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Fourth International

# Thirty years since the death of Ernest Mandel

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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**Sunday, 20 July 1995, marks three decades since the death of Ernest Mandel (1923-1995) "the most creative economist of our time," in the words of the Pakistani socialist Tariq Ali. Thus ended a whole life informed by the passion of revolutionary militancy and an intense activity in the construction of Marxist organizations and of the international itself.**

I met Mandel belatedly, just a couple of years before his death, when, taking advantage of my position as Secretary at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), we invited him to the country to give a series of lectures. Before, when I was able to travel to Europe in the 1980s, I could not see him and when years later he was in Uruguay I could not travel. But I did get to know him quite a bit during his stay in Buenos Aires, even later we travelled together to Brazil for an activity on Marilia's university campus. His health had already much deteriorated, I never met him again.

In those continuous discussions I understood that in the face of the deformation of Marxist thought by Stalinism and its followers, the task of transmitting to the new generations of academics and activists the concepts and values of original Marxism was necessary, creatively combining creativity and independent reflection with theoretical contributions and popular texts. And he certainly did deliver, thousands of comrades were trained all over the world with his texts, his courses and his conferences, among them me writing this, he was my teacher from a distance.

A few days after his death, a group of colleagues who felt indebted to his legacy signed a statement that was published in *Página 12*. There we stated, "That any critical assessment of his political career should be based on the recognition and rigor of his work and his life, which knew how to bring together, like the great classical Marxists, the intellectual commitment to dedication and militant passion for the socialist transformation of our societies." I still maintain this. That is his legacy.

Below I reproduce part of the interview that comrade Jorge Muracciole did with me on the 100th anniversary of Mandel's birth.

**To begin with, Mandel was a very prolific writer but with a strong emphasis on economics. Do you share this view?**

Yes, as you say, he was a very active author, and his work is very abundant. Those who took the task of gathering his works, many of them translated into Spanish, calculate about 2000 articles and about 30 books, in addition to a voluminous correspondence. Of course, economics and economic history have an important weight in his production. There is a triptych of works that seems to me fundamental to understanding his thought on this level. The "Treatise on Marxist Economics" written at the beginning of the 1960s, which is to put it in very current terms a valorisation, through a scientific critique with empirical data of the time, of the work of Marx written in the previous century. Then "Late Capitalism," written a decade later and where he finds an explanation of the long economic cycle that capitalism registered at the end of World War II with the expansion of the accumulation and reproduction of capital, economic concentration, productivity growth, consumerism and globalization. Finally a text, my memory fails me and I don't remember the title, but it is a book where he gives a detailed and profound explanation of the crisis of capitalism in the 70s that put an end to the long wave of growth and began a downward wave that with ups and downs lasts to this day. Well, I'm also forgetting "The Long Waves of Capitalist Development," which finds its foundations in Leon Trotsky's text, "The Curve of Capitalist Development."

**That text you don't remember is "The Crisis 1974-1978", of which if I am not mistaken there is a Mexican**

**edition from the 1980s. But all these works gave rise to multiple controversies. I remember the polemic with Nahuel Moreno about the development of the productive forces.**

Yes, your memory is better than mine. I was referring to that text of the crisis of the 1970s that you mention. Of course, there were many controversies. The one with Moreno that you mention, very hard by the way, took place through the preparatory documents of the I think 10th World Congress of the Fourth International, as you say about the concept of development of the productive forces in the long capitalist cycle, which later led to differences over characterizations of the stage and the type of party to be built. Yes, Mandel was a customary polemicist, because his thought was open to the best contributions of his time, wherever they came from. He understood the capitalist system as a regime subject to contradictions and transitory in historical terms, while at the same time he was a harsh critic of Stalinism and the so-called actually existing socialisms. But he was also an implacable critic of those who professed, and in many cases still profess, a closed Marxism, with a vision of the world already completed. In this perspective it is understandable that he debated with prominent personalities of his time such as Bettelheim, Sartre and Althusser, among others. It is also good to remember the polemic with Alec Nove on planning and the market in societies in transition and his participation in the great economic debate of 1962-1964 in Cuba, where he supported the ideas of Che, who polemized with the positions of high-ranking figures of the Cuban government at the time.

**Mandel was a very prominent economist, researcher, university professor but he was never considered an academic Marxist, on the other hand he produced a series of works and texts aimed at the training of activists.**

Yes, it is as you say, in his works there is academic rigor, no one disputes that, not even his detractors, but he never had an academic deviation. He combined his economic works with popular works. "The Leninist Theory of Organization," "What is Trotskyism?" "Workers' Councils, Workers' Control and Self-Management;" "Bureaucracy; Reform of the workplace or workers' control"," The future of human labour." Among those I quickly remember.

**Were you referring to this when at the beginning of the article you mentioned him as a reference-point of militant Marxism?**

Yes, of course, all his work, no matter how rigorous and academic, if you want to see it that way, is not understandable without his militant passion. Only in this way is the combination of his theoretical contributions, his popular texts and his activity in the construction of Marxist organizations and of the international itself understandable.

His life is an example. Born into a German home, his father was a founder of the Spartacist League with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, according to his biographers he adhered to the ideas of socialism after reading Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables." At the age of 15 he joined the POS – Socialist Workers' Party – Belgian section of the Fourth International. He then developed an intense militant activity, was arrested several times and then deported to Germany, where he joined the fight against the Nazis, was captured and confined in a concentration camp until he was liberated in 1945.

Shortly afterwards he was elected head of the POS and then appointed to the leadership of the Fourth International together with the Italian Livio Maitan – also this year is his centenary – and the Frenchman Pierre Frank.

In all his analyses, the role of the class struggle in the history is incorporated, even reaffirming classism and the centrality of work in capitalist societies was an advance in giving relevance to social movements. He was a supporter of the Luxembourgist notion of socialist democracy and the protagonism of the masses over organizations. During the 1960s he was a kind of "bete noire" for liberal democracies. He was banned from entering the United States,

Germany, Switzerland, France and Australia.

On one of those afternoons during his stay in Buenos Aires. we shared lunch with our respective companions. At some point in the conversation, he told me that he was “a moderate ultra-leftist.” I gave him an interrogatory look, and he completed “firmness in principles and the necessary tactical flexibility to take advantage of every moment to move the movement forward.” Since then, I have made that militant formulation my own, clarity in the strategic orientation and sufficient capacity to understand the changing conjunctures – the relations of force at each moment, the contradictions and fissures in the ruling classes – and to intervene politically in them.

His prolific activity includes the training of generations of militants around the world. In many cases, like mine, distance learning by reading their works.

**Finally, and to close the interview. How would you make a quick assessment of such an important figure – perhaps the most important in the anti-Stalinist ranks after Leon Trotsky – for the ideas and the transformative action of our societies?**

Well, first of all, he was passionate about what he did and the bearer of a bulletproof optimism. Frequently he was criticized for his exaggerated optimism, which I believe was a legacy of Trotsky himself. It should be said that Ernest describes the golden period of capitalism 1945-1975, like no one else, which he affirms “was a unique and unrepeatable process”. But from then until today the world has changed several times. The restructuring of capital in the last decades of the last century, the rise of neoliberalism, the rise of China and Southeast Asia, the 2008 crisis, value chains, the pandemic and war, artificial intelligence... A new world is being formatted in this period of what we could call the hegemonic transition on a global scale. And we have to take it into account to know what is current in his thought and what is not.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [lvientosur](#).

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