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Ernest Mandel (1923-1995)

The work of Ernest Mandel, a significant legacy for revolutionary combat in the 21st century

Monday 20 July 2020, by [KELLNER Manuel](#) (Date first published: 20 July 2020).

Ernest Mandel (1923-1995), who died a quarter of a century ago, has left us a significant theoretical legacy. It is unavoidable for anyone who wishes to make a balance sheet of the 20th century and contribute to the elaboration of revolutionary perspectives for the 21st century.

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The red thread of Ernest Mandel's thought, the axis around which both his writings and his life as a revolutionary militant turned, was the united self-activity and democratic self-organisation of the working class: the keystone for a universal human emancipation. The central idea of his contributions concerning the strategy of combat for a classless society, and at the same time the quintessence of his vision of the socialist democracy to come at the world level, stemmed from his critiques of capitalism and other coercive contemporary systems. The internationalism of Ernest Mandel was organic, linked to the centre of his preoccupations and inseparable from his commitment to the interests of the employees, the oppressed, dispossessed and all those left behind.

That also explains why Ernest Mandel wrote on so many subjects. His remarkable biography by Jan Willem Stutje shows us the man and his devotion to the revolutionary cause as well as to the construction of our Fourth International. [1] The collection of talks given at the 1999 seminar in Amsterdam on his contribution to Marxist theory, edited by Gilbert Achcar, is rich in lessons. [2] My book on his theoretical work, based essentially but not solely on the appraisal of his writings, gives an overall view of his theoretical contribution while discussing its strengths and weaknesses. [3]

Critique of political economy

Mandel's *Marxist Economic Theory*, published in 1962 (completed in May 1960) sought to demonstrate "that it is possible, on the basis of the scientific data of contemporary science, to

reconstitute the whole economic system of Karl Marx". [4] The wealth of references to a great number of publications from various areas of the social and human sciences supported his line of argument on what remains relevant in Karl Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production – in spite of the long term economic expansion of the post-war period.

In this work, as in others dealing with the same subject and in his numerous "Introductions" to the works of Marx and his successors, Mandel distanced himself from the scholastic pseudo-Marxist approach of "proving" Marx had been right with waves of quotations. Also, Mandel was in no way tempted to treat the categories of Marx's critique of political economy as data which flow logically and in a dogmatic manner from one to the other. His ambition was to synthesise economic history and economic theory; to show that it was there that we should see the strength of Marx's approach. For example, he developed the labour theory of value on the basis of pre-capitalist examples of the appropriation of surplus product by a dominant class.

The great advantage of this method is didactic. I know a certain number of contemporaries who, like myself, have had access to Marx's *Capital* through the reading of Mandel's writings. Mandel's style was the illustration of his arguments by a great number of concrete examples. That is why he was very easy to understand and convincing in his writings as in the presentations he made in educational courses, seminars or political meetings. In the preface to his *Late Capitalism*, he details and defends his "genetic-historic" method, while relativizing it a little, because he accepted the critique of having been too "descriptive" in *Marxist Economic Theory*. [5]

Mandel was not the partisan of a determinist conception of historical-dialectical materialism. He spoke of "partially autonomous variables" determining the evolution of the capitalist mode of production. He explained why this mode of production appeared first in the countries of Western Europe, not because of general "laws" of historic development, but because certain specificities, certain preconditions, were met there at a moment in history. For example, the gold looted in Latin America strengthened the possibilities of accumulation of money capital and the total separation of a significant part of the population from its means of production, allowing massive investment in the exploitation of the labour force. In China, these preconditions were not met and thus – even if certain technologies were more developed than in Europe – the capitalist mode of production was not able to develop.

Written in German and published in 1972, *Late Capitalism* (*Spätkapitalismus*) is considered as Mandel's magnum opus. To situate this work it is necessary to remember that at that time we were still far from neoliberal hegemony. The dominant ideology presented apologetics for the capitalist system by suggesting that the obvious contradictions of this mode of production were things of the past: state intervention had proved able to control crises, the standard of living of many employees had visibly improved, the countries of the "third world" had the chance to catch up with the level of the rich countries, the progress of social security systems had overcome the tendencies to pauperisation of the broad masses.

In this context, Mandel explained that the contradictions of capitalist class society had not been overcome but would explode still more powerfully in the near future. He analysed the concrete changes of the functioning of this post-war capitalism which was, for him, a new period in the context of the monopolistic or imperialist capitalism analysed by Lenin.

Mandel also contributed to the explanation of the destructive crises of capitalist overproduction which appear regularly – proof of the failure of the capitalist system and a good example of the strength of Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production. His original contribution was the rejection of mono-causal explanations – such as the theory of under-consumption or that of the disproportion between the great departments of production, or again the overaccumulation of

capital. In his synthesis, the fluctuations of the rate of profit play an important role. Mandel did not just study the explanatory force of the different approaches, but also their role in the struggle between the working class and capital. For example, the theorisation of underconsumption served the reformist leadership to limit themselves to increasing the purchasing power of the masses, supposedly sufficient to combat the crisis. But if wages rose, profits fell... which would hardly encourage capitalist investment. The theories of the disproportion between the different sectors of production for their part stemmed from the “anarchy” of capitalist production. Here again, this was used as an argument for a “super-holding” so as to overcome the effects of competition on investment decisions. Finally, over-accumulation was used as an argument by capital to increase the production of surplus-value. A “Marxist version” of this kind of theory presupposes an unemployment rate of virtually zero over a very long period, which is utopian in the capitalist mode of production.

The other side of the coin is the function of cyclical crises. From the viewpoint of capital, these are crises of “cleaning”, in a convulsive way bringing prices back to real values in a manner in which only the strongest enterprises and capitals remain in place, to the detriment of the weakest, who disappear. The tendency to the concentration and centralisation of capital is thus realised, in a catastrophic manner, through its crises.

Ernest Mandel was one of the rare Marxist theorists to have theorised the “long waves” of capitalism: these periods of general expansionary or depressive tendencies, which each contain several cycles of shorter length. But whereas the conjunctural crises of industrial cycles contain in themselves the germ of economic revival, Mandel argued that the long periods of depressive tendency did not contain the elements necessary to the return to a period of an expansionary character. For that, exogenous factors are needed, extra-economic and generally of a political character. Thus, for example, the secular defeat of the working class leading to the Second World War as well as the catastrophic destruction caused by the latter allowed a spectacular rise of surplus-value, to the detriment of employees, thus providing the bases for the post-war expansionary period.

In a certain sense, following Marx, Ernest Mandel also spoke of the coming “collapse” (*Zusammenbruch*) of the capitalist mode of production, when the latter seemed to be at the height of its success. But he did not believe in an economic mechanism leading by itself to such a collapse. Indeed he stressed that if the employees and oppressed were defeated and were unable to oppose the inhuman treatment that capitalism would impose on them, then the latter could pull through – theoretically – but at the price of falling into global barbarism. Instead of a purely economic collapse, Mandel defended the idea of a global multiform crisis, which included the crisis of the system of political and ideological domination of the capitalist class. A structural crisis whose result is either socialism or the end of human civilisation.

Socialism

Basing himself in this respect on the writings of Marx and on the terms of the debates of the Russian Bolsheviks and the young Communist International during the revolution, Ernest Mandel considered that socialism was a society without classes and thus without a state – without this coercive armed apparatus raised above of society. In such a society, conceived as the first phase of communism, the domination of human over human would give way to the common management of things, of the material goods of society, by the freely associated producers. Commodities and money would no longer be a quasi-natural force subjecting humans, the market economy would be in the process of disappearing to increasingly give way to a common management aimed at satisfying needs. As for communism, it would be – as Marx had sketched it – a society in which the freedom of each would be

the condition for the freedom of all: not an “end of history” but on the contrary the real beginning of the history of humanity liberated from all the atrocities of a past characterised by exploitation, oppression and violence.

According to Mandel, to arrive at socialism it was necessary that the working class, by mobilising all the oppressed layers, take power into its hands and appropriate the productive forces developed by capitalism at the world level to manage them and transform them in its own interest. The political system appropriate for this would be a socialist democracy, the sole form of domination of the working class (Marx and Engels identified the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the Paris Commune of 1871 – an outline if such existed of the most flourishing democracy) capable at the same time of effectively combatting the resistance of the possessing classes to their expropriation and of installing a democratic planning. It would still be a state, but a state which carried within itself from the beginning the germ of its own withering away, thus preparing the development of a society without classes, “socialist” in the full sense of the word.

Of course, what revolutionaries call the “transitional society” (to socialism) – which begins to exist directly after the seizure of power by the working class – is of more interest to ordinary people than the utopia of the hoped for situation which will emerge from it after some decades. And on that point, Mandel was very explicit: from the beginning, this society of transition to socialism should visibly improve the lot of employees and the broad masses. Not only guaranteeing broader democratic liberties than any possible bourgeois parliamentary democratic republic, but also providing a solid material base allowing the masses to truly exercise their democratic rights, participating in bodies of self-management and in the political decision making processes. For Mandel, this involved a general radical reduction of working time, along with an appreciable standard of living for all. In such a transitional society, a plurality of parties and thus political options would be needed as well as independent mass organisations and associations, starting with trade unions.

Searching for a weak point in Mandel’s argument, we quickly come across the problem of these “material bases” necessary to realise this emancipatory progress. In reading the chapter dealing with this problem in *Marxist Economic Theory* – written, let us recall, at the very beginning of the 1960s – what catches the eye is that Mandel was then far from being as conscious of ecological problems as he was to become during the 1980s (not to mention the positions of the Fourth International today). In the sources of a socialist accumulation mentioned by Mandel in the early 1960s, nuclear power and the extensive development of agriculture with the aid of chemical fertiliser are cited, something he would not have written later on.

It should certainly be kept in mind that Mandel’s concept of liberation is strongly linked to a relative abundance of resources of consumption, without which a distribution of consumption goods in non-commodity form is conceivable only with a system of rationing. For it amounts not only to the satisfaction of elementary needs, but at the same time a radical reduction of working time. If many forms of productions are to be eliminated to save the climate and the earth, if energy production should be significantly reduced, if agrarian production must function without monocultures, labour productivity will not be spectacularly increased. But without a radical reduction of working time and material wellbeing for everyone, socialist democracy will not function. All this should then be rethought.

Strategy

Inside the capitalist system, the democratic self-organisation of employees develops through

collective struggle against capital and its state. Mandel invites us to conceive a struggle which extends and generalises, as in Wallonia in 1960-1961. It is in fact the idea of an insurrectionary general strike. The very necessities of the struggle, if it is led in a consistent manner, lead to the extension of the movement and the multiplication of the tasks that it sets itself, including those linked to public safety. The democratically elected organs of the strikers begin to contest rights of sovereignty and legitimate representation with the organs of the bourgeois state. In this way simple strike committees can develop to become councils, "soviets", that is the organs of an alternative state emerging from below. There thus appears first a situation of dual power, which after a certain period of time must be resolved, either in the sense of the re-establishment of the full authority of the bourgeois state, or that of the conquest of power by the democratically centralised councils.

Politically, the working class is not homogeneous. In normal times, revolutionaries only represent a minority within it. In the context of a broad united self-activity developed in the class struggle, times are not normal. The working class masses do not learn very much in passivity and atomisation but learn a great deal quickly from when they create spaces of self-determined collective activity. The revolutionary current must seek, in the context of such a broad movement, to win increasing support for its general ideas and its practical proposals so that they can win majority support in the councils.

To achieve this, revolutionaries must seek to apply a whole arsenal of strategic concepts elaborated by the Communist movement in the early 1920s, lost under the reign of Stalinism, but preserved and updated constantly by the Fourth International:

- The policy of the united front: common action with the reformist parties and organisations for concrete goals and demands.
- Transitional demands: they start from the consciousness and problems experienced by the mass of workers to propose solidarity-based solutions (like the reduction of working time without loss of wages, with proportional hiring and workers' control over working conditions, a ban on lay-offs and so on) which are, in their dynamic, incompatible with the capitalist system.
- The construction of a revolutionary party: this latter would bring together the broad social and working class vanguard, all those who lead the struggle constantly, and not only at times of uprisings of the broad masses.
- The organisation of memory and reflection at the national and international levels, so that the experiences lived through in a period of a rise of the movement are not lost in a period of reflux and can then inform the orientation of new surges in the mass movement.

Ernest Mandel's socialist strategy was organically internationalist. He argued for the appraisal of the political and social situation starting from the world level, its markets, its coercive resources, the crying inequalities that capitalism deepens, but also the potentialities of resistance, the various movements of an emancipatory character at the international level. For poor and dependent countries, he defended the strategy of permanent revolution, for which the tasks of the democratic revolution and the assertion of national sovereignty as well as a radical agrarian reform could not be led to the end by bourgeois forces and hence necessitated the seizure of power by the working class allied to the mass of oppressed and dispossessed layers, thus inserting itself in the process of world socialist revolution.

Analysis of the bureaucracy

The workers' mass organisations (associations, trade unions, parties) created inside of capitalism cannot do without full timers. Organisers, journalists, professional politicians and so on are needed so that such organisations as well as their parliamentary representation can function. Ernest Mandel

was very much conscious of this. But he stressed the price to be paid for it: the ascent of a privileged bureaucratic layer inside the workers' organisations which developed specific interests and became increasingly conservative. It links up with the more affluent layers of the salariat, hates the revolution "like fire" (Friedrich Ebert), and channels and sabotages the movement which could challenge the "routinist" rhythms of the capitalist domination of society.

Against these bureaucracies, Mandel proposed the construction of left, class struggle currents, especially inside the trade unions, which offered alternative strategic choices and personnel to the conservative-reformist orientations of the bureaucratic leaderships. It was clear for him that the left alternatives could only succeed in the context of broad and combative mass movements. The first task of revolutionaries is then to do all they can to promote, encourage and support any momentum of collective self-activity of the employees and the oppressed. The mass workers' organisations, inside capitalism, were for Mandel double-edged instruments: unavoidable to confront the power of the employers, their associations and their parties, and at the same time seeking to limit the struggles solely to demands for real wages, better working conditions, better social protection in the context of capitalism. Thus self-limited, these organisations often renounce going beyond solely symbolic success. To make them into effective instruments in the sense of the immediate interests of the employees, it is necessary to organise to break them from their policy of class collaboration and social peace.

The bureaucracies of the trade unions and workers' parties, more or less adapted to the bourgeois parliamentary democratic states, maintain a mode of organisation which is more or less authoritarian and undemocratic, smothering rank and file initiatives, fiercely combating left opponents. The bureaucratic regimes of the party-states merged in power, in the countries of so-called "actually existing socialism", were outright oppressors. The bureaucratisation of the USSR had brought to power Stalin's faction which was the appropriate representative of this bureaucratic privileged layer. To defend its material interests, this bureaucracy sought above all to break with the revolutionary past of Bolshevism and with the very idea of world revolution. That is why the concept of "socialism in one country" and a policy of state power replaced the strategy of permanent revolution and consistent internationalism of the young Communist International.

The revolutionary Marxist critique of these regimes is not the same as the critique made by the bourgeois ideologues. Certainly, the terrible crimes of Stalin and his clique should be denounced, but at the same time the clearly conservative character of the "official Communism" established under the reign of Stalin should be understood.

To characterise these states, Mandel rested above all on the analyses of Trotsky, while enriching them by recognising new tendencies. The term "bureaucratically degenerated workers' state" irritates. Already Trotsky did not greatly like it and used it in the absence of anything better. Indeed, what is the meaning of a workers' state (even strongly bureaucratised), where the working class does not exercise power and is also deprived of elementary democratic rights?

Mandel's main argument, following Trotsky, was the fact that certain conquests of the October 1917 revolution remained in place: neither the means of production nor labour power were commodities; the law of value and the market did not dominate the economy, which was planned; the state still held the monopoly of foreign trade. These were non-capitalist societies of transition to socialism, although bureaucratically petrified. It was necessary then, at the level of tasks, to combine the defence of the non-capitalist elements against any attempt at the restoration of capitalism from inside or outside with the revolutionary overthrow of the political power of the bureaucracy to return to a socialist democracy of the councils.

The process of the rupture of Stalinist monolithism and the crisis of Stalinism, then of post-Stalinism

was encouraging for Mandel and for the Fourth International, but also full of theoretical and programmatic challenges. After the collapse of the USSR and allied or similar regimes in Europe, Mandel strongly welcomed the fall of the Stalinist “dead weight”, and he saw already opened a revolutionary process in the sense of the hoped-for political revolution and a return of the aspiration to an authentic socialist democracy at the level of the masses. There were signs going in this sense, Mandel’s hopes were broken on the reality of the process of capitalist restoration and the triumphant victory of the capitalist “West” in the “Cold War”, which was obviously a sizeable defeat for the working class at the planetary level.

In his great book on bureaucracy, *Power and Money* Mandel wrote, in a self-critical manner, that “revolutionary Marxism” (and hence himself) had underestimated the devastating effects of decades of Stalinist and post-Stalinist reign on workers’ consciousness. It had also overestimated the potential of resistance to the restoration of capitalism inside the dominant bureaucracy itself. [6] These are significant elements, but they do not suffice to put an end to this debate.

The truly original chapter of this book concerns “substitutionism” and it is of a very special interest for revolutionaries. For if the substitutionist ideology is characteristic of the leaderships of the big bureaucratic apparatuses – who seek to justify their constant tendency to act in the name of and in place of the employees – revolutionary leaders, in certain circumstances, are also tempted by substitutionism. Mandel gives some convincing examples of this not only for Lenin and Trotsky, but also for Luxemburg and Gramsci! And he shows that it is the degree of autonomous activity of the working class and the oppressed which is the determinant factor. If this degree is very low, substitutionism of every kind (parliamentary, caudillist, terrorist, propagandist and so on) often takes place. And Mandel concludes from this once again that the main task of revolutionaries is to do all they can to promote, encourage and promote the self-activity of the working class and the oppressed masses in general.

To debate

The theoretical contribution of Ernest Mandel is too rich to be subjected to a critical examination in a few lines. I will have to limit myself to raising three questions and invite the reading of my book. A question which goes to the heart of revolutionary Marxism is whether the actuality of the world socialist revolution remains in the 21st century, and whether the working class has lost its potential to lead such a revolutionary process. Already Trotsky had expressed some doubts here in arguing that if the Soviet working class proved incapable of overthrowing the regime of the bureaucracy to re-establish its own class power, the transitional programme would lose its meaning and should be replaced by a new minimum programme for the defence of the elementary interests of the masses reduced to slavery. And today? The proof has not been made that the reconstruction of a revolutionary and emancipatory workers’ movement remains possible. New breakthroughs, starting with the rise of the PT in Brazil in the early 1980s have regularly foundered, until now.

The Marxism of Ernest Mandel merits discussion. What was his dialectic between an “open” Marxism which at the same time leaned towards certain orthodoxies (“Marxist”, “Leninist”, “Trotskyist”)? Was his search for an overall doctrinal coherences linked to the need to safeguard and strengthen his own relatively small organisation? It should be said in passing that his Marxism – in philosophical terms his worldview (*Weltanschauung*) – borrowed much from the writings of popularisation of Engels and of Plekhanov, who had more or less invented the “Marxist doctrine”. It was also a Promethean Marxism of the classic workers’ movement linked to a strong belief in social, technological and scientific progress and in the creative potentiality of the working class, capable of resolving the most difficult problems.

Ernest Mandel didn't like the fact that it was often said of him that he was too "optimistic". He had acquired a strong confidence in himself in predicting the developments of the 1960s and 1970s which actually happened – not all of them, but nonetheless – in a fairly convincing manner. He was always on the lookout for the development of movements with emancipatory potential anywhere in the world. Sometimes he overestimated the revolutionary potentials, or underestimated the difficulties.

Already, at the age of 23, he saw Abraham Léon as a model when he encouraged his comrades to "see behind each reason for despair a reason for hope". How was it possible to lead the revolutionary combat against Nazism and war at the height of midnight in the 20th century and at the same time keep one's humanist élan without such an admirable moral force? At his point it is customary to quote Antonio Gramsci. For a bit of a change, I will conclude by citing Robert Merle who said of his male hero, the delphinologist Sevilla: "He was not naive enough to think that a cause triumphs because it is right, but he could not afford the luxury of being pessimistic". [7]

Manuel Kellner

P.S.

- International Viewpoint. Monday 20 July 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6733>

Footnotes

[1] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, Verso 2009.

[2] Gilbert Achcar (ed.), *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel*, Verso 2000.

[3] Manuel Kellner, *Gegen Kapitalismus und Bürokratie – zur sozialistischen Strategie bei Ernest Mandel*, Neuer isp-Verlag, Karlsruhe/Köln 2010. An English translation – *Against Capitalism and Bureaucracy: Ernest Mandel's socialist strategy* – will be published this year by Brill & Haymarket books in the "Historical Materialism" series.

[4] Ernest Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory*, Merlin Press 1977 (Introduction, page 17).

[5] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, Verso 1999.

[6] Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money, A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy*, Verso, London-New York 1992.

[7] Robert Merle, *The Day of the Dolphin*, Fawcett, 1977.