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Thirty years after: A critical introduction to the Marxism of Ernest Mandel

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Ernest Mandel's *Introduction au marxisme* ["Introduction to Marxism" titled in English *From Class Society to Communism*] has been and remains for many activists a reference work. Thirty years after its publication, in 1974, Daniel Bensaïd looks back at one of the most read book of Mandel.

The first edition by the Fondation Léon Lesoil of this *Introduction to Marxism* [1] dates from 1974. The date is not without importance. After the "oil shock" of 1973, Ernest Mandel was undoubtedly one of the first to diagnose the exhaustion of the post war boom and predict the reversal of the long wave of growth which followed the Second World War [2].

The debates inside the European left and workers' movement nonetheless remained marked by the illusion of an unlimited progress guaranteed by a Keynesian compromise and a "Welfare State". This optimistic vision of historical development gave the parliamentary left and the trade union apparatuses the hope of socialism at a tortoise pace, respectful of existing institutions while awaiting the political majority to join the social majority, in countries where – as illustrated in May '68 by the greatest general strike in history – waged labour represented for the first time two thirds of the active population. Mandel's Introduction is not then a text out of its time.

If it is still valid today for its pedagogic qualities in the presentation of the genesis of capitalism, the functioning of the economy, cyclical crises, combined and unequal development and so on, it nonetheless has a polemical dimension, of which certain essential elements have been amply confirmed by the thirty years which have passed since its publication:

- The logic of capitalism does not tend to a progressive reduction of inequalities, indeed to their extinction. If these inequalities had seemed to decline in the post-war period, it is not because of the generosity of a compassionate capitalism, but a social relationship of forces emerging from the war and the resistance, the wave of colonial revolutions, and the great fear which the ruling classes had experienced during the 1930s and the Liberation. Since the beginning, in the 1980s, of neoliberal counter-reform, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has recorded from year to year a growth of inequalities, not only between countries of the South and the North but also between the richest and the poorest even inside the developed countries, and between the sexes despite the conquests of women's struggles. Not only were "the social state" and the "mixed economy" not eternal, not only were they not the solution finally found to the contradictions and crises of capitalism, but nothing, contrary to reformist illusions, is definitively won for workers as long as the possessors hold ownership of the great means of production and the levers of power. Thatcher and Reagan would not be slow to demonstrate it. And George W. Bush confirms in his manner that the epoch remains that of wars and revolutions.

- Private ownership of the means of production, exchange, communication, far from being diluted by popular share ownership, is undergoing an unprecedented concentration, and it exerts the corresponding effective power, not only in the economic sphere, but in the political and media sphere. For anyone who has not renounced the urgent necessity of “changing the world” the radical transformation of property relations in the sense of social appropriation remains just as decisive as at the time of the *Communist Manifesto*. And it is still truer at a time of globalisation, where capital commodifies everything, where the privatisation of the world extends to education, health, living organisms, knowledge and space.

- If the state is not longer solely a “band of armed men” or the “night watchman state”, if it fulfils sophisticated and complex functions within social reproduction, an “ideological function” as Mandel stresses, it is not for all that one relation of power among others (domestic, cultural, symbolic). It remains very much the guarantor and lock of power relations, the “boa constrictor” which hugs society in its multiple rings. So it is still necessary to open the road to its withering away as a specialised apparatus separated from society. All the revolutions of the 20th century, both victories and defeats, have confirmed this major lesson of the Paris Commune.

In spite of this verified pertinence, Mandel’s *Introduction to Marxism* is marked by certain silences. The 1970s saw a new planetary rise of the movements for women’s emancipation. The Fourth International adopted an important programmatic document on the question at its 11th world congress in 1979. However, in Mandel’s text gender relations occupy at best a marginal place. In the same way, whereas ecological concerns came to the forefront notably following the movements against nuclear power stations or the Three Mile Island disaster, they are practically absent from the first edition of this *Introduction*.

That can probably be explained — but not justified — by the humanist and Promethean optimism which then coexisted for Mandel with an undisputable lucidity on the ambivalence of technical progress and the threat of barbarism.

This incoherence –or this contradiction – is confirmed by the role that he attributes, when responding to the challenges of the transition to a socialist society, to what I call “the joker of abundance”. : “An egalitarian society founded on abundance, there is the goal of socialism”. This march to abundance implies a growth of productive forces and the productivity of labour allowing a massive reduction of working time. If that is true in general terms, again it is necessary, under pain of falling into blind productivism and ecological insouciance, to subject these productive forces themselves to a critical examination. Incidentally, the notion of abundance is highly problematic. The supposition of an absolute abundance and of a saturation of natural needs indeed appears as a loophole before the necessity of establishing priorities and choices in the allocation of limited resources: how to allocate to health, education, housing, transport, how to decide the localisation of these investments and so on? Is there a natural limit to needs in the area of health or education? Like abundance, the needs are historic and social, thus relative.

One can consider rightly that the logic of commodity consumption arouses and nourishes artificial needs, luxuries, unnecessary, which a socialist society could very well do without. But the step from this to preaching austerity and frugality to the poor is one that certain ideologues of zero growth do not hesitate to cross. Who can distinguish between true and false needs, the good and the bad? Certainly not a group of experts, but the democratic arbitration of associated producers and users.

Indeed the recourse to the joker of abundance allows the avoidance, or at least simplification, not only of the question of social priorities in an ecosystem subject to limits and thresholds, but also that of democratic institutions in a society in transition to socialism. It is certainly not about demanding a democratic utopia delivered with the preconceived plans of a perfect city, but rather stressing the

decisive importance of democratic forms in a society where the withering away of the state is in no way synonymous with a withering way of politics in the simple “administration of things” (as has been suggested by a formula unhappily borrowed - by Engels notably - from Saint-Simon).

One cannot reproach Mandel for this under-estimation, to the extent that he was the main writer of the resolution “Socialist Democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat”, adopted in 1979 by the 11th world congress of the Fourth International. But the fact is that his insistence on the theme of abundance tends to relativise the role of politics to the profit of a technical management of distribution without limits: “employees should replace the remuneration of labour by free access to all the goods necessary to the satisfaction of the needs of the producers.

Only in a society which ensures to humanity such an abundance of goods can a new social consciousness be born”. It is right that he held this question of “free access”, not only to certain health or educational services, but to basic needs in foodstuff or clothing, particularly close to his heart. It follows from the decommmodification of the world and a veritable revolution in consciousness, for the first time putting an end to the biblical curse obliging humanity to win its bread “by the sweat of its brow”.

Thus Mandel insisted: “Such abundance of goods is in no way utopian, on condition that it is introduced gradually, and starting from a progressive rationalisation of human needs, emancipated from the constraints of competition, the hunt for private enrichment, and the manipulation by advertising intended to create a state of permanent dissatisfaction among individuals. Thus the progress in living standards has already created a situation of saturation of consumption in bread, potatoes, vegetables, some fruits, indeed milk, and fat and pork products among the poorest section of the population of the imperialist countries. A similar tendency can be seen among undergarments, shoes, basic furniture and so on. All these products could be progressively freely distributed, without the intervention of money, and without involving significant increases in collective expenditure”.

This logic of free access as the condition for the partial withering away of monetary relations remains current. The accent put on the conditions of “saturation of consumption” for the least poor part of the population in the richest countries leaves however in the shadows the weight of planetary inequalities and the relation of production to demographic evolution. The notion of “progressive rationalisation of human needs”, although pertinent to the critique of the mode of life induced by capitalist competition, should not be confused with that of abundance, unless it is an abundance relative to a given state of social development which does not dispense with criteria and priorities in the use and distribution of wealth. Politics, and thus “socialist democracy” and not “the administration of things”, remains then necessary to the validation of needs and to the fashion of satisfying them.

The most dated part of the 1974 *Introduction*, which most badly withstands the test of time and the events of the last quarter of a century is undoubtedly that concerning Stalinism and its crisis. Mandel here takes up the essentials of the analysis of the Left Opposition and Trotsky on the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the USSR and on its reasons: “The reappearance of increased social inequality in the USSR of today can be basically explained by the poverty of Russia immediately after the revolution, by the insufficiency of the level of development of productive forces, by isolation and the defeat of the revolution in Europe during the period of 1918-1923”. This approach had the merit of stressing the social and historic conditions of the bureaucratic gangrene, unlike the currently fashionable reactionary historiography, typified by among others the Black Book of Communism - for which great historic dramas are only the mechanical result of what had germinated in the fertile minds of Marx or Lenin, when not simply “the fault of Rousseau”. Serious contemporary research backed up by the opening of the Soviet archives (that of Moshe Lewin notably) confirms to a large extent the method of Mandel and sheds light on the different stages of

the bureaucratic reaction in the Soviet Union.

Mandel takes up the classic analysis of the bureaucracy in the tradition of the Left Opposition to Stalinism: the bureaucracy is not “a new dominant class”; it “plays no indispensable role in the process of production”; it is “a privileged layer which has usurped the exercise of the functions of management in the Soviet economy and state, and on the basis of this monopoly of power granted itself lavish advantages in the area of consumption”. Although debatable (the definition of classes – in the broad and historic sense, or in the sense specific to modern societies – is not clearly established by Marx himself) the distinction between fundamental classes and bureaucratic caste strives to analyse the singularity of an unprecedented phenomenon. It avoids the simplification of characterising the Soviet Union or China as “countries of socialism” requiring an unconditional fidelity, or inversely identifying them simply as an eastern version of western imperialisms.

But Mandel goes further. The bureaucracy is only a “privileged social layer of the proletariat”. As such, “it remains opposed to the reestablishment of capitalism in the USSR which would destroy the very foundations of its privileges”. The Soviet Union remains then “as in the days following the October revolution a society in transition between capitalism and socialism; capitalism can be restored there, but at the price of a social counter-revolution; the power of the workers can be restored there, but at the price of a political revolution which breaks the monopoly of the exercise of power in the hands of the bureaucracy.”

Yet, by the 1970s, too much water had flowed under the bridges of history, and too many crimes had been committed, to claim such a continuity between the Soviet society of Brezhnev and the “the days following the October revolution”. As for the ruling bureaucracy, it would not be slow in demonstrating that it was not such a determined “adversary” to the restoration of capitalism.

Even taking into account the didactic intention, this passage from the Introduction does not stand up to the test of time. On the one hand, in reducing the bureaucracy to a functional excrescence of the proletariat, Mandel excludes the hypothesis of its transformation into a dominant class in its own right. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the velvet revolutions in eastern Europe have shown on the contrary that a substantial fraction of the bureaucracy can, on the basis of a “primitive bureaucratic accumulation” ripen into a gangster bourgeoisie. On the other hand the not very dialectical conception of the bureaucracy as “parasitic excrescence of the proletariat” underpins a debatable alternative between social counter-revolution and political revolution.

The hypothesis of a restoration of capitalism as “social counter-revolution” evokes in effect a symmetry between the events of the October revolution and this counter-revolution. Indeed, and this is the interest of the analogic notion of Thermidor, a counter-revolution is not a revolution in the opposite direction (a revolution reversed), but the contrary of a revolution, not a symmetrical event to the revolutionary event, but a process. In this sense, the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the Soviet Union certainly began in the 1920s and the collapse of the Soviet Union is only the final episode.

If it is necessary, in the light of the last twenty years, to criticize Mandel’s reading of the situation, that should not prevent us from recognising that it had its uses in providing an orientation in the tumults of the century. It should also be recognised that it led to errors of appreciation, notably on the meaning of perestroika under Gorbachev or that of the fall of the Berlin wall. Having identified in “the decline of the international revolution after 1923” and in the backwardness of the Soviet economy, “the two main pillars of the power of the bureaucracy”, Mandel deduced from this logically that with the rise of the Soviet economy (symbolised by Sputnik) and the renewed rise of the world revolution (in the colonial countries, but also in Europe after May 68), the hour of the political revolution was going to sound in the USSR and in Eastern Europe.

The overestimation of the “socialist gains” supposed to facilitate a political revolution democratising already constituted social relations thus led him in his book *Beyond Perestroika* (1989) to overestimate the dynamic of the political revolution and to underestimate the forces of capitalist restoration. In the same way his understandable enthusiasm concerning the overthrow of the Berlin Wall led him to interpret the event as a return to the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg and the workers’ councils, after a long interval of reaction, and to underestimate the restorationist logic inscribed in the relationship of international forces. This was not only a manifestation of optimism of the will on his part, but very much an error of judgement stemming in part from theoretical roots.

His vision rested on the conception, shared inside the Fourth International since its congress of 1963, of a convergence between the “three sectors of the world revolution”: the democratic revolution in the colonial countries, the social revolution in the imperialist metropolises, the anti-bureaucratic political revolution in the post-capitalist countries. In the 1960s, this perspective was not lacking in factual indices: the shock wave of the Chinese revolution, the victory of the Cuban revolution and the liberation struggles in Algeria, Indochina, and the Portuguese colonies; the anti-bureaucratic uprising in Budapest in 1956, the Prague spring in 1968, anti-bureaucratic struggles in Poland; resumption of social struggles and big strike movements in France, Italy, and Britain in the 1960s; the breakdown of the Franco and Salazar dictatorships.

In the midst of the 1970s, with the halting in 1975 of the Portuguese revolution, the monarchical transition in Spain, the split between Vietnam and Cambodia, the turn towards austerity of the European lefts, the normalisation in Czechoslovakia then the Polish coup, the winds had begun to change, and the “three sectors”, far from converging harmoniously, had begun to diverge. Centrifugal forces triumphed. The bureaucratic struggles in the East were not led in the name of the workers’ councils or self-management (“give us back our factories!”) as was still the case in 1980 during the Solidarnosc congress, but were informed by mirages of western consumer society. The unequal reflux of deep-seated social revolutions announced the counter wave of “velvet revolutions”, Foucault perceiving one of the first importance during the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Starting from a famous formula of Trotsky in the Transitional Programme, according to which “the crisis of humanity” is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership, Mandel often had recourse, in taking account of an unexpected turn of events, to the notion of delay. The objective conditions of the revolution will be nearly always ripe, indeed overripe. Lacking only is the “subjective factor”, absent or at least considerably behind in relation to the right moment of history.

If the old ideas continue to dominate the workers movement, “it is due to the force of inertia of consciousness which still retards material reality”. This idea of a delay attributable to “the force of inertia of consciousness” is strange. Certainly, the owl of Minerva is said to only take flight at dusk, but the difficulties of class consciousness stem much more from the effects of the alienation of labour and commodity fetishism than to a reassuring time lag, suggesting that consciousness will come late, but will necessarily come. At least if it does not come too late?

The notion of “delay”, like that of “detour”, also frequently used by Mandel, presupposes a debatable normative conception of historic development. It introduces moreover a problematic relation (not very dialectical, whater Mandel says in the methodological part of his Introduction – chapters 16 and 17 on the materialist dialectic and historical materialism) between the “objective conditions “ and the “subjective conditions” of revolutionary action. If the objective conditions are as promising as is claimed, how can we explain the fact that the subjective factor is so unreliable in most of its incarnations? Such a divorce between the two could lead to a paranoia of treason: if the subjective factor is not what it should be, it is not in relation to certain relative limits of the situation and of the effective relations of forces, but because it is incessantly betrayed from within.

The very real capitulations, indeed betrayals of the bureaucratic leaderships of the workers' movement have certainly cost humanity dear in the past century (and will cost it still more dearly), but making this the main or exclusive explanatory factor of the disillusionments and defeats of the 20th century would end almost inevitably in a conspiracy vision of history which Trotskyist organisations have not always escaped. Mandel is happily much more nuanced. Thus he enriches his notion of objective conditions, "independent of the level of consciousness of proletarians and revolutionaries", including in this "the social and material conditions" (the strength of the proletariat) and "the political conditions", namely the incapacity of the dominant classes to govern and the refusal of the dominated classes to let them govern. Thus revised, the "objective conditions" include a strong dose of subjectivity.

There remain only among the said subjective conditions the level of class-consciousness of the proletariat and the level of strength of "its revolutionary party". They tend thus to be reduced to the existence, strength, consciousness, the maturity of its vanguard, detached from the complex mediations of the class struggle and the institutions. It opens the road to an exacerbated voluntarism, which is to the revolutionary will that which individualism is to the liberated individuality.

The risk of reducing the problem of modern revolutions to the sole will of their vanguard is compensated in Mandel by a sociological confidence in the growing extension, homogeneity, and maturity of the proletariat as a whole. Even if he concedes that "the working class is not entirely homogeneous from the point of view of the social conditions of its existence", the tendency to homogeneity would easily triumph in his eyes. It is supposed to overcome quasi-spontaneously the internal divisions and the effects of competition on the labour market: "Contrary to a widespread legend, this proletarian mass, although highly stratified, is seeing its degree of homogeneity broadly increase and not decrease. Between a manual worker, a bank employee, and a minor civil servant, the distance is less today than it was a half century or a century ago, as regards standard of living, and as regards the inclination to unionise and go on strike, and as regards potential access to anti-capitalist consciousness."

In raising such a passage, we should, here again, remember its social context and the political issues at stake. Faced with changes in the division and organisation of labour which accompanied the long wave of growth, the question was posed of whether this amounted to the formation of a new working class and an extension of the proletariat, or on the contrary to the massive appearance of a new petty bourgeoisie.

The class alliances and formation of a new historic bloc would raise then new strategic questions, as argued in certain texts of Poulantzas, Baudelot and Establet, where some Maoist currents tried to find a European equivalent to the "bloc of four classes" dear to Chairman Mao. Mandel argued that the situation of the employees in the so-called tertiary sector was converging with that of the working class, from the viewpoint of the form (wage earning) and the average amount of income, their subaltern place in the division of labour, and their exclusion from access to ownership. This material convergence was confirmed by a cultural convergence, and verified by the behaviour of the new wage earning layers in the struggles of May 68 in France or the hot autumn in Italy: the old blind antagonism between blue and white collar, between workshop and office, blurred before solidarity in common struggle against exploitation and alienation.

If Mandel's argument was justified sociologically and strategically (the main problem was the rallying of the workers themselves and not the search for a class alliance or a new kind of popular front in the face of "state monopoly capitalism"), it transformed into an irreversible historic tendency the specific situation created by post war industrial capitalism and its specific mode of regulation. He thus took up on his own account the sociological gamble of Marx, that the strategic

difficulties of the social revolution would be resolved through the development of large scale industry and the growing concentration of the proletariat in big units of production, itself favourable to a rise of the trade union movement, a strengthening of solidarities, and a raising of political consciousness.

If this certainly appeared to be the tendency of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the response of capital came quickly with the neoliberal offensive. Far from being irreversible, the tendency to homogenisation was undermined by the policies of dispersal of work units, intensification of competition on the world labour market, individualisation of wages and labour time, privatisation of leisure and lifestyles, the methodical demolition of social solidarity and protection.

In other words, far from being a mechanical consequence of capitalist development, the rallying of the forces of resistance and subversion of the order established by capital is an incessant task recommenced in daily struggles, and whose results are never definitive.

As he stresses in his foreword, Mandel accorded a major importance to the methodological chapters on the materialist dialectic and on the theory of historical materialism. This type of general exposé has its pedagogic virtues. The famous *Elementary principles of philosophy* by Georges Politzer have thus contributed to initiate dozens or hundreds of militants who were not intellectuals by training into the fundamental theoretical questions. But for Mandel as for Politzer, pedagogical vulgarisation has its price.

It gives the presentation of a theory the air of a manual, a little doctrinaire, and tends to present abstract universal laws – “the dialectic as universal logic of movement and contradiction”, writes Mandel – overhanging their specific fields of validity. Thus if it is correct in the abstract that to “deny causality is in the final analysis to deny the possibility of knowledge”, such a general affirmation says nothing on the numerous questions raised by the very notion of causality and on the different modes of causality, irreducible to the sole mechanical causality inspired by classical physics. Thus again, to define the dialectic as “the logic of movement” and the forms of passage from one state to another, tends to make of it a formal logic, detached from content, a system of general laws governing the singularities at work in the real world.

This is of course a discussion which would go far beyond the limits of this critical introduction to *Introduction to Marxism*. It is not however superfluous to indicate that its stakes are far from being negligible. Mandel’s chapter on the dialectic finishes with the idea that “the victory of the world socialist revolution, the advent of a classless society, will confirm in practice the validity of revolutionary Marxist theory”. The formula is to say the least adventurous. If victory should confirm the validity of a theory, the accumulation of defeats should reciprocally invalidate it. But who wins historically? On what timescale? Who is the judge? By what criteria? the questions are connected and run into each other, which goes back in the last instance to the idea that it can be done from science and scientific truth, or the relationship between truth and efficacy [3]. Here is another – very – long story.

Mandel’s book, the questions and criticisms that it can raise thirty years after its first publication, are revealing of a time and the relationship of a revolutionary with his times. Roland Barthes could write of Voltaire that he was “the last happy writer”, to the extent that he could express the world vision of a rising bourgeoisie, still capable of believing in all good conscience in the future of an enlightened and liberated humanity. In the same way one could say of Ernest Mandel that he was one of the last happy revolutionaries. This formula could surprise or shock, when used of a militant who knew the tests of war and imprisonment, who was witness to the tragedies of the century of extremes, who had to fight all his life against the dominant currents.

He was nonetheless a happy revolutionary to the extent that, despite the defeats and the

disillusionments, he kept intact the confidence of the pioneers of socialism in the future of humanity, and the optimism which was theirs, at the threshold of a twentieth century which announced the end of war and human exploitation. For Ernest, classical humanist and man of the Enlightenment, the disillusionments of the twentieth century were only a long detour, or an annoying delay, which did not undermine the logic of historic progress. This obstinate conviction underlay both his greatness and his weakness.

P.S.

* English version and title from International Viewpoint.

* Daniel Bensaïd is one of France's most prominent Marxist philosophers and has written extensively. He is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).

Footnotes

[1] Published first in English as *From Class Society to Communism*.

[2] Ernest Mandel, *La Crise*, Paris, Champs Flammarion, 1978

[3] The Mandel quote relates to a certain extent to the criterion of the scientific status of a theory upheld by Popper, that of falsifiability"; a theory can only be called scientific if it is capable of being refuted in practice. That is why Marx's theories, like those of Freud, which survive the denial of their prognostications or their therapeutic setbacks, cannot claim to be scientific. The argument rests on a series of debatable presuppositions, concerning both the relationship between the social sciences and the exact sciences, and the different forms of causality.