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# The actuality of Ernest Mandel

- Sur la vie et l'œuvre -

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# The actuality of Ernest Mandel

Ernest Mandel died on the 20th of July 1995, in the middle of the last decade of the 20th century. This was a time of ebb for the world Marxist movement : the neoliberal offensive of global capitalism was so pervasive that, even though they owed their election to a backlash against its effects, Clinton was continuing Reagan's work and European Social Democrats were soon to carry on what their conservative competitors had started. The Stalinist states of the former Soviet bloc had collapsed in the most striking and least expected illustration "in reverse" of the "domino theory." A vast array of political ideologues sharing the view that the USSR and Marxism were as inextricably tied together as the Vatican and Catholicism "whether they hated Moscow or were among its fans and supporters" had proclaimed that Marx, this time, was really dead.

This political and ideological context weighed heavily on the reception of Mandel's death. There was a natural tendency to see in him mainly a representative of a generation overdetermined by living through the experience of the Soviet Union "people born in the early years of the Russian "communist" regime and passing away at the time of its final demise. Mandel could thus be easily perceived as a representative of a specifically 20th-century Marxism whose main trends were very much concerned with the Soviet Union, whether supportively or critically. Those wishing to carry on a Marxist-inspired fight against capitalism were advocating a return to Marx (who, of course, was alive and kicking, as everyone noticed fairly quickly). For some, this meant more or less leaping past the legacy of both "Soviet Marxism" and its critics, while others sought to combine a new-look Marx with brands of critical philosophical thought that were as remote from the issue of the USSR as they were from the actual class struggle and therefore unaffected by the great historical shift.

In reality, any view confining Ernest Mandel's legacy to a chapter in the history of Marxism that is related to the existence of the Soviet Union can only stem from sheer ignorance of his writings. For however one rates Mandel's numerous contributions on the Soviet Union "which actually could be deemed the least original part of his work, as they were devoted in large part to an orthodox defence of Trotsky's analysis" these were but a small fraction of his voluminous body of writings. Ernest Mandel always protested energetically "and rightly so" against any attempt at defining the theoretical and political profile of the international movement he inspired, and hence his own profile, as mainly "if not merely" "anti-Stalinist." He always insisted that the most essential part of the fight he waged with his comrades was against capitalism, and that Stalinism was a much more ephemeral phenomenon than capitalism.

The truth of the matter is that if the "return to Marx" is to be considered as the defining feature of modern-day Marxism, then Ernest Mandel is the most relevant of late Marxists. The main body of Mandel's work is in fact based on a direct re-appropriation and reappraisal of original Marxism. Many of his main theoretical works fall into this category, especially *Marxist Economic Theory*, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* and the introductions to the Penguin edition of the three volumes of Marx's *Capital*. Mandel thus established himself as one of the key modern interpreters of Marx's economic theory, and no serious "return to Marx" "in the economic sphere at the very least" could spare itself the obligation of reading Mandel as a most useful and informative companion to Marx's economic thought.

If Mandel had only written the above-mentioned works, his relevance to modern-day Marxism would already be obvious. But he did much more than that : Ernest Mandel was the author of what Perry Anderson, the most knowledgeable practitioner of the history of Marxist ideas, has described in his *Considerations on Western Marxism* as "the first theoretical analysis of the global development of the capitalist mode of production since the Second World War, conceived within the framework of classical Marxist categories." As a matter of fact, *Late Capitalism*, Mandel's masterpiece, though it was not the first attempt at interpreting the dynamics of post-Second World War capitalism, is the first "and to this day the only" attempt to deal with this daunting task in a comprehensive

manner. Mandel strove to update Marx's categories and use them to analyse not the economic sphere alone, but also the social, political and ideological spheres – veritably producing an analysis of the post- Second World War "capitalist mode of production" in the most inclusive sense of this Marxist formula.

Moreover, Mandel developed key instruments for the analysis of the stage that global capitalism entered after the long post-war boom, especially through the crucial role he played in rehabilitating and updating the theory of the "long waves" of capitalist development. He also formulated a major analysis of the nature of the protracted recession of global capitalism that has been in progress since the 1970s. His interpretation is one of the most stimulating and serious attempts at explaining the historical dynamics of global capitalism over the long haul, and thus one that could only be ignored at the cost of missing a crucial piece of Marxist theoretical discussion in economics. One of Mandel's most important contributions in this regard consisted in putting a very great emphasis on class struggle and forms of bourgeois rule as major factors in the historical dynamics of the capitalist economies.

He rightly saw that the success of capitalist efforts to impose a new form of (de)regulation on the global economy – what is now commonly referred to as capitalist "globalization" – would depend largely on the balance of social forces. With his eye on the European fraction of global capitalism, he concluded the last of his books to come out before his death, the updated 1995 edition of *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*, with the following, still very relevant prognosis :

If long periods of prosperity create more favourable conditions for compromise and "consensus," long periods of depression favour conflicts in which all contenders refuse to make important concessions. Not successful regulation but growing contradictions and strife tend to prevail.

So there will be no "soft landing" from the long depression, only business cycles upturns followed by new recessions, with a steady increase in unemployment and long-term average rates of growth much lower than those of the "postwar boom."

Mandel, most faithful in this regard to Marx, regarded the class struggle as a major factor in economic history and prognosis, instead of producing a Marxist adaptation of the bourgeois classical economics' belief in the omnipotence of the "invisible hand" of market forces or of the mercantilists' vision of a world economy where contending states are the determining factor. He shared Marx's vision because like Marx he was himself deeply immersed in the class struggle : Mandel was as far removed from armchair Marxism as anyone could be. He was a dedicated militant of the workers movement throughout his life, devoting the major part of his time to political intervention in the actual movement in various ways.

It was unfortunate that Mandel did not live long enough to witness the rise of the new global movement against neoliberalism and imperialist wars. Had he still been with us and in good health, there can be no doubt that he would have contributed powerfully to building the movement, bringing to it not only his immense erudition and experience, but also his unquenchable revolutionary enthusiasm. In many ways, he would have been very much in tune with the new movement and the new wave of youth radicalization, as he was so fully in tune with the 1968 wave at a time when he was already 45 years old.

Ernest Mandel's legacy is actually much more in harmony with the young component of the new global movement than many of its older components are. This is because his revolutionary commitment was always deeply ethical : far from the cynical view of the world of bureaucrats and professional grafters, Mandel's inspiration was highly ethical. His revolutionary humanism – a characteristic that he shared with that icon of juvenile revolutionary ardour that he came to befriend and with whom he also shared a first name, Ernesto Che Guevara – was one of the defining features of Mandel's personality and theoretical production.

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Moreover, he was very much in harmony with the younger generation insofar as freedom and democracy were among the highest values he adhered to. In this regard Mandel was probably, among Marxists of the second half of the 20th century, one of the closest spiritually to the woman he admired profoundly and who has stood the test of time admirably : Rosa Luxemburg. Any person familiar with Mandel's political writings knows that he was in many ways a "Luxemburgist," not only in his deep belief in the revolutionary potential of the masses, but also in his intensely felt internationalism and his conviction that democratic freedoms are as necessary to the revolutionary movement as breathable air is to human beings.

Ernest Mandel is an indispensable source for the development of a 21st-century Marxism.

29 June 2005