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Ernest Mandel's ideas on ecology

# Ernest Mandel and ecosocialism

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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**Concern for the environment appeared strongly in Mandel's writings only from the 1970s. It hardly appears, for example, in *Marxist Economic Theory* (1962).** It is true that we already find, in this "inaugural" work, the idea of "stopping growth" under socialism: "When society has a supply of automatic machines large enough to cover all its current needs (...) it is likely that "economic growth" will be slowed down or even temporarily halted. Man, completely free from all material and economic concerns will be born". [1]

## The ecological ideas of Ernest Mandel

It is therefore from 1971-72, after the emergence of the first ecological movements and following his reading of the pioneering works of Elmar Altvater, Harry Rothman and Barry Commoner, that he began to integrate the ecological dimension into his thinking. Thus, in *Late Capitalism* (1972) he writes about the "growing threat that contemporary technique, because of its instrumentalization by capitalism, poses for the environment" and consequently for "the survival of humanity". But this is not a central problem in the book: there are only a few references here and there, without the theme being treated systematically. [2]

It would therefore seem that it was the "Club of Rome" Report (Meadows Report, supported by Sicco Mansholt) which stimulated Mandel to start a more sustained reflection on the subject of the environment: this was the object of the article "Dialectic of growth" of November 1972, later published in German under the title "Marx and ecology". Considering what he had written in *Marxist Economic Theory* on stopping economic growth under socialism, it is curious that his reaction to the Meadows report was so negative, to the point that he characterized the authors as "doctrinaires of capitalism" ready to sacrifice everything, even the standard of living, today still considered sacred, "provided that private property and profit are safeguarded". He nevertheless recognized the merit of recalling the existence of "limited natural resources" which made it impossible to generalize on a world scale the way of life of the middle class in the United States.

After recalling that for Marx economic growth, the development of the productive forces, was not an end in itself, but simply a means for human emancipation, Mandel quotes an important passage from *The German Ideology* (1846) on the transformation, in capitalism, of productive forces into destructive forces. This destructive potential of the capitalist development of the productive forces results from the very logic of the market economy based on the search for profit: "if we have chosen certain techniques rather than others, without taking into account the effects in terms of ecological equilibrium, it is on the basis of the calculations of the private profitability of certain firms ... ". [3] In certain passages Mandel seems to believe in the neutrality of modern technology: "it is simply not true that modern industrial technology inevitably tends to destroy the ecological balance ". But later he recognizes that the current technology, the really existing modern industrial technology - for example that imposed by chemical trusts like Monsanto - is dangerous and harmful. He simply insists that this technical orientation is not the only possible one: in a socialist perspective we would give "priority to the development of another technology, entirely aimed at the harmonious development of the individual and the conservation of natural resources, not towards maximizing private profits".

So the solution is not to impose shortages, asceticism, a drastic reduction in the standard of living - as proposed by MIT experts in their report to the Club of Rome - but rather to plan for growth, subjecting it to "a series of clearly established priorities, which entirely escape the imperatives of private profit". The "zero growth" option, especially in the underdeveloped countries, is unacceptable. The socialist alternative that Mandel offers is to radically transform economic and social structures, thus creating the conditions for restoring ecological balance. In a socialist society priority will be given to the satisfaction of basic needs for all human beings and to the search for new technologies

which replenish the reserves of scarce natural resources. The quality of life, free time, the richness of social relationships, will become much more important than "the increase in gross national income". [4]

Subsequently, this issue became very much present in the writings of Ernest Mandel: for example, in the manifesto of the Fourth International, *Socialism or Barbarism on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century*, (1993), there is a section dedicated to the relationship between socialism and ecology. The author recognizes the weaknesses of the workers' movement in this area, the blatant failure of bureaucratic post-capitalist societies and the debt of Marxists towards environmentalists. But he stuck to his guns on the socialist alternative: "an effective fight against pollution, a systematic defence of the environment, a constant search for substitutes for scarce natural resources, a strict economy in the use of these therefore calls for investment decisions and the choice of production techniques to be taken from private interests and transferred to the community which operates them democratically" (5). The emphasis on "scarce natural resources" - already present in the 1972 article - is an obvious limitation: the ecological issue goes far beyond this economic aspect.

## "Appropriation" or subversion of the productive apparatus?

If the socialist option of Mandel still seems to me to be topical, it seems to me necessary to go a few steps further, both in criticizing the Marxian heritage and in the radicality of the break with the existing techno-productive paradigm. We must integrate the achievements of ecology into the very heart of the socialist approach: in other words, aim for an eco-socialist alternative.

A certain classical Marxism - using some passages from Marx and Engels - starts from the contradiction between forces and relations of production, and defines the social revolution as the suppression of capitalist relations of production, which have become an obstacle to the free development of the productive forces. This conception seems to regard the productive apparatus as "neutral", and its development as unlimited. From this perspective, socialist transformation would consist above all in the social appropriation of the productive forces created by capitalist civilization and their placing at the service of the workers. To quote a passage from Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, a canonical work for generations of socialists: in socialism "society takes possession openly and without detours of the productive forces which have become too great to be directed by anyone but itself". [5]

This perspective must be criticized from an ecosocialist point of view, drawing inspiration from Marx's remarks on the Paris Commune: the workers cannot take over the capitalist state apparatus and put it to work at their service. They must "break it" and replace it with another, of a totally distinct nature, a non-state and democratic form of political power.

The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the "really existing", i.e. capitalist, productive apparatus: by its nature and structure, it is not neutral, but at the service of the accumulation of capital and the unlimited expansion of the market. It is in contradiction with the requirements of environmental protection and the health of the work force. By its operation and its logic, it can only aggravate pollution, the destruction of biological diversity, the suppression of forests, the catastrophic upheaval of the climate. It is therefore necessary to "revolutionize" it, by radically transforming its structure. This can mean, for certain branches of production - nuclear power plants for example - "breaking it". In any case, the productive forces themselves must be profoundly modified, according to social and ecological criteria.

This means, first of all, an energy revolution, the replacement of non-renewable energies responsible for pollution and environmental poisoning - coal, oil and nuclear - by "soft" and renewable energies: water, wind, sun.

But it is the whole mode of production and consumption - based for example on the private car and other products of this type - which must be transformed, together with the suppression of capitalist relations of production and the beginning of a transition to socialism. It goes without saying that each transformation of the productive system or of transport - the gradual replacement of road by rail - must be done with the guarantee of full employment of the workforce.

What will be the future of the productive forces in this transition to socialism - a historic process that will not be counted in months or years? Two schools of thought confront each other within what could be called the ecological left:

- The optimistic school, according to which, thanks to technological progress and soft energies, the development of the socialist productive forces can have an unlimited expansion, aiming to satisfy "each according to his needs". This school does not take into account the natural limits of the planet and ends up reproducing - under the label "sustainable development" - the old socialist model.
- The pessimistic school, which, starting from these natural limits, considers that it is necessary to limit, in a draconian way, the demographic growth and the standard of living of the populations. Energy consumption should be cut in half, at the cost of forgoing individual houses, heating, etc. As these measures are very unpopular, this school sometimes cherishes the dream of an "enlightened ecological dictatorship".

It seems to me that these two schools share a purely quantitative conception of the development of the productive forces. There is a third position, which seems to me more appropriate - towards which Mandel seemed to tend - whose main hypothesis is qualitative change in development: put an end to the monstrous waste of resources by capitalism, based on production, on a large scale, of unnecessary or harmful products: the arms industry is an obvious example. It is therefore a question of orienting production towards the satisfaction of authentic needs, starting with those which Mandel designated as "biblical": water, food, clothing, housing.

How can we distinguish authentic needs from artificial and fake ones? The latter are induced by the system of mental manipulation which is called "advertising". An essential part of the functioning of the capitalist market, "advertising" is doomed to disappear in a society in transition to socialism, to be replaced by the information provided by consumer associations. The criterion to distinguish an authentic need from another artificial one is its persistence after the removal of advertising ... (Coca-Cola!).

The private car, on the other hand, meets a real need, but in an eco-socialist project, based on the abundance of free public transport, it will have a much smaller role than in bourgeois society, where it has become a fetish merchandise, a sign of prestige and the centre of the social, cultural, sporting and erotic life of individuals.

Certainly, the pessimists will answer, but individuals are driven by infinite desires and aspirations, which must be controlled and repressed.

Ecosocialism is based on a bet, which was already that of Marx and on which Mandel often insisted: the predominance, in a classless society, of "being" over "having", that is, personal achievement, through cultural, playful, erotic, sporting, artistic, political activities, rather than the desire for the infinite accumulation of goods and products. The latter is induced by bourgeois ideology and advertising and nothing indicates that it constitutes an "eternal human nature".

This does not mean that there will be no conflicts, between the requirements of environmental protection and social needs, between ecological imperatives and the necessities of development, especially in poor countries. It is up to

socialist democracy, freed from the imperatives of capital and the "market", to resolve these contradictions.

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[1] Ernest Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory*, London, 1962.

[2] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London, 1972.

[3] Ernest Mandel, "Dialectique de la Croissance", *Mai n* Å° 26, novembre- décembre, 1972, p.11.

[4] Ibid. pp. 12-14.

[5] 6. Friedrich Engels, *Anti- Dühring*, London, 1892.