reject this view, arguing that only the class struggle matters and that everything else is a diversion. This is ironic, since the Marxists have traditionally criticized anarchists for supposedly orienting not to the working class but to the peasants, the urban poor, prisoners, the *declassé* and “lumpen” sections of society. This was supposedly the program of Bakunin. And it is true that we want them in the movement—but that does not contradict a working class orientation. There are also anarchists who, instead of advocating proletarian democracy prefer to denounce “democracy” as such. I prefer to see anarchism as the most extreme, radical, and participatory, democracy. We should not give up a good slogan to our enemies.

Many anarchists do accept an orientation to the most oppressed, but make an exception of defending oppressed nations, opposing demands for national liberation and national self-determination. On this point I believe that Lenin and Trotsky were right. We should support all struggles against capitalist imperialism, including those of oppressed nations, while arguing against the ideology of nationalism that international working class revolution is the only real solution (Price, 2005). Except that Lenin meant for national self-determination to be a stepping stone toward an eventually centralized world state, while anarchists are decentralists as well as internationalists and really do value local cultures.

I think that anarchists and autonomist Marxists might learn a good deal from Trotsky — and Lenin — on the need for tactical and strategic flexibility. Or, to put it another way, what Trotsky said on tactics and strategy is often compatible with libertarian socialism. This view is in conflict with those libertarian socialists who take a Left Communist (so-called “ultra-leftist”) position on tactics. For example, many of those who became council communists first broke with the Communists not over the party-state but over Lenin’s demands for united fronts with reformists. The reformists had a lot more workers than the radicals had, but the Left Communists would not join the reformist unions (which were much bigger than the separate revolutionary unions) and so on. But I think that the radicals were absolutely right to oppose Lenin’s demands that they participate in electoral action (running for parliament, supporting reformist parties in elections, etc.). However they were wrong to oppose united fronts and joining the existing unions—because we must find ways to reach the majority of workers.

For example, in Italy in the ’20s, the Fascists were attacking and destroying working class centers and socialist newspapers. The anarchist-syndicalists organized coalitions of leftist workers to fight against the Fascists and drive them off. This worked in some places, but the Communist Party was led by Amadeo Bordiga, who was later expelled and organized a Left Communist trend which still has some influence among libertarian Marxists. Bordiga and his followers rejected the united front in principle and would not work with the anarchists against the Fascists. (*Revista Anarchica*, 1989; meanwhile the Socialist Party actually signed a “pact” with the Fascists promising peace between them—which the Fascists ignored, of course.) The anarchists were correct; the Left Communists were horribly wrong. Later when Trotsky fought for united front action by German Social Democrats and Communists against the Nazis, he was advocating something which was consistent with what the Italian anarchist-syndicalists had done (Trotsky, 1971).

How can libertarian socialists have anything in common with Trotskyism? I have reviewed the democratic side of Trotsky’s heritage already. Yet I must agree with Trotsky’s most severe critics that all that talk about multi-tendency democratic soviets, however sincere, was meant as a stepping stone toward putting his party in power. He did want to create a centralized party, state, and economy. He advocated a workers’ revolution, but I think that his policies would have created a new bureaucratic ruling class.

But—and this is the important point—like Lenin, Trotsky really did want a workers’ revolution. While his goals are different from those of anti-statist socialists, to a certain extent he sincerely advocated similar means. He truly was concerned with the decay of capitalism and thought that the only way to solve its problems was to have an international working class revolution.

This is quite different from those who came after Lenin and Trotsky. The Stalinists did not sincerely want working class revolutions. Where the working class was the majority they have generally advocated reformist policies, as in Western Europe. Where they could use the weight of the Russian army to crush the workers, they would set up Communist Party dictatorships, as they did in most of Eastern Europe. Where they could organize peasant-based armies and keep the working class passive, they have made revolutions to put their bureaucracies in power—as they did in China, Yugoslavia, North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba. They never, ever, mobilize the working class to overthrow the capitalists; that would be too dangerous for them. Stalinism is Leninism, but moribund, congealed, Leninism.

So our goals differ from the Trotskyists but our means may overlap, and therefore we can learn from them in terms of practical and even theoretical issues. They certainly do not hold all the answers, but neither do anarchists. They are divided into many trends, and so are the

libertarian socialists. As Anderson is quoted as writing, Trotskyism, in all its diverse forms, can be usefully studied if we regard it as only one of the diverse trends which can contribute to a truly revolutionary-democratic and libertarian socialism.

## References

- Albert, Michael (2003). *Parecon: Life After Capitalism*. London & NY: Verso.
- Bookchin, Murray (1999). *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left; Interviews and Essays, 1993–1998*. Edinburgh UK & San Francisco: A.K. Press.
- Brinton, Maurice (2004). *For Workers' Power; The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (ed.: D. Goodway). Oakland & Edinburgh UK: AK Press.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius (1997). *The Castoriadis Reader* (trans. & ed.: D. A. Curtis). Malden MA & Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cleaver, Harry (1999). *Reading Capital Politically*. Leeds UK & San Francisco: Anti/Theses & AK Press.
- Cole, G.D.H. (1920/1980). *Guild Socialism Restated*. New Brunswick USA & London UK: Transaction Books.
- Daum, Walter (1990). *The Life and Death of Stalinism; A Resurrection of Marxist Theory*. NY: Socialist Voice.
- Daum, Walter, & Richardson, Matthew (2010). "Marxist Analysis of the Capitalist Crisis: Bankrupt System Drives Toward Depression." *Proletarian Revolution*. No. 82. Pp. 35–48.
- Drucker, Peter (1999). *Max Shachtman and His Left*. Amherst NY: Humanity Books/ Prometheus Books.
- Dunayevskaya, Raya (2000). *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 until Today*. Amherst NY: Humanity Books/ Prometheus Books.
- Goldner, Loren. website: *Break Their Haughty Power*. [home.earthlink.net](http://home.earthlink.net)
- Guérin, Daniel (1973). *Fascism and Big Business*. NY: Pathfinder.
- Guérin, Daniel (ed.) (1998). *No Gods, No Masters. Book One* (trans.: P. Sharkey). Edinburgh UK & San Francisco CA: AK Press.
- Guillamon, Agustin (1996). *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939*. Oakland & Edinburgh UK: AK Press.
- Hardt, Michael, & Negri, Antonio (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge MA & London UK: Harvard University.
- Hobson, Christopher Z., & Tabor, Ronald D. (1988). *Trotskyism and the Dilemma of Socialism*. NY & Westport CN: Greenwood Press.
- James, C.L.R. (1994). *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism; Selected Writings of C.L.R. James 1939–1949* (eds.: S. McLemee & P. LeBlanc). Amherst NY: Humanity Books/ Prometheus Books.
- James, C.L.R. (1996). *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"* (ed.: S. McLemee). Jackson MI: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lenin, V. I. (1970). *Selected Works in Three Volumes*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Mattick, Paul (1978/2007). *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Monmouth, Wales, UK: Merlin Press.
- Mattick, Paul (1934). *The Permanent Crisis: Henryk Grossman's Interpretation of Marx's Theory of Capitalist Accumulation*. [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)

- Price, Wayne (2005). "The U.S. Deserves to Lose in Iraq but Should We 'Support the Iraqi Resistance'?" [www.anark-ismo.net](http://www.anark-ismo.net)
- Price, Wayne (2007). "Victor Serge and the Russian Revolution." [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)
- Price, Wayne (2009a). *Anarchism and Socialism; Reformism or Revolution?* Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Thought crime Ink.
- Price, Wayne (2009b). "From the Great Witch Hunt to the Epoch of Capitalist Decay; Review of Silvia Federici *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*." [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)
- Price, Wayne (2009c). Review of *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes & Consequences*, by John Bellamy Foster & Fred Magdoff. [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)
- Rachleff, Peter (1976). *Marxism and Council Communism: The Foundation for Revolutionary Theory for Modern Society*. Brooklyn: Revisionist Press.
- Rivista Anarchica (1989). *Red Years, Black Years: Anarchist Resistance to Fascism in Italy*. London: ASP.
- Schmidt, Michael, & van der Walt, Lucien (2009). *Black Flame; The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. Vol. 1. Oakland CA and Edinburgh UK: AK Press.
- Segal, Ronald (1979). *Leon Trotsky; A Biography*. NY: Pantheon Books.
- Taber, Ron (1988). *A Look at Leninism*. NY: Aspect Foundation.
- Tabor, Ron (2009). "Some Thoughts on the Nature of the Period." *The Utopian*. [utopianmag.com/Trotsky](http://utopianmag.com/Trotsky)
- Trotsky, Leon (1932-3/1967). *History of the Russian Revolution*. Three Volumes (trans.: M. Eastman). London: Sphere Books.
- Trotsky, Leon (1971). *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*. NY: Pathfinder Press.
- Trotsky, Leon (1973). *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*. NY: Pathfinder Press.
- Trotsky, Leon (1977). *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*. NY: Pathfinder Press.
- Weir, Stan (2004). *Single Jack Solidarity* (ed.: G. Lipsitz). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Wreszin, Michael (1994). *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition; The Life and Politics of Dwight MacDonald*. NY: BasicBooks/HarperCollins.
- Wright, Steve (2002). *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London & Sterling, VA: Pluto Press.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Wayne Price  
From Trotskyism to Anarchism  
Sep 18, 2010

Retrieved on 2014-02-26 from [utopianmag.com](http://utopianmag.com)  
Originally published in The Utopian, Volume 9

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