

In Memoriam Tribute To Ernest Mandel

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We have lost not only a most humane human being, but the world's greatest optimist. I don't know which is the greater loss, but perhaps there was an intimate connection of humane optimism and/or optimistic humanism; and, if so, the world's loss is multiplied and all the greater. Not only shall we miss him; we still NEED him!

My relation with Ernest was professional, political, and above all personal. It began with his professional/political published praise of my early work on Latin America and my request to him for help with my work on dependence, to which he accededed logistically by receiving me in the Hague, taking me back to Brussels in his car, and lodging me at his home in or about 1969. Ernest later changed his mind about, and became ever more critical of, dependence "theory" and my work; but our personal relations continued to flourish.

Another professional tie was our interest in Kondratieffs in general and the Kondratieff B phase world economic crisis of accumulation since 1967, about which we both wrote so much. [A recent manifestation was the 1989 Brussels Kondratieff conference he organized whose papers then appeared in a book edited by him, Kleinknecht and Wallerstein. Another was our concern with whether Kondratieff lower turning points are exogenous, as he maintained, or possibly endogenous as I suggest, as eg. in our debate which began between him and David Gordon in Boston in 1979 as summarized and continued by the three of us in REVIEW 1994.

Also in 1979, we co-taught a summer school course on the world economic crisis together at Boston University. As I have recounted many times, Ernest and I agreed on everything with each other [and very little with almost everybody else], and we disagreed in class and in private on only two issues: Ernest said the revolution is around the corner in several countries, and I said that it is not. I claimed that the same capitalist economic law of value also operates in the "socialist" economies, including the Soviet Union, which really exist as part and parcel of the [capitalist] world economy; and Ernest Mandel denied the same. On several occasions both before — and all the more so after — 1989-91, I found it increasingly difficult to avoid saying and writing to Ernest that "I told you so."

I also recall standing on a street corner with him in Brussels waiting for his first wife Gisela to get some film she had left for developing at a photo shop. Ernest asked me "don't you agree that we Trotskyists do the best analysis of what is going on in the world?" and I answered, yes I do. Well, "then you have to also agree that we have the best political practice," Ernest continued. NO, I answered, I do NOT agree; and I do not have to, because what you say is a complete non-sequitur, which was born, perhaps, more from his own great optimism and humanity than from his analysis of the evidence, which has hardly supported his aspiration. Even with all his humanism, I never understood how Ernest Mandel maintained his inveterate optimism in the face of all the evidence; and yet, the more the evidence comes in, the more do we need his optimism and humanism — as well as his analysis — to get out of it. So we shall miss him — and continue to need him.

P.S.

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