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REVIEW ESSAY

# The Personal, the Political, and Permanent Revolution: Ernest Mandel and the Conflicted Legacies of Trotskyism

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**Review of JAN WILLEM STUTJE. *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*. Verso, London [etc.] 2009. 460 pp. \$34.95.**

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Biographies of revolutionary Marxists should not be written by the faint of heart. The difficulties are daunting. Which revolutionary tradition is to be given pride of place? Of many Marxisms, which will be extolled, which exposed? What balance will be struck between the personal and the political, a dilemma that cannot be avoided by those who rightly place analytic weight on the public life of organizations and causes and yet understand, as well, how private experience affects not only the individual but the movements, ideas, and developments he or she influenced. Social history's accent on the particular and its elaboration of context, political biography's attention to structures, institutions, and debates central to an individual's life, and intellectual history's close examination of central ideas and the complexities of their refinement present a trilogy of challenge for any historian who aspires to write the life of someone who was both *in* history and dedicated to *making* history. Ernest Mandel was just such a someone, an exceedingly important and troublingly complex figure.

## MANDEL' S MAKING FASCISM AND THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

Benefiting from a cosmopolitan childhood, Mandel, born in Antwerp of Polish parents in 1923, nonetheless grew up with fascism. Relatives died in Auschwitz, his parents and brother escaped the Gestapo and, living

underground in Brussels, Mandel was arrested by the German secret police during a routine check of identity papers in 1942. At this point an active Trotskyist, young Mandel's revolutionary politics had been nurtured in the home, his father drawn to anti-Stalinist radicalism by the Moscow trials and the Spanish Civil War. Ernest was further inspired by Abraham Le' on, a moving force in the small circle of Belgium's communist left opposition.

As a Jew and a revolutionary, Mandel's eventual capture by the Nazis was perhaps inevitable, yet he never relinquished the certainty that fascism would be defeated. His first arrest ended in Mandel breaking free from his captors: it was his father's ability to pay a ransom of 100,000 francs to corrupt police officials that almost certainly paved the way for his son's escape. Mandel used his freedom to good effect, building Trotskyism in tandem with the Resistance. Clandestine work took him across the Belgian border into France. There he first crossed paths with a Greek revolutionary known as Pablo, whose later history would intersect decisively with that of Mandel.

In 1944, while engaged in the dangerously heroic act of leafleting German soldiers occupying Belgium, Mandel was again arrested and sentenced to two-and-a-half years of forced labor. Deported to Germany, he was bounced from one work camp to another. Mandel made a daring bid for his freedom, succeeding for a day, but he was almost immediately recaptured. Cultivating political relations with some of those guarding him, Mandel discovered that many of his wardens were former German social democrats whose commitment to the Nazis was weak. If he was fortunate to survive, Mandel suffered greatly. Emaciated and plagued by a number of serious health problems, he spent the winter of 1944-1945 at Camp Niederroden, cutting reeds on frozen lakes before being hospitalized. At the end of March 1945, with the United States armed forces overrunning Germany, Mandel's ordeal finally came to an end.

In the postwar period Mandel dedicated himself to building and sustaining the Fourth International (FI), established by Trotsky in 1938 and aiming to draw together the global forces of Marxists who opposed both capitalism and Stalinism. Operating at first under conditions of illegality, the FI was subject to attack from its Soviet and Chinese opponents; its advocates ran the gauntlet of repression from one capitalist state to another. Important, and contentious, issues of principle divided the young movement.

The 1950s saw the Fourth International fractured, with the significant American section (the Socialist Workers' Party, or SWP) aligned with others opposing the leadership of Mandel and Michel Raptis/Pablo. In 1953, Mandel and Pablo led what became known as the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (ISFI), while their opponents headed the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). A reunification of many of the forces advocating Trotskyism occurred in 1963 as Mandel and Joseph Hansen of the SWP co-authored a programmatic statement on the dynamics of world revolution that staked out common ground on the nature and meaning of the Cuban Revolution and

how to approach revolutionary struggle in colonial and Stalinist settings. When Pablo departed the now renamed United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec/USFI) in 1965, ending his long and tumultuous tenure in the Fourth International, Mandel was positioned to become world Trotskyism's principal spokesman.

With the upsurge of radicalism associated with 1968, the United Secretariat grew. One part of this enhanced prestige was that, under Mandel's leadership, the USec saw the potential of the Vietnamese struggle against imperialism and the role this would play in galvanizing a generalized radicalization of youth. Mandel's ties to charismatic dissidents like the German student leader, Rudi Dutschke, solidified in common struggles. Never far from the global political fray, Mandel and the USFI subsequently championed and/or had roles to play in the so-called Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979, which saw the royal regime of the Shah toppled, replaced by an Islamic republic headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini; Poland's early 1980s Solidarnosc; and the Brazilian Workers' Party of the 1980s and 1990s that brought together trade unionists, intellectuals, and dissidents, eventually catapulting Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva into the presidency. Mandel exhausted himself in his efforts on behalf of the International, and died in 1995, his last years a whirlwind of activity that unfolded as the ageing Marxist neglected his health.

Complementing his primary political work at the organizational centers of global Trotskyism was Mandel's contribution to Marxist theory, a corpus of texts that oscillated productively between synthesis and polemic. Among the library of books that Mandel authored (which included a social history of the crime novel) were his two-volume treatise, *Marxist Economic Theory* (1962); an intervention into the debate surrounding the concept of "alienation" in *Marx, The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (1967); and a trilogy of highly influential works addressing capitalist crisis and the rise and fall of the welfare state as the long boom of postwar expansion ground to a halt in the mid-1970s: *Late Capitalism* (1972); *The Second Slump: A Marxist Analysis of Recession in the Seventies* (1978); and *Long Waves of Capitalist Development* (1980).

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Widely translated, Mandel's prodigious writing was imaginative and influential. It earned him lectureships and eventually academic appointment at the Free University of Brussels. The professorship did not come easily: having published more than ten books, consolidating an enviable reputation as a stimulating and compelling lecturer, there were still those among the species *academicus supercilious* who thought Mandel's credentials (specifically the lack of a doctorate) wanting.

There was a more serious backlash. As the invitations to speak to left-wing audiences proliferated from the 1960s on, the paranoia of the security state's counter-intelligence (an apt designation) officialdom went into overdrive. Mandel was banned, at various times, from entering the United States, France, West Germany, Switzerland, and Australia. Yet he soldiered on, producing books and articles with a military discipline;

battling what he conceived as “sectarianism” within the ranks of the Trotskyists; continuing to identify himself with the authority of the original Fourth International.

It was no easy row to hoe. As Jan Willem Stutje’s engagement with and assessment of Mandel shows, the warhorse of the fractured Fourth International carried baggage he had accumulated as a victim/survivor of the Shoah. Much of Mandel’s willingness to vacillate and compromise in order not to sever relations with comrades he valued but knew to be pursuing a wrong course, Stutje implies, can be explained by this history. A revolutionary whose leadership of a “section” was subordinate to his figurehead status as a spokesman for all “parties”, Mandel needed, desperately so, to keep the forces of world Trotskyism together. Just as he was the archetypal “non-Jewish Jew”, so too, as a revolutionary internationalist, did he travel the planet without a truly effective visa, however much his Belgium roots mattered to him.

A deep divide seemed to separate Mandel the public advocate of revolutionary hope from Mandel the man, be he son, husband, or friend. Having been wrenched from his family during the displacements of World War II, isolated in the incarcerations of work camps and prisons, not knowing the fate of loved ones, Mandel survived only to face the premature death of his father. For much of the rest of his life he lived with a mother whom he cherished, but who was clearly overbearing. He had no capacity to deal with children, whose boisterousness unsettled his routines. Responsibilities in personal relations he rarely acknowledged, and emotion was something Mandel no doubt saw as a burden borne by the irrational.

His first marriage to Gisela Scholtz had tragic undertones. Gisela not only had to contend with Ernest’s mother; she struggled to be recognized as Mandel’s equal within the leadership of world Trotskyism. This ultimately drove her deeper into a depression that had been lingering since late adolescence. There were happy times for Gisela and Ernest, but the last years of their marriage, from the late 1970s into the early 1980s, were sad. Painkillers and anti-depressants kept Mandel’s wife going, but she felt abandoned by her husband, trapped in a bleak existence. In 1982 Scholtz died at the age of forty-seven. Shortly thereafter, Mandel met and married Anne Sprimont, finding love and happiness in a relationship with a younger, cultured woman who had little background in the politics of the left and no desire to move into Mandel’s public space.

As this all too brief gloss on Mandel’s extraordinary and complex history suggests, three strands weave themselves through this ambitious biography. The personal, the political, and the published work form components of *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel’s Dream Deferred*. Stutje is sympathetic to Mandel, declaring at the outset that his book is “an exercise in critical admiration”, an exploration of “a Flemish revolutionary Marxist with whose ideas I feel a close affinity” (p. xv). For all the proclamation by Stutje that he subjects Mandel to critical scrutiny, however, it is at precisely those levels where one would expect criticism to register decisively – political program and principles – that Mandel is let

rather easily off the hook. It is, ironically, in the realm of personal relations where Mandel is most decidedly found wanting, with Mandel's relationships with women and friends subject to critical commentary. Stutje's book opens pages of Mandel's life that were to some extent closed to all but those who knew him intimately. Yet it turns over too rapidly pages of the history of Trotskyist principles and bypasses ideas that framed Mandel's long list of publications.

Tariq Ali, in a rather self-serving and politically complacent foreword to this Verso edition of the English translation of Stutje's original 2007 study (insisting, in effect, that Trotskyism, its "interminable polemics" and "arid and unrewarding" routine, was never much more than a utopian "road to nowhere"), quotes Yeats: "The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work." He notes that for Mandel, "it was always the latter" (pp. xi-xiii). This perhaps bifurcates too neatly. Mandel lived for the work of revolution – and this work, and the promise of revolution's end was, in his view, life's ultimate sustenance, the only force that could insure survival. Stutje, who understands Mandel's position, offers us his subject's life and work with a different emphasis, one that places the accent of interpretation less on the political and more on the personal. If this does not falsely separate, it tends to skew.

## **THE PERSONAL AS SUBSTITUTE FOR THE POLITICAL**

To say this is not to disparage the importance of what Stutje has attempted. As an author, Stutje had enviable access to important and revealing Mandel correspondence with his wives, family members, colleagues, and comrades, as well as insights gleaned from interviewing those who worked closely with Mandel in all kinds of capacities. This is a great strength of his treatment of Mandel. The social can both explain and contextualize the political and make it come to life. But sometimes the personal is *not* overtly political. There are times when explanations of public, political, developments are ill-served by recourse to explanations that rely on assessments of individual psychology or deterministic readings of personal characteristics. This is especially the case when such analysis is formed on the basis of evidence that is incomplete or open to conflicting interpretation, premised on conjecture.

Stutje seems to have fallen prey to a tendency of our depressingly subjective era to substitute the personal for the political. He relies on rather thin tissues of inference to read into Mandel's politics the *structure* of an over-determined personality, one that he associates with an historical cohort that "divided life into public and private spheres". Mandel attained maturity in his politics and writing, but he could supposedly not transcend childhood "in emotional life"; his personal "development [y] stalled on the way to adulthood". Insisting that "the political always took priority over the personal", Mandel showed "more concern for humanity than for himself or those around him", and he found in "the need to change society ample justification for remaining blind to the soul". All of this ostensibly explains why Mandel, according to Stutje, consistently deluded himself that he could protect and retain his International

followers by avoiding divisive confrontations over matters of political principle. He preferred, not the clarity of open and decisive political debate and programmatic reconfiguration, but the politics of mobilization and the press to move on to the next item of the agenda. "This impatient, adolescent attitude helped [Mandel] keep aloof from key problems – from realities – that were too unruly for analysis and prognosis," writes Stutje (pp. 201-203).

There are a myriad of problems with this kind of explanatory direction. First and foremost, it throws in the political towel. If realities are indeed too chaotic and out of control to be analyzed and acted on rationally, revolutionary politics is doomed, a position that Mandel would surely have attacked with all of his being. Second, in attributing to Mandel a certain personality, Stutje is suggesting much more than his evidence will allow. Furthermore, the "personality structure" that Stutje has sketched would apply to almost any revolutionary born before 1930, virtually all of whom would have willingly conceded that public, political life took precedence over the private realm and that humanity's needs trumped those of the individual. Leading figures on the revolutionary left understood well that friendships were often put to the test in the cauldron of debate and difference over principles. Not all of them saw solutions in temporizing.

Third, and perhaps most decisively, this critical accent on the personal becomes in Stutje's book a substitute for the necessary development of a substantial account of the politics and the ideas that animated both Mandel's leadership of a substantial wing of the Trotskyist movement and his writing. With the personal becoming both explanation for the political and the primary arena where criticism of Mandel is developed, the requisite scrutiny of Mandel's political life that most readers of this book will want is often lacking. When we contemplate what Stutje is suggesting about Mandel's "blindness to the soul", we might stop to ask where this kind of "analysis" leads. Do those uncommitted to large causes necessarily appreciate more sensitively the spiritual and immortal nature of humankind?

Stutje's tendency to miss the mark in his speculations about personal character is evident in a comparison he makes between Trotsky and Mandel, suggesting that neither figure was able to stand firm in their principles and ideas when faced with battles that they thought would isolate them. Trotsky may indeed have made errors of concession in the 1920s, when he faced the difficult task of assessing how best to preserve the world's first revolutionary workers' state, but this can hardly be taken as a measure of either his personality or his political trajectory.

When Trotsky did indeed come to appreciate that there was no appeasement possible in the case of the Stalinization of the Communist International, he rose to the occasion and led a principled fight for the program of world revolution, opposing the parochialisms and worse of a program of socialism in one country. Against the slanders and violent intimidations of Stalinism, culminating in his murder, the condescending dismissals of an increasingly pragmatic and politically enervated social democracy, and the ideological and material might of the "free world

colossus", Trotsky stayed this principled, and testing, course. It is hardly appropriate to conclude, as does Stutje, that Trotsky, like Mandel, "found it difficult to fight unhesitatingly, if need be alone, for what he believed was right" (p. 202). [1]

As a structuring feature of *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, recourse to the personal traverses and truncates the text. It frames almost every key moment in Mandel's political leadership of international Trotskyism. This may seem an odd criticism to level at a biography. The point is not that the personal is unimportant and irrelevant, but rather that it must not overwhelm the political, serving in its constant references, allusions, and speculations as a substitute for the detailed analytical accounting of political orientation that Mandel himself would have acknowledged was decisive in the lives of all revolutionaries. It is necessary, then, to reread Mandel in order to retrieve a fuller understanding of the politics that structured his life.

## **REREADING MANDEL: THE RETRIEVAL OF THE POLITICAL**

Mandel's post-World-War-II political work in Belgium saw him playing a leading role in orchestrating a Trotskyist entry into the Socialist Party. He edited and wrote for left-wing newspapers such as *La Gauche* and *Le Peuple*. Mass strikes like the 1960-1961 conflict that saw public-sector unions and Walloon coalminers and steelworkers lead a concerted charge against government cutbacks and retrenchment in pivotal economic sectors provided a test of Mandel's political mettle. Stutje recounts how Mandel had a falling-out with the militant but mercurial trade-union leader, Andre' Renard, in 1959, when Renard put the brakes on a miners' general strike that Mandel had been championing in the pages of *La Gauche*. "He is and remains at base a left-centrist", Mandel fumed (p. 75). Mandel and Renard found themselves facing one another again in the 1960-1961 upheaval, heralded throughout Europe as the "strike of the century", but in effect Mandel was subordinated to Renard's ultimate authority in particular and the constraints of the Socialist Party hierarchy in general.

Neither could be misconstrued as revolutionary. Stutje presents Mandel as the unadulterated voice of revolutionary class struggle, but in effect *La Gauche* with Mandel at its helm vacillated. Repudiations of coalition government and calls for workers to power were subtly reconfigured if certain conditions could be met. "All participation in government must be ruled out, unless [y]" (p. 76). Mandel called for a massive mobilization of protest, a march on Brussels in January 1961, only to draw back in the face of Renard's opposition two weeks later. Well poised to offer a critique of the trade-union bureaucracy's strategic refusal to confront the state, collapsing the struggle into pressuring federalist solutions that would secure concessions serving the socio-economic interests of Wallonia, Mandel abdicated and, even retrospectively, failed to make clear what had sealed the fate of the Belgium upheaval of 1960-1961. [2]

Much of this was predictable for those who had been keeping a keen

political eye on Mandel and Trotsky's original Fourth International. Indeed, that body no longer existed in 1960–1961. It had split apart at the programmatic seams. The rupture was occasioned by Pablo's insistence in the early 1950s that a new conjuncture in the global politics of the revolutionary left had arrived. He initiated talk of the objective opposition to capitalism and imperialism that was being led by Stalinism, even to the point of the establishment of seemingly revolutionary regimes. The postwar reconfiguration of Europe, the Chinese Revolution, and anti-colonial struggles in Algeria and Vietnam redrew the map of socialist possibility, according to Pablo. The survival of regimes that were either objectively Stalinist or supported and sustained by Stalinism could, in Pablo's view, last for a century and more. This necessitated that the Fourth International re-evaluate its orientation. It was enough to make old-guard Trotskyists, like France's Pierre Broue, shiver.

In the apocalyptic cauldron of an anticipated Third World War, more threatening than ever with the proliferation of nuclear weaponry, Pablo argued that standing alone as Trotskyists was futile. The task was to align with and merge into whatever oppositional force offered the greatest likelihood of effectively challenging and displacing capitalist hegemony. Too often the line between outright advocacy of those resisting imperialism or challenging capitalism, on the one hand, and principled critical support and defence that never relinquished the entirely necessary exposure of programmatic weakness and capitulation, on the other, was crossed. In Pablo's post-1953 International Secretariat of the Fourth International, within which Mandel functioned as something of a loyal critical conscience, Trotskyist commitment to organizing the working class for its revolutionary self emancipation found substitutes in various adaptations: to peasant-based, Stalinist-led, anti-colonialist mobilizations in the Third World; and, depending on the circumstances, tailing after Stalinist or social democratic parties in the capitalist West, even liquidating Trotskyism in "deep entries" into such political formations.

The contested politics of this decisive turn have remained central to debates among the world Trotskyist movement to this day. Yet the rupture is passed over in Stutje's book very lightly, brushed off as the product of strong leadership personalities clashing in "mutual jealousy". The Trotskyist milieu is presented as a set of incestuous battlegrounds, in which "tight moralistic communities" rallied around all-powerful figures, who demanded "devotion and imitation" (p. 102). Explaining political development and debate in this way colours Stutje's account of the world Mandel inhabited.

Too little is made, for instance, of Mandel's specific political role in the pivotal period of the early 1950s. What is available in Stutje's account is often open to challenge. Pablo's ideas, for instance, galvanized an immediate opposition, concentrated in the French section of the Fourth International. It was soon arbitrarily suspended by Pablo, who was nothing if not decisively and aggressively authoritarian in dealing with opponents. Mandel had no taste for repudiating Pablo directly, but early in 1951 he authored a document that came to be known as the "Ten



Theses" on Stalinism. Stutje interprets Mandel's theses as "a limited acceptance of Pablo's analysis", one that "dimmed the rather rosy light Pablo had shone on the Soviet bureaucracy" (p. 100). In actuality, Mandel's manifesto could just as easily be considered a rejection of Pablo's positions, advocating as it did that the Fourth International stay true to its "fundamental task: to create new revolutionary parties". Certainly the French section thought Mandel was onside with its positions, calling on him to defend his own principles and hold firm to the political ideas of revolutionary Trotskyism. He did not.

In capitulating to Pablo, Mandel, according to Stutje, preferred "to serve unity rather than get his own way" (p. 297). The tragedy of this apparently selfless politic was evident in the years to come. By the end of the 1950s Mandel and others who joined him in failing to fight for principled Trotskyist positions within the Fourth International at the beginning of the decade had come to the conclusion that, [Pablo] "doesn't lead, he brutalizes" (p. 113). Had Mandel aligned with the French section dissidents of the FI, and rallied to their standard, James Cannon and the SWP and others in the International, the history of Trotskyism, and possibly the history of radicalism in the 1960s and beyond, might well have looked very different. Mandel opted for another course.

Those who opposed him, Pablo, and Pierre Frank in 1953, are too often presented by Stutje as caricatured straw men, easily knocked down for their unwholesome personal characteristics. An example is the leader of one of the Fourth International's largest sections, Cannon, who is portrayed by Stutje as an autocrat concerned only with preserving his own organizational power. To be sure, the Socialist Workers' Party's departure from the Pablo-Mandel Fourth International, undertaken with a British contingent led by Gerry Healy, and the Argentinian followers of Hugo Bessano (Nahuel Moreno), was late in coming, and Cannon, especially, failed to rise forcefully to the necessity of opposing Pablo quickly and unambiguously.

Stutje explains Cannon's cavalier response to Pablo's early 1950s reversal of Trotskyist politics as self-interested parochialism. It was only when an eruption of factional 'Pabloism' within the United States section of the FI threatened Cannon's personal power that the SWP deigned to act.

There is something to this, but Stutje gets a lot wrong in coming to his conclusions. Rather than engage with what Mandel and Cannon thought the political issues in the 1953 split entailed, Stutje settles for a garbled and inadequate assessment of the issues. He cites disapprovingly a Cannon article that appeared in the SWP's theoretical journal, *Fourth International: A Marxist Quarterly*. Entitled "Trotsky or Deutscher?"; Cannon's views are presented as "a commentary on *The Prophet Armed*, the first volume of the Polish-British historian Isaac Deutscher's monumental biography of Trotsky". Particularly galling for Stutje was Cannon's position that "Deutscher's belief in the possibility of reforming Stalinism was heresy" (p. 103). In a footnote, Stutje further notes that the SWP newspaper, the *Militant*, published "an abridged version of the same witch-hunting review" by George Breitman (p. 299).

This is all quite wrong. Cannon's article, subtitled, "On the New Revisionism and Its Theoretical Source", never mentions Deutscher's *The Prophet Armed*. It cannot, even at a casual glance, be confused with a review of the first volume of Deutscher's Trotsky trilogy. Rather, it was a discussion of Deutscher's role in reformulating Trotsky's positions on Stalinism. First evident in Deutscher's 1949 biography of Stalin, Cannon saw these problematic positions developing further in Deutscher's *Russia - What Next?* (also published as *Russia After Stalin*), a 1953 book that he regarded as opposed to Trotsky's perspective precisely because it predicted that there would be a gradual evolution of the Soviet regime after the death of Stalin, leading to the restoration of socialist democracy. These Deutscher views were undeniably related to the developing politics of Pabloism. Deutscher argued, somewhat disingenuously, that what was happening in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death was precisely the "limited political revolution" against Stalinism Trotsky had advocated in the 1930s. That Deutscher bastardized Trotsky's position, insisting that only reform decreed from above could overcome Stalinism by forestalling upheaval from below, was indeed telling in so far as it actually reversed Trotsky's understanding of what was required to right the Soviet road. [3] Not surprisingly, Cannon raised these and other issues.

Stutje can speak of "heresy" and of a "witch hunt", but unless one believes that Trotskyist organizations should bury all hatchets, including those thrown directly at their programmatic heads, this all seems a little off the mark. So too does presenting Breitman as "a thin silent man" given to taking orders from Cannon. Breitman's long assessment of *The Prophet Armed* (a six-part extended review) was hardly an "abridged version" of anything, let alone Cannon's article. It provided a sustained, if polemical, discussion of a book entirely different from the Deutscher study Cannon bent his pen against. Breitman, while more often than not in agreement with Cannon, can hardly be reduced to his National Chairman's cipher-like mouthpiece.

If the original split in the Fourth International is thus given short (and overly personalized) shrift in *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, it must also be noted how often Stutje sidesteps later political developments in a like manner. There is much useful material, for instance, on the nature of the Pablo-Mandel International Secretariat's support for the Algerian National Liberation Front in the 1950s and early 1960s, and Stutje's revelations about what went on under Pablo's leadership are illuminating. But there is never a political accounting of the original politics of change and what they entailed for Trotskyism. As the rise of the Argentinian soccer player, Juan Posadas, revealed, the trajectory of the International Secretariat in the late 1950s and early 1960s contained more than a little that revolutionaries should have been questioning. Posadas was a cultist capable of truly fantastic flights of "theoretical" fancy, much of which had the consequence of downgrading the significance of the working class in the advanced capitalist political economies.

Mandel responded by holding firm to the importance of the proletariat, inching back towards a rapprochement with the American SWP. This was eventually engineered, ironically, because the break with Pabloism that

Cannon and others orchestrated belatedly in 1953 had given way, a decade later, to accommodations centered on the Cuban Revolution. This reunification gave birth to what became known as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec). Even at the point that Mandel had reconstructed the FI, aligning in leadership with Pierre Frank and Livio Maitan, and thus displacing Pablo, the programmatic shift that had been associated with the latter had indeed sunk deep, longstanding roots.

At this point, the SWP disappears from Stutje's narrative. Much is consequently missed, including an opportunity to highlight different aspects of Mandel's story. In 1969–1974, for instance, Hansen (who had served as Trotsky's secretary in Mexico) and other SWP leaders initiated a Leninist-Trotskyist Tendency within the United Secretariat, challenging Mandel's growing enthusiasm for the perspective of continental guerilla warfare in Latin America. This view, which had little in common with orthodox Trotskyist understandings of building mass revolutionary movements led by the working class, was increasingly popular with young, New Left Europeans influenced by Che' Guevara. The older SWP leadership, still embedded in the traditions of labour struggle associated with Cannon, grasped the significance of what was at issue as Mandel and the USec seemed content to jettison fundamental principles of Trotskyism's approach to the organization of revolutionary forces.

By the 1980s, however, a new layer of younger SWP leaders, with Jack Barnes first among them, was calling the shots, and it opted for an entirely different approach from that espoused by Hansen and his colleagues. Many veteran comrades reared in Cannon's SWP continued to insist on the relevance of Trotskyist fundamentals, and were expelled for their views. At stake was nothing less than the ongoing relevance of the basic concept of permanent revolution, a founding premise of the FI stipulating, among other things, that socialist revolutions could be achieved in the developing colonized world, but only if they were led by the proletariat, as opposed to the peasantry or other cross-class forces. It was Mandel's turn to mount a defense of basic principles, which he did. But the SWP was maneuvering to exit the United Secretariat, and it had broken its affiliation with Mandel by 1990. Distancing itself from its own revolutionary heritage, the SWP became little more than a Cuba support group.

There is, to be sure, fascinating personal detail in Stutje's account about Mandel's relations with Che' Guevara and the Cuban state in the 1960s. It is unfortunate that this intriguing material could not be integrated with analysis of the centrality of the Cuban question for late twentieth-century Trotskyism. As much as Mandel and others in the USFI clung to the rhetoric of Trotskyism in their opposition to the SWP's 1980s trajectory, their actual politics often reflected the same appetite to substitute a "quick fix" for the protracted and difficult politics of building working-class revolutionary organizations that could effectively lead socialist revolutions. Indeed, the history of the Mandel-led USec from the 1960s into the 1990s includes a fairly long list of those for whom revolutionaries were recruited to illusion. Some, such as Guevara in Bolivia, Allende in Chile, or Lula in Brazil were more easily rationalized than others, such as

Khomeini in Iran. Stutje asks, at one point in his discussion of Mandel's position on "armed struggle" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, whether political stands which seemed to take "no account of reality", were "a failure of leadership?" (p. 187). But an answer is not really given.

Stutje thus neglects the important ramifications of the eventual USec/SWP split. He concentrates instead on Mandel's hopes for a revolutionary breakthrough on the part of Poland's Solidarnosc. In a personalist accounting that places the accent, not so much on the absence of a revolutionary leadership in Poland, as on Mandel's relations with Polish comrades and his misplaced optimism in the possibilities of the moment, Stutje perhaps exaggerates the importance of the Polish debacle for Mandel and of Mandel's role in the Solidarnosc upheaval. It was, however, a pivotal turning point, a dry run for the implosion of the Soviet order. When it all came to naught for the forces of revolution, and the heralded fall of the Soviet Union produced not movement to the left of workers' democracy, but to the right of a possessive individualism that reinstituted markets, profit-taking, and private ownership, Mandel had no answers. He had not seen the writing on the wall in Poland, where the workers' resistance to Stalinist bureaucracy had been disfigured by clerical nationalism and the guiding light of American capitalism. Nor could Mandel discern that, as the Berlin Wall fell and Gorbachev gave way to Yeltsin, the primitive accumulation of capitalist restoration would result in a truly barbaric gutting of what remained of the gains of the October Revolution. Stutje, acknowledging that Mandel "did not succeed in grasping the nature of the world in which he'd reached old age", avoids confronting the extent to which what he designates Mandel's "optimism" was itself a reflection of a political wavering on the fundamental Trotskyist principles that he claimed to have espoused his entire life (p. 260).

## INTELLECTUAL PRODUCTIONS

If Stutje skirts the political, so too does he often give Mandel's ideals, expressed in his many books and articles, a surprisingly wide berth. Those looking to this biography for an intellectual history of Mandel's contributions to Marxist political economy may well feel shortchanged.

Take the all-too-brief ten-page chapter on Mandel's two-volume *Marxist Economic Theory*, for instance. It describes the book in outline, but then concentrates on the personal connections of Mandel with mentors and friends associated with the writing of the book, especially Roman Rosdolsky, whose comradely response was nonetheless resolutely critical. The difficulties in publishing the study are recounted, the reviews are listed, some correspondence with friends is cited. There is more in a chapter on "The Worlds of Politics and Scholarship", but not enough to temper the criticism that Mandel's writing is reduced to descriptive phrases, rather than engaged with and elaborated upon.

In abbreviated passages on Mandel's *Late Capitalism* and his writing on long wave theory, Stutje relies on correspondence in the Mandel archives to

stress that a number of colleagues thought these texts inadequately developed and in need of a more coherent presentation. Published criticism in *New Left Review* and *Historical Materialism* is drawn upon, but what seems missing is an appreciation of the extent to which, in the 1970s, this work broke new and creative ground in suggesting how the long boom of post-World-War-II capitalist expansion set the stage on which the Keynesian welfare state emerged. Yet capitalism could never make itself immune from the endemic crises that invariably punctuate its regimes of accumulation and restructure the politics, ideology, and culture of an epoch.

Mandel's studies of late capitalism and long waves thus creatively set the stage for appreciations of the material context of class struggle from the 1970s to the present, providing Marxists with a rare political economy of oscillation that has proven useful in explaining the episodic nature of workers' uprisings. In addition, as the Marxist cultural critic, Frederic Jameson, suggested in drawing on Mandel, the ideological wellsprings of late capitalism have the capacity to revive obfuscations at the point that the material relations of class seem to demand a war of opposing interests, masking the necessity of class struggle in a proliferating pyrotechnics of aesthetic productions.

Stutje touches down on little of this. He suggests that as much as Mandel's writings in these spheres sparkled, they too often lapsed into monocausal explanation (the rate of profit) or failed to "yield the promised synthesis" (p. 140). He seems content to call into question Mandel's formulations as incapable of differentiating capitalist continuity and the breaks that separate specific periods of capitalist development. It is entirely possible, however, that no such divide need be imposed on Mandel's framework, which is able to accommodate appreciation of the *essential* continuities of capitalist regimes of accumulation *and* the *particularities* of epochs governed by important and determinate changes.

As his friend and critic Rosdolsky would suggest to Mandel, Marx's method was dialectical and was able to grasp the nature of change within seeming stasis. The difficulty was, as Mandel's life work revealed, to know when and how to push the change struggling within capitalism's confines in directions of revolutionary transformation. This was the task of the Fourth International and its various post-1953 incarnations, but the realization of this end was balanced precariously on the difficult subjective struggle to cultivate and develop a revolutionary leadership capable of intervening in the inevitable crises of capitalism. But what produced such crises? It would be useful to have an assessment of this question in light of Mandel's writing, one that addressed the material significance of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the impact of combined and uneven development during late capitalism's intensified global reach. One of Mandel's last books, *Trotsky as Alternative* (1992), provides an opportunity to develop such a discussion, but the study receives only a few lines of rather idiosyncratic comment in *A Rebel's Dream Deferred*.

## **THE BALANCE SHEET**

The biography of a Marxist like Mandel, who struggled all of his life to keep the possibility of revolutionary advance alive, is a tremendously difficult undertaking. Invariably, the biographer, who is drawn to his subject not out of some “great-man” understanding of historical process, but in the belief that a specific individual can, if properly situated within his or her historical context, cast light on an era and the subject’s areas of influence, brings together the private and the public. How these spheres are balanced well so that they *develop* understanding is a delicate art, and one far more difficult than most social historians, many of whom disparage biography, allow.

The presentation of the social, a shorthand for private life, is indeed well developed in this book, and sympathetic readers will rightly find much in Stutje’s pages that brings Mandel to life in new ways, not all of them pleasant for political readers to grapple with. This is to the good. The book, as a consequence, has a substantive feel for Mandel as a person, which is one reason that some of the strongest parts of the book outline his early years, when relations with his father and his intrepid struggles against fascism provide fascinating background to his later development. As Mandel becomes increasingly important in the history of late capitalism’s communist left opposition, necessitating deep understanding of his ideas, the politics of the Fourth International, and its post-1953 Secretariats that Mandel headed, however, much is passed over too casually and quickly. Stutje ends up masking what Mandel, in his own writing and mobilizing efforts, also obscured: the ISFI/USec’s substitutionist politic, a perpetually unraveling thread running through Mandel’s political life from the 1950s to his death in 1995. [4]

Who cannot, on some levels, empathize with Stutje? It is difficult to see how he could have adequately dealt with Mandel’s life, his writings and theoretical contribution, *and* his politics in anything less than a multi-volume study. And this is neither what publishers want nor many in the reading public welcome.

Yet it is what Mandel deserves. It is what is needed. For as critical as it is necessary to be about this formidable figure in the history of late capitalism’s small but pivotally important army of dedicated, conscious grave-diggers, there is no denying Mandel’s immense contribution and courage, both of which were evident as early as the 1930s and 1940s, when the ideals of his youth moved him to acts of sacrifice and daring. As he matured, his contributions shifted gears, and the nature of his intellectual work revived Marxist appreciation of the centrality of materialist, economic theorizing. Yet Mandel was much more than a man of words: he revered revolutionary possibility, and was willing to bank much, too much, on insurrectionary impulse. He was exhilarated by struggle, whether on the urban barricades or in the jungle; he would not renounce those who were in the fight, when so many others were not. This drew him to the New Left, but it compromised him time and time again. If Mandel never dichotomized the organizational imperatives of the revolutionary left and the analytic richness of Marxist thought, he was too willing to champion the rebel who had insufficient grounding in either. At times (too many times some

will proclaim loudly) this revolutionary giant had toes of clay. Nonetheless, he still stood tall among those who have kept the hopes of revolution alive in the inauspicious times of our epoch. His dream may have been deferred, but all of us who see similarly what might be if only the workers of the world could break their ever entangled chains, owe Mandel much. A respectful deference is Mandel's due, albeit in ways always critical, and never yielding the primacy of the political.

### **Bryan Palmer**

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### **P.S.**

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### **Footnotes**

[1] This reiterates a view first put forward in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921* (London, 1964), p. 498.

[2] See Ernest Mandel, "The Dialectic of Class and Region in Belgium", *New Left Review*, 20 (Summer 1963), pp. 5-31.

[3] See Isaac Deutscher, *Russia After Stalin* (London, 1969), esp. pp. 96, 164.

[4] Note the parody of Mandel and the USec in Tariq Ali, *Redemption* (London, 1990), pp. 214-216, which presents a Mandel-like figure advocating deep entry into the world's religious institutions, so that the Trotskyist vanguard could eventually "occupy the Vatican", electing a Pope, while securing as well positions as cardinals, ayatollahs, and rabbis.