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A Mandel for All Seasons

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Ernest Mandel:

A Rebel's Dream Deferred

By Jan Willem Stutje

Translated by Christopher Beck & Peter Drucker.

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THE GERMAN NEW Left activist Rudi Dutschke declared just prior to his death in 1979 that his friend Ernest Mandel "continues to surprise and yet remains the same." (197) Dutschke's appraisal draws attention to the appeal of Ernest (born Ezra) Mandel (1923-95), the Belgian Marxist economist and revolutionary activist, for a generation of young people impelled toward Leftist politics in the 1960s era of decolonization, civil rights activism, and the student revolt.

The personal and political life of Mandel, a Jewish internationalist whose first loyalty was to the working class, is scrupulously restored and judiciously scrutinized in Jan Willem Stutje's comprehensive biography.

Stutje's labors remind us that large-scale radicalization may be rooted in tangible conditions, but the ideology and organizations through which a newly arising fervor for social change is articulated are in some measure produced by vestiges of prior practice. Mandel, owing to a preceding quarter-of-a-century of activism that served to ripen his political thought, bridged several generations of militants in a fashion that might serve as an exemplar for the present stratum of aging socialists in the New Millennium.

Mandel not only embodied Marxist culture in his activist commitments, but also made an effort to provide sophisticated answers to the exacting questions posed by those familiar with the past performance of the Left and distressed by its record of failure and even self-deception.

A young radical of the 1960s, faced with the legacies of Communism, Social Democracy and Trotskyism, justifiably had as many reasons to be repulsed by as attracted to affirming continuity with the historic Left. To act was imperative — but how?

How should a radical attend to the barbaric record of human suffering inflicted by the Stalinist states? How might one effectively reform a social order in view of the decades of complicity with the capitalist (and colonialist) systems exemplified by liberal and social democratic parties and governments? How should one forge a political movement independent of all exploitative societies — East, West and neocolonial — in light of the cult-like sectarianism all-too-frequently evidenced by Trotskyism?

Stutje's biography particularizes how in public debates, articles, pamphlets and eventually scholarly books (many of the most brilliant issued by New Left Books, a publishing house associated with the British journal *New Left Review*), Mandel worked unstintingly to craft responses to these questions; he sought a way that might be suitable for a new generation's quest to create its own identity yet enhance what was recuperable from its forerunners.

A decades-long member of the Fourth International, he was nonetheless of a political breed different from those whose education in pre-1960s Trotskyism too often addressed contemporary events by reciting catechisms about a "historic program," "the lessons of October," and a profession of "faith" in the working class to carry out its "mission."

Stutje reveals to us how Mandel tenaciously held to the core ideas of Lenin and Trotsky — a transitional "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" leading from the old society to the new, a strategy of "Permanent Revolution" to address economic under-development in a largely rural society, and a view of the urban working class as the central category of political agency in the industrialized world. But Mandel maintained that such ideas had merit only to the degree that they could be critically justified by empirical data from World War I to the present.

From the late 1960s on, Mandel displayed his finest gifts when he disdained customary Trotskyist rhetoric, especially the traditional dismissal of adversarial arguments by assigning them scare-labels such as "reformist," "petit-bourgeois," and "centrist"; instead, even when he employed the canonical vocabulary of Leninism, his thinking frankly grappled with rather than evaded the knotty problems of revolutionary politics.

Democracy and Working-Class Power

My own favored example of Mandel's dexterity is his handling of the relationship between socialism and democracy. Making his case from evidence that he could readily cite, Mandel was a proponent of augmenting electoral campaigns with extra-parliamentary action — strikes, mass demonstrations, and new political formations. But he did not regard "bourgeois democracy" as bankrupt or meaningless; rather, he judged in practice the institutions of the bourgeois state, such as private property, to be in contradiction to the self-activity of the working class.

His characteristic way of posing the issue of democracy for revolutionary politics was to firmly avow that notions such as the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and "dual power" be understood as processes that depend on and extend the civil liberties for which prior radicals fought hard, such as freedom of the press, the legality of diverse political parties, and so forth.

Mandel went even further and contended that Marx and Engels had failed to anticipate how democracy might be eroded and usurped in a revolutionary process.

This why Mandel proposed, for the next wave of political upheavals, safeguards that were mandatory to insure that full democratic freedoms would be coupled with the soviet (council) form of political organization favored by socialists.

Moreover, in surveying past regimes that had come to power with revolutionary claims and aspirations, he was adamant that the introduction of criteria by the Bolsheviks for allowing political rights only to those who were “for” as opposed to “against” the revolution was a dangerously unacceptable procedure, too open to partisan subjective judgments.

Socialists, he concluded, must wage their struggles primarily through the free exchange of ideas; the Bolsheviks were dead wrong in their 1921 banning of factions and similar measures taken even under the qualification (never honored) that these were but temporary actions.

Revolution and “The Transition”

Mandel extended this method, which emulated Marx by enriching and complicating hypotheses in light of new experience, to other contentious topics. When asked whether the experience of the October 1917 Revolution might serve as a kind of model for the future revolutionary confrontations in Europe, he recommended an additional examination of the events in Germany 1917-1923, Spain 1936-37, Portugal 1974-75 and elsewhere. His conclusion was that features that tended to recur in all these situations were the ones that one should most likely anticipate when class conflict rose to a genuine crisis.

Mandel stubbornly held to Trotsky’s view that the post-revolutionary USSR was a transitional social formation — not capitalist, socialist, or a new version of class society. He happily debated his perspective in the pages of numerous publications outside the Fourth International. Yet he did not see one’s choice of nomenclature for Soviet society as a crucial dividing line between socialist organizations. [1]

When it came to the troubling question of clarifying the response of Trotskyism to World War II, Mandel realized that 1960s activists who had come of age with full knowledge of Nazi atrocities were not going to be sympathetic to any outlook that imagined World War II as a repeat of World War I. Informed young people would rightly be horrified by the Allies’ saturation bombings, segregation of troops by color, and use of atomic weapons, but they would still assess sectarian abstention from military combat under the banner of “revolutionary defeatism” as a suicidal policy in the face of fascist aggression.

Mandel wrote in depth, especially in a book-length volume called *The Meaning of the Second World War* (1986), of the different dimensions to the war, making a distinction between those components that required material support with arms (such as the anti-fascist Resistance) and those that required vigorous ideological repudiation (the imperial aims of the Allies).

He pointed out that some who claimed to be Trotskyists during the war had failed to understand Trotsky’s guiding principles at the time of his August 1940 assassination. And he presented a thought-provoking argument about Yugoslavia as illustrating the authentic Trotskyist strategy of combining armed struggle against fascism with anti-capitalist social transformation, even though post-revolutionary Yugoslavia had a long way to go before arriving at socialism.

The most lively and direct answers to these sorts of questions, along with many others, appeared in *Revolutionary Marxism Today* (1979), a book of interviews conducted with Mandel by five then members of the Fourth International. [2] These are certainly not the same questions young activists of today might ask, which would more likely be about ecology, gender, and globalization. But such debates of 30 years ago are nonetheless a vital, if incomplete, inheritance that should be appropriated by any future Left.

To disregard Mandel's bequest to 21st century radicals might result in retreats in both ideological sophistication as well as democratic forms of political organization. Such a regression was the fate of so many among the 1960s New Left who, after properly breaking with the illusions of liberalism, seemed to learn zilch from their predecessors and were drawn into the predictable dead-ends of neo-Stalinist Maoism, sectarian versions of Trotskyism, and the appalling if small-scale terrorism of Weatherman, Black Liberation Army, and worse.

Personal, Political and Intellectual Life

Stutje's work, first released in the Netherlands two years ago and now expertly translated by Christopher Beck and Peter Drucker, represents a powerful commencement of what will surely be an ongoing task of recovering and analyzing this bequest. [3]

With nearly 400 pages, organized into 11 chapters, a conclusion, and superb notes and bibliography, Stutje seeks to embrace at least four simultaneously-progressing narratives: Mandel's personal biography, his record of political activities in Belgium and Western Europe, his leadership role in the Fourth International, and his intellectual achievements.

Some who knew, collaborated with, or studied Mandel will undoubtedly disagree about Stutje's emphases and interpretations. [4] Perhaps the most impressive feat is that Stutje, a labor historian from the Netherlands, presents a rigorous factual backdrop for all of these aspects of Mandel's life and work, assessed benevolently but with genuine critical detachment.

Paramount among family influences was Mandel's father, Henri Mandel (1896-1952). Henri came from a Polish village under Austrian rule, relocating to Antwerp, Belgium at the time of World War I. He was raised in a Jewish culture and was first attracted to the socialist-Zionist group Workers of Zion, and then to the burgeoning Communist movement.

After the Russian Revolution, Henri moved to Berlin and launched the Soviet Press Agency. When the German revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered in 1919 (by a military death squad authorized by the Social Democratic government — ed.), he relocated to Antwerp where he made his way as a diamond merchant while still adhering to his Marxist views. In 1921, Henri met and married Rosa Mateles, a Jewish freethinker who shared Henri's multilingual skills.

Although Henri's diamond business boomed in the 1920s, the economic catastrophe of 1929 forced him to switch over to work in insurance and as a mortgage agent. In the interim, the growth of fascism transformed the Mandel home into a haven for political refugees, a number of whom inspired the family toward Trotskyism. By the time of the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War, Henri was supporting oppositionists of various types (Trotskyists, anarchists, the Spanish P.O.U.M.).

Stutje provides mesmerizing particulars about Henri's extraordinary political activities that finally resulted in his stoic pessimism about the possibilities of revolutionary transformation in the face of both Hitlerism and Stalinism. Henri and Rosa endured the war years by going into hiding in Brussels, the city in which they remained for the rest of their lives.

Young Ernest inherited his mother's features and wonderful smile, but his father's dynamism. A brilliant student who adored the Greek and Latin classics, he listened to Mozart and Bach, and learned to speak six languages. Ernest was also facile in chemistry, the subject pursued by his younger brother, Michel. But by age 13 he was captivated by Trotskyist politics and at age 15 he

joined the Fourth International.

In 1940, with Belgium occupied by Germany, Ernest was working full-time on an underground newspaper that supported resistance. In 1942, when the Mandel family was ordered to wear yellow stars, identifying them as Jews, they obtained false papers and vanished from public life.

Stutje makes available fabulously detailed data about this whole period, especially in regard to activities of the small Trotskyist movement and with special attention to the participation of Jewish internationalists such as Abram Leon.

Stutje also narrates the full story of the two well-known arrests of Ernest by the Gestapo, and his two escapes, and then his incarceration in German prisons and work camps where he miraculously survived until liberation by U.S. troops. Among the fresh revelations is that Ernest's first breakout — by leaping in handcuffs from a car in which he was being transported to Gestapo headquarters — was probably facilitated through a bribe paid by his father.

Leading the FI

Mandel's subsequent political career is far too wide-ranging and multifaceted to outline in this review. His life was chiefly divided between activities in Belgium, where he lived with his parents and then his rather protective mother after Henri's death, and in the Fourth International.

The organization was re-established in Paris after the war. Mandel was elected to the leadership in 1946 and wrote often under pseudonyms such as "Ernest Germain" and (later on) "Walter."

In 1953, the Fourth International split into two factions, and Mandel allied with the controversial Michel Pablo (a pseudonym for the Greek-born Trotskyist Michalis N. Raptis, 1911-1996), who was noted for his super-centralized view of the International and illusions about the longevity of Stalinism.

Yet under Pablo's prodding, the European movement transcended the blinders of Euro-centrism and gave a special priority to waging a struggle against colonialism by throwing itself into heroic work on behalf of the Algerian Revolution.

Mandel, in collaboration with his close friend, the U.S. expatriate poet Sherry Mangan, also labored assiduously toward reunifying the Trotskyist movement, which occurred 1963 following common assessments of the Cuban revolution, although Pablo, as well as the most sectarian of the forces who were estranged 10 years earlier, did not participate. [5]

Mandel's public writings appeared in the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool*, the Cologne daily *Rheinische Zeitung* (under the name "Pierre Grousset"), the French weekly *l'Observateur* (which sent him to East Asia in 1953) and countless other places. In Belgium, he joined the Socialist Party to become the leader of its militant wing, editing the paper *La Gauche* and appearing regularly in *Links* (a Flemish-affiliated publication).

He became a member of the economic studies commission of the General Confederation of Labor of Belgium and worked closely with well-known syndicalist André Renard. During a general strike occurred in 1960-61, Mandel opposed the anti-strike legislation pushed by the Socialist Party-Christian Democratic coalition and was eventually forced out of the SP.

In 1962, the outsider Mandel stunned the academic world with a brilliantly researched two-volume treatise defending classical Marxism, *Marxist Economic Theory* (translated into English in 1968). It was 15 years in the making and much admired by Che Guevara, who discussed it in Havana with Mandel in 1964, during a seven-week stay where he provided economic guidance to the new

revolutionary government.

The book's success led to Mandel's resuming academic studies and receiving a degree from the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris in 1967. One year later he conducted a spectacular tour of European and the U.S. universities to speak on revolutionary socialism.

In 1972 he received a doctorate from the Free University of Berlin. At that time Mandel was banned from West Germany (as well as several other countries, including the United States) as a subversive. His dissertation committee had to fly to Brussels for the defense, after which he continued to teach at the Free University in Brussels.

The dissertation was then published as the internationally acclaimed *Late Capitalism* (1972; translated 1975), which demystified the "welfare state" as a distinctive, secondary phase of monopoly capitalism commenced in the wake of World War II. Reclaiming the pioneering work on cycles by the purged Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev (1892-1938), Mandel gave the 1978 Alfred Marshall Lectures at the University of Cambridge, published as *Long Waves of Capitalist Development* (1978).

Dozens of books and pamphlets flowed from his pen in many languages, and late in life he received some unexpected notoriety when he was satirized as the genius "Ezra Einstein" in Tariq Ali's 1990 novel *Redemption*.

Associations and Relationships

Readers in the United States will welcome the candid details about Mandel's association with political activists in Europe, such as the aforementioned Rudi Dutschke, Alain and Hubert Krivine, Charles-André Udry, Janette Habel, Peter Uhl and Zbigniew Kowalewski. Then there are the facts about Mandel's dealings with eminent Marxist intellectuals such as Ernest Bloch, Roman Rosdolsky (exiled in Detroit), Lucien Goldmann, Ernest Federn, and those associated with *New Left Review*.

Moreover, for the first time we are told about Mandel's intimate life — his unsuccessful pursuit of Micky Traks, the Jewish student of psychology whom Mandel met in the Trotskyist movement after World War II; his tormented 1966 marriage to Gisela Scholtz, the German SDS activist; and the happiness he found with his 1983 wedding to Anne Sprimont, a pianist and high school English teacher.

Yet this same audience may find Stutje's investigation of Mandel's relations with the U.S. Trotskyist movement to be disappointing. A compelling inquiry would require a detailed and subtle inspection of the dynamics of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party (SWP) after the 1940s, unimaginable for a single volume such as this.

Moreover, Stutje occasionally exhibits a tendency to attribute rather decisive political decisions to the opportunist response of an influential leader. For example, U.S. Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon's 1953 break with Pablo is treated merely as precipitated by Cannon's discovery that his own critics in the SWP, such as Harry Braverman, were citing Pablo as an authority.

Similarly, Stutje conjectures that, following the April 1969 Ninth World Congress of the Fourth International, Mandel privately believed that Latin American guerrilla struggles were tantamount to "Blanquism and individual terrorism;" but in the debates building up to the February 1974 Tenth World Congress he deceptively declared himself a "fully convinced supporter of the armed struggle position."

The suggested reason is that, had Mandel followed his beliefs, “he would have alienated the young radicals, particularly the French....He wanted to avoid that, if necessary by defending a position that took no account of reality.” (187)

One can only laud Stutje’s desire to include the possibility of subjective and emotional factors as playing a part in decisions by Cannon and Mandel, and one does not sense that he is engaging in any factional score-settling in these characterizations. Yet such controversies will never be intelligible until they are the subject of careful research that accounts more fully for the context and over-determining factors.

Mandel’s incontestable misjudgment in the early 1970s, for example, occurred at a time when the Fourth International was polarized by clashing methodologies that became obvious 10 years later; at this time his opponents, called “The Leninist-Trotskyist Faction,” broke apart and components took progressively wacky positions. [6]

“The World’s Greatest Optimist”

Upon Mandel’s death, Andre Gunder Frank, the founder of dependency theory, observed that “We have lost not only a most humane human being, but the world’s greatest optimist.” [7]

Stutje concludes his remarkable study with a discussion of Mandel’s legendary and perchance even perilous optimism, concurring with Michael Löwy’s judgment that it rested not on any certainties about historical contingencies but “in the conviction that resisting injustice and striving for freedom are profoundly human.” (258)

Yet one cannot neglect the fact that the organized movement to which Mandel devoted his life, while possibly stronger today than it was at the start of the 1960s, is far from playing the leadership role in the revolutionary transformation that he envisioned. Why Mandel’s political influence never matched up to the quality of his intellectual production cannot be easily explained.

One factor is that his fortune, by his own choice, was tightly tied to that of the Trotskyist movement as a whole. Yet much of this movement was poisoned by oversimplified, crude polemics, schematic policies, and unrealized projections ceaselessly rationalized; there is little doubt that 20th century Marxist culture and political life outside Trotskyism was time and again far more stimulating and politically productive than that within.

To respond to this complex situation, Mandel found himself forging in practice a perspective of “Revolutionary Marxism,” a militant brand of socialism far to the Left of social democracy. In this venture, a version of Trotskyism lived on as resource and catalyst — but not as a limiting horizon.

Whether Ernest Mandel’s specific project will yet be realized remains in doubt. But the validity of his moral vision and his extraordinary example as a Marxist activist-intellectual is not.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 142, September-October 2009:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2383>

Footnotes

[1] In particular, he was adamant that the USSR could not be called a “workers state” without the qualification that it was bureaucratized and had degenerated from its original nature; he said that the pre-1989 USSR remained similar to the state inaugurated in 1917 only to the degree that it was preventing the re-emergence of capitalism. He certainly agreed with his critics that the terminology involving “bureaucratized workers state” was confusing from a common sense perspective, but he still saw it as the least confused designation. In the end, however, his theory of the USSR was too limited to anticipate the conclusion of events in Poland and the USSR.

[2] These were: Denis Berger, a co-founder of Tendency 3 (associated with the bureaucratic collectivist theory of the USSR) in the Revolutionary Communist League of France and now Professor of Political Science at the University of Paris and a supporter of the Anti-Capitalist Party; Robin Blackburn, a British social historian and former editor of *New Left Review*; Quintin Hoare, a prize-winning translator of Antonio Gramsci; Jon Rothschild, a U.S. translator; and Henri Weber, a member of the European Parliament representing the Socialist Party of France.

[3] It properly began with Gilbert Achcar, ed., *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel* (London: Verso, 1999), an essential starting place.

[4] See, for example, the review by Phil Hearse at <http://marxsite.com/DestinyofaRevolutionary.html>
Available on ESSF: [Ernest Mandel – Destiny of a Revolutionary](#) .

[5] In 1983, with assistance from Mandel and Pablo, I published a biography of Sherry Mangan, *The Revolutionary Imagination* (University of North Carolina Press), and in 1987 wrote the introduction to a collection of his political poetry and fiction, *Blackness of a White Night* (Arts End Books).

[6] During the Spring 1973 debates prior to the Tenth World Congress, Robert Langston, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.), attempted to distance himself from both the Leninist-Trotskyist Faction and the view of the International Majority Tendency on guerrilla warfare in Latin America. Langston and others announced the modestly-named “June 10th Tendency,” which I supported, but which, in the heat of the larger polarized debate, had negligible impact and influence.

[7] These remarks are available at http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/agfrank/mandel_tribute.html.