

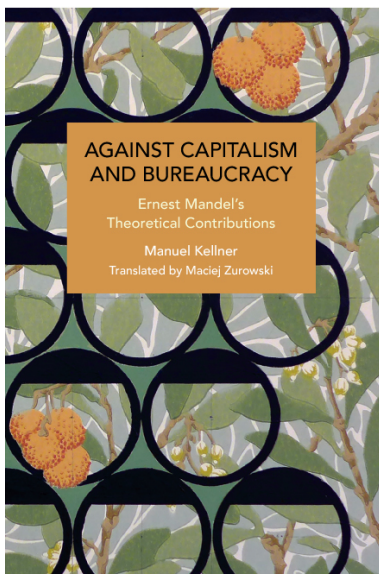
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Marxism

On Ernest Mandel's Contributions

- Reviews section -



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Against Capitalism and Bureaucracy Ernest Mandel's Theoretical Contributions. By Manuel Kellner, translated by Maciej Zurowski, Foreword to the English Edition by Michael Löwy. Chicago: [Haymarket Books](#), 2024, 465 pages including index. \$40 paperback.

AN ACCUMULATION OF global crises and catastrophes have been generating powerful stirrings of radicalization throughout the world that are causing increasing numbers of young activists to reach out for examples and insights from revolutionary fighters and thinkers who have gone before. Many have come to the reasonable conclusion that there is much to learn from the past that can help us comprehend the present and shape the future.

For some of us (particularly in the aging and diminishing ranks of the generation of 1968), central among such figures — as an inspiration, a mentor, and a comrade — was Ernest Mandel (1923-1995), whose contributions have begun to attract some well-deserved attention.

Revolutionary Theorist of the Fourth International

An outstanding, critical-minded study by one of Mandel's German comrades (from the Generation of '68) — Manuel Kellner — has now appeared, accomplishing what the earlier studies on Mandel did not provide: a systematic examination and assessment of his wide-ranging theoretical contributions.

Published under the auspices of the remarkable Historical Materialism book series, it is a gift for scholars and activists seeking to engage with and make use of the vibrant work of a brilliant theorist who was serious about revolutionary change. We will focus here on some of what Kellner has to say, although this volume — like the corpus of Mandel's contributions — deserves further (collective, critical-minded) discussion.

One cannot comprehend Mandel's theoretical development without understanding his deep commitment to the Fourth International. This is a transnational organization of left-wing parties and groups, founded in 1938 after a five-year preliminary process, by Leon Trotsky and other revolutionary Marxists from a number of countries.

They were driven by the need for a revolutionary alternative to the Second International (or Socialist International, which they felt had been corrupted by social-democratic reformism) and to the Third International (or Communist International, which they felt had been corrupted by Stalinist authoritarianism). [\[1\]](#)

“At a young age,” Kellner tells us, “just after World War II, Ernest Mandel was already a leading figure in the Fourth International,” regarded at the time “as a kind of prodigy, owing to his intellectual proficiency, his already vast knowledge, and his ability to think independently, offering captivating analyses of social processes, and articulate revolutionary socialist perspectives in a compelling fashion.”

Beginning in this period, and for the next fifty years, “he played an important role in the development of the Fourth International's positions” on a variety of issues. (Kellner, 215)

Kellner notes that Mandel “always endeavored to ensure continuity with Trotsky's most important positions and the

programmatic legacy of the Fourth International.”

This had two outcomes: “anything ‘new’ was [deemed] best analyzed with the Trotskyist ‘grid,’” and consequently when his writings are examined, “his own theoretical contribution ... is not always easy to discern,” although Kellner argues that Mandel did indeed make independent contributions.

Also running through his thought is an incredibly fruitful tension — “a tension between ‘openness’ and the insistence on ‘coherence.’” (215, 407)

Kellner identifies a link between Mandel's openness/coherence approach and the Fourth International to which he had committed his life. One aspect of this involves an insistence on theory not as an open-ended idea fest, but as a guide to action. This means a determination to advance the revolutionary socialist cause in a manner that can culminate in successful revolution. Another aspect, however, signifies a sectarian danger.

Positives and Negatives

Kellner opens his examination of the positive in this way: “The emphasis on the coherence of his own edifice of ideas ... springs from deep-seated needs. The cohesion of an organization that is only imparted to an extremely modest degree by successes in practical action depends not least on the idea that the doctrine that the organization stands for is in line with social reality and its tendencies of development.” He adds: “On what else can it base its hope of becoming a relevant political factor someday?” (408)

In the next breath he notes the negative:

If categories from the programmatic ‘canon’ (such as ‘permanent revolution’) prove to be inadequate for interpreting such processes [that are unfolding in the world], the cohesion of one's own organization appears to be at stake. In such cases, however, theory serves less as a guide to action than as a means of reassuring oneself about the validity of one's own basic positions. Thus there is a certain ‘apologetic’ aspect of Mandel's Marxism too. (409)

And yet the positive certainly moved to the foreground at a key moment in history:

Mandel ... correctly predicted at the beginning of the 1960s, on the basis of his analysis of contemporary capitalism as well as some major tendencies with respect to social forces and struggles, not only the turn to a 'long wave' with a stagnant and depressive tendency, but also a new upsurge of anti-imperialist struggles, anti-bureaucratic struggles, and class struggles in the developed industrial capitalist countries.

In all of this, his predictions were vindicated by the actual development. In this way, he gave the members of the Fourth International and a number of activists in the left and workers' movements new hope: the perspective he offered them was that real tendencies in society would soon converge with their ideas of a process of universal emancipation.

In particular, 'the dialectic of the three sectors of the world revolution,' which may have seemed speculative and over-optimistic to observers in 1963, seemed to begin to materialize in the late '60s. The left in general, and the FI in particular, emerged stronger from this process of radical change. (409-410)

Much has changed since the late 1960s, and since Mandel's death in 1995. In that dramatically changing context, the once-massive workers' movement and the organizations of the labor-left, in different ways and for more than one reason, have largely disintegrated.

The Fourth International has endured, but it too has changed. When first founded, the FI projected itself as the World Party of Socialist Revolution, and this was evident in Mandel's own perspectives to the very end of his life.

As Kellner notes, "for Mandel the FI, the organization that authentically preserved and developed the revolutionary Marxist tradition, was the nucleus of the future great force" that would bring a socialist revolution.

In the year of Mandel's death, however, a World Congress of the FI declared "rather more modestly," as Kellner sums it up, "that it is one of several international organized tendencies wishing to make a contribution to the renewal of the workers' movement, the reformation of an anti-capitalist left, and the formation of revolutionary parties and a mass revolutionary international." (436)

Breadth of Thought, Focus of Purpose

The scope of Mandel's thought and contributions is indicated by the topics of the book's chapters. "Theory and Practice" (Chapter 1) outlines his early life. It focuses on his initial intellectual, political, and activist development, including in the face of the Nazi invasion — and resistance to it — in his native Belgium during World War II, culminating to his precocious rise to the leadership ranks of the Fourth International.

"Critique of Contemporary Capitalism" (Chapter 2) explores his pathbreaking contributions to Marxist economic theory, particularly regarding the structure and dynamics of capitalism in the post-World War II period but also placing this in the long view of history.

"Socialism: The Utopian Dimension in Mandel's Work" (Chapter 3) presents specifics on Mandel's vision of the alternative to capitalism — profoundly humanistic and democratic, while at the same time striving for a tough-minded realism.

Post-revolutionary experience in the wake of Russia's socialist revolution of 1917 yielded a quite different outcome, and Mandel focused considerable attention to an ongoing and intensive examination of how and why this was the case, and its meaning for theorists and activists of his own time, summarized in "Critique of Bureaucracy" (Chapter 4). The orientation that Mandel projected on how to move from the oppressive realities of the capitalist present to the hoped-for socialist future is presented in "Socialist Strategy" (Chapter 5).

The concluding chapters — "Emancipation and Social Catastrophe" (Chapter 6) and "Evaluation and Prospects" (Chapter 7) — offer incisive discussions of Mandel's (and Trotsky's) analysis of fascism, and Mandel's effort to comprehend the Holocaust. Also in these last seventy pages are succinct discussions of a variety of matters, and here we will very briefly touch on three.

One involves the question of optimism vs. pessimism. A quotation attributed to Antonio Gramsci (but actually originating from one of his literary heroes, Romain Rolland) is a call for "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," which can be understood in more than one way. [\[2\]](#)

For Gramsci, a pessimistic intellect could be utilized to make one more effective in the struggle for socialism, with an optimistic will that refuses to allow one to give up. On the other hand, for all-too-many tired or lazy activists in recent years, it seems to justify having become immobilized by an “optimistic” will pulling toward an effective socialist movement and a “pessimistic” intellect perceiving its seeming impossibility.

Using the phrase in its strictly Gramscian sense, Michael Löwy — cited at length by Kellner — observed in regard to Mandel that “when it ceased to be ‘optimism of the will’ in the Gramscian meaning (i.e. coupled with ‘pessimism of the intellect’) to become a sort of ungrounded ‘optimism of the intellect,’ or just plain and simple over-optimism, oracular predictions, so often repeated and so often falsified, about the ‘impetuous rise of the masses,’ and the immanent revolutionary upsurge, in the USSR, in Spain, in Germany, in France, in Europe and in the whole world.”

In the late 1960s and early '70s, Mandel supported the perspective of a continental strategy of guerrilla warfare which could lead – he over-optimistically thought — to socialist revolutions throughout Latin America. He fleetingly speculated, in 1969, that revolution might even be made in the United States by 1979-1984. [\[3\]](#)

In some ways more profound is Kellner's discussion of a sort of “moral imperative” animating Mandel (which “united him with a number of devoted socialists of various tendencies”) that Kellner describes this way:

Mandel makes the point that taking sides with the exploited and oppressed is a moral duty, even if all hopes of achieving the desired social liberation are shattered: ‘Today, in bourgeois society, this implies siding with the working class and other oppressed strata of the population, poor peasants in the third world, oppressed women, oppressed youth, etc. This is a moral duty, a matter of conscience that does not stem from any certainty that socialism will prevail. Even if one is convinced that barbarism will triumph, one must not for a second abandon this moral, categorical imperative. (429-430)

This brings us to a distinguishing element in Mandel's thought. For Mandel (as for Marx) this categorical imperative was inseparable from a deep commitment to the condition, the experience, and the future of the working class.

Working-Class Commitment

Kellner refers to “Mandel's last extensive piece of writing — [which] in a sense . . . can be defined as his ‘political testament’.” This was part of a public confrontation (which some of his closest comrades had strongly urged against) in New York City with the hyper-sectarian Spartacist League.

For years it had been denouncing Mandel and the Fourth International with the accusation that it systematically and always, always betrayed the Trotskyist cause — and he wanted to provide an answer. In close consultation with Mandel, I agreed to help organize and co-chair the event. [\[4\]](#)

According to Kellner, “Mandel's political-strategic thinking is permeated by a tension between his orientation towards a class movement of wage earners and the entire range of emancipatory social movements, on the one hand, and his strong identification with his own, largely marginal organization.”

These sensibilities permeated his remarks during the debate with the Spartacists. Of enduring relevance, however,

were the more general points he offered regarding the working class, its evolution, and its struggles. (433) Mandel begins his political testament with these five sentences.

The birth act of Marxism is the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point is to change it.' While a correct theoretical understanding of capitalism is indispensable for its overthrow, it is not enough. This task has to be realized in practice. Only the working class — as it is defined by the first program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party written by Lenin and Plekhanov, all those who are under the economic compulsion to sell their labor power — only the working class is capable of breaking the hold of the bourgeoisie over the main means of production and exchange. [5]

Of course, the working class had been undergoing dramatic changes — along with the dramatically changing capitalist system — over the nine decades since Lenin and Plekhanov wrote that program. Mandel had been engaging with the study of that evolution for at least three decades prior to the debate with the Spartacists, describing in 1968, for example:

[the] growing integration of intellectual labor into the productive process; growing standardization, uniformity and mechanization of intellectual labor; growing transformation of university graduates from independent professionals and capitalist entrepreneurs into salary earners appearing in a specialized labor market — the market for skilled intellectual labor where supply and demand make salaries fluctuate as they did on the manual labor market before unionization but fluctuate around an axis which is the reproduction cost of skilled intellectual labor.

"What do these trends mean but the growing proletarianization of intellectual labor, its tendency to become part and parcel of the working class? [6]

Over the years Mandel observed a global process which, through diverse and contradictory developments, was making the working class larger and stronger than ever:

It is true that the billion-strong army of wage-earners throughout the world is not growing at the same rate in every country at all times, nor are their living standards and working conditions bringing them closer together than they were at all times in the past. The development of the working class does not progress in a linear way. It declines (and becomes de-skilled) in certain sectors, regions, or even countries while progressing and becoming more skilled in others. But there are no data that prove that the long-term, world-wide tendency is one of [numerical] decline, far from it. (Mandel quoted, 357)

Kellner describes Mandel's "take" on new developments in the class struggle:

The greater role of the 'new social movements' does not contradict the role of wage earners as the potentially revolutionary subject. The base of these movements is generally 'proletarian' according to the aforementioned definition [by Lenin and Plekhanov]. Not its alleged petty-bourgeois composition, but a process of alienation from a largely conservative official labor movement, which is unattractive on many issues linked to emancipation, has led it to constitute itself 'outside.' (Kellner, 357)

Kellner offers the following critical appreciation: "One hopes that many more people will be inspired by Mandel's verve and let themselves be motivated to live his kind of life, yet without succumbing to ungrounded political confidence or to some of his more questionable ideas."

He adds: "Ultimately, any other than critical approval would not be in Mandel's spirit." In the final paragraph of his study, Kellner emphasizes that "Mandel's attempt to critically revive the Marxist tradition as a whole, based on extensive empirical findings, can only be continued through collective work ..." (439, 445)

And inseparable from such collective theoretical development, of course is its dynamic interplay with the experience of mass struggle for a livable future and a better world.

Source: January-February 2026, [Against The Current](#) 240.

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[1] For informative, more or less non-polemical accounts, see: Pierre Frank and Daniel Bensaïd, *The Long March of the Trotskyists: Contributions to the History of the Fourth International* (London: Resistance Books, 2014); Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Livio Maitan, *Memoirs of a Critical Communist: Towards a History of the Fourth International* (London: Resistance Books, 2019); Daniel Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life: A Memoir* (London: Verso, 2014).

[2] See my essay "Antonio Gramsci and the Modern Prince," in Paul Le Blanc, *The Revolutionary Collective: Comrades, Critics, and Dynamics in the Struggle for Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 116-117.

[3] Kellner, 432. On the Latin America experience, see Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life*, 109-142. At the conclusion of his very interesting 1969 survey of the U.S., Mandel concluded that "the political radicalization of the working class, and therewith socialism, will become a practical proposition in the United States within the next 10 or 15 years, under the combined impact of all these forces which have been examined here." See Ernest Mandel, "Where is America Going?" *New Left Review* 1/54, March-April, 1969 — <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i54/articles/ernest-mandel-where-is-america-going>

[4] Kellner, 433-439; "Spartacist League Debates Ernest Mandel," *Spartacist*, No. 52, Autumn 1995, 9-23 https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/spartacist-us/1993-1998/0052_Autumn_1995.pdf. A substantially expanded version of his talk can be found in Ernest Mandel, "World Socialist Revolution Today. Sectarianism vs. Revolutionary Marxism," *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, 125, May/June 1995, 18-41; this can be located through the Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/bidom/index.htm>.

[5] Mandel, *Spartacist*, No. 52, 10.

[6] Ernest Mandel, "Workers Under Neo-Capitalism," *International Socialist Review*, November-December 1968, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/19xx/xx/neocap.htm>