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Review

Destiny of a Revolutionary

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Jan Willem Stutje has taken on an enormous task in writing this biography, and probably an impossible one. To evaluate Ernest Mandel means evaluating the revolutionary left in the second half of the 20th century, which means evaluating the whole trend of development in world politics.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/png/Ernestmandel.png]
Ernest Mandel being interviewed on German television
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDtBR7nUSwk

Mandel had such a range of contacts and interests that it's extremely difficult to see the wood from the trees, to see what's important and what is either very secondary or just gossip. Then again, Ernest touched so many lives and influenced so many people that many in the book's audience have their own version of Ernest Mandel, and are certain to have individual opinions and memories that contrast with what some of what the books says.

Indeed being for or against Ernest Mandel was part of the identity of many in the Trotskyist movement – Militant and its successors referred (and refers) to the Fourth International as the 'Mandelites', while some English speaking supporters of Mandel's political trend referred to themselves, only half jokingly, as 'Mandelistas'.

Mao Zedong, when asked for his balance sheet of the French Revolution is alleged to have replied 'It's a bit early to tell'. And maybe it's too early to write a balanced biography of Mandel, since this involves making an assessment – perhaps the book's central theme – of his eternal 'optimism', and his eventual exasperation at the turn of events in Eastern Europe and the advent of neoliberalism; in other words making an assessment of the prospects for socialism in the foreseeable future.

But Stutje has made a bold attempt, and in many ways a successful one, to weave together narrative and analysis and to give a picture of the man's personality and personal life, as well as his theoretical achievements and political successes and failures. Stutje has talked to a lot of people and had the advantage of access to the Mandel archives; Mandel was a prolific correspondent and could reel off half a dozen treatise-length letters in an evening. Some of the correspondence quoted, for example exchanges of letters with Perry Anderson, is very revealing. In the era of email this is a resource that is unlikely to be available to future biographers, unless they have strong contacts in the security services.

So this is a serious book, packed with information about Mandel's life, which leftists everywhere will find interesting. But in the end I think it is seriously unbalanced, and while individual criticisms are well founded, overall it doesn't really situate Mandel's extraordinary abilities and achievements.

Everybody is a product of their times and what they can do with their lives depends not only on their own abilities and character, but on the circumstances in which they find themselves. As Marx put it, "Men (sic) make their own history but not in the circumstances of their choosing". The circumstances as far as revolutionary militants are concerned also include the accumulated theoretical and political concepts with which they have to work, or attempt to modify.

To evaluate Mandel means to look at what he achieved against what he could have achieved. Looked at in that light Ernest Mandel's achievements are extraordinary; his weaknesses he often shared with the whole of the movement ('Trotskyist') that emerged from the Left Opposition's struggle against Stalinism. But first a digression on Mandel's personal life, about which the book says a lot, and maybe too much.

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Stutje has extensive coverage of Ernest's repeated failure to stabilise his personal relations with women, more specifically the difficulties of his love life. The mental illness and eventual suicide of his partner Gisela Scholtz is extensively covered, including Mandel's inability to help her. Part of this is certainly that he always put political work ahead of personal life. But having a relationship with someone like Mandel would have been in any case extraordinarily difficult. Being a significant revolutionary leader is always going to put enormous strains on one's social and personal life.

Stutje derives a whole theory out of this, arguing that Mandel's emotional development was arrested at adolescence, leaving him incapable of real intimacy. This is biographer as psychoanalyst, an unnecessary extrapolation from the known facts. Isaac Deutscher's biography of Trotsky, by contrast, manages to integrate movingly his subject's personal life without stooping to pop psychology.

More substantially I think the book, while accurately engaging with some of Mandel's political and theoretical weaknesses, doesn't accord enough credit to his extraordinary achievements. In addition, in covering the political debates and actions of the Fourth International, it leaves out some of the most important things and spends inordinate space on some secondary or irrelevant things.

First on Mandel's theoretical achievements, mentioned but inadequately assessed. Without question it was his ability to analyse the dynamics of modern capitalism and its coming crisis, and in the process re-excavate some of the basic concepts of Marx, that constitutes his lasting theoretical contribution. In this, it's true, he depended a lot on the work of and personal discussions with Roman Rosdolsky, whose path-breaking book on Marx's Grundrisse (*The Making of Marx's Capita*l) did a lot of the spade work for *Late Capitalism*. But then new theoretical insights rarely emerge fully formed from the brain of one person.

The announcement of this 'new' theoretical paradigm was not really his first theoretical work *Marxist Economic Theory* (a rather leaden production) , but his 1967 book *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (Verso). This book was really a polemic against Althusserian 'structural Marxism' and showed the importance of dialectical thought for understanding the innermost workings of â€˜generalised commodity production'.

His masterwork *Late Capitalism* was the most complete analysis produced by Marxists of the dynamics of the Keynesian-welfare state model of capitalism and why Keynesianism would not be able to withstand the fundamental contradictions and inevitable periodic crises of capitalism.

We should remember this book was written in 1970. If some of it is dated now, this is because it was basically correct and that Keynesianism collapsed. What is not dated in the book – and lots of it is highly relevant as a theoretical model – is the notion of 'long waves' of capitalist development. Building on the ideas of Kondratieff, Mandel developed a paradigm that was not just another model, but highly relevant in understanding the sweep of post-Second World War history, and locating the relationship between capitalist economic development and the class struggle. Is there any doubt there was a 'long wave' of capitalist expansion after world war two? Or that neoliberalism constitutes another 'long wave'? In any case the notion of long waves helps us understand the long periods of capitalist civilisation, with implications of course for politics and ideology. Which is why it was so inspiring as a theoretical model for a social critic like Frederic Jameson who has attempted to chart the evolution of postmodernism as precisely the ideology of 'Late Capitalism'.

Not mentioned by Stutje is Mandel's 1975 collection *The Second Slump* (Verso). Mandel was able to use the ideas developed in *Late Capitalism* to see how the economic crisis of the 1970s could be situated historically and its implications for politics.

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With his economic theories Mandel complemented his political work in the Fourth International. As is well known, his pamphlet *An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* sold in hundreds of thousands in many languages in the late 1960s and 1970s. This helped win thousands of young militants to Marxism, without a shadow of doubt. These economic writings helped sustain the whole of the revolutionary left with the gut feeling – always important – that only Marxism could explain the contemporary world and that Marxists, and the Fourth International in particular, were at the cutting edge of theoretical analysis, much more than social democrats, liberals, theoretically dead Stalinism or the ideological right. This was a feeling more difficult to sustain from the 1980s onwards, of which more below.

But Mandel did more than this at the theoretical level. His writings, often in the form of long magazine articles or interviews, helped connect up the new generation of militant leftists with the best traditions of the pre-war European workers movement. He helped situate the contributions of Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, although he never wrote anything substantial on Gramsci. In other words he helped celebrate and explain the grandeur and extraordinary theoretical achievement of the pre- and post-first world war militants of the Communist movement, a generation whose ideas still dominate the revolutionary left, and whose contributions and strengths are well explained in Perry Anderson's book *Considerations on Western Marxism.*

Now we come to politics. Stutje's book has some extraordinary omissions. There is nothing about the formation of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil and the crucial role of the Fourth International militants in helping to establish it and subsequent debates about it. Or indeed about the eventual failure of the PT experiment and the balance sheet of that – particularly suprising in the light of Stutje's assertion that Mandel never developed a theory of the party. The Mexican PRT (Revolutionary Workers Party), at one point the biggest section of the Fourth International, is merely mentioned in passing in a footnote. Again its crisis and failure, and what that meant for the FI and its political methods, might have been a significant thing to discuss.

Perhaps even more amazingly the long fight in the 1980s with the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is absent from the book. This was fundamental because it involved an analysis of the whole state of the modern Marxist movement, the theory of permanent revolution, and the role of the Fourth International. Nor, incidentally, does the fate of the once important Spanish section figure, or by contrast the extraordinary successes of the Portuguese revolutionary Marxists in forming the Left Bloc, which has just won more than 10% in the European elections and elected 3 MEPS.

Astonishingly however there are pages and pages on the mid-1980s psycho-drama in the FI leadership over the organisation's Polish work. This, Stutje claims, damaged Mandel's reputation, damage that his reputation 'never recovered from'. This is nonsense. Most people who knew or knew of Mandel didn't know anything about this incident, in which he was not anyway a central actor.

If you want to make a balance sheet of Mandel's political achievements you have to start off with the success – and basically success it was – of the FI leadership team around Mandel, Pierre Frank and Livio Maitain in the 1950s and 1960s. Their success, once they had broken with the mercurial Palbo (Michael Raptis), was to orientate around three basic political options united by one method. First, unlike their sectarian opponents, an openness towards the colonial revolution which enabled them to see the importance of the Algerian independence struggle, celebrate and welcome the Cuban revolution and spot from a mile off that Vietnam was going to dominate world politics. Second they stuck firm to the idea that Stalinism would go into crisis. And third the idea that crisis would break out in the advanced countries, leading to new opportunities for the then isolated left.

Politically this leadership team held firm to non-sectarianism and tried always to link up with left developments – few as they were – in the European workers movement. This led to an over-long experiment with entrism in the mass workers parties, which hindered the turn to the newly emerging radical student and anti-war movement, the â€˜youth radicalisation'. But in most places they turned in time. And it was of course the attitude to Cuba and Vietnam – and

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the central role played by FI sections in the Vietnam solidarity movement - that enabled them to make significant gains in this milieu, gains that led to the creation of new sections of the International and the growth of old ones. The biggest success of course was in France, where Mandel spoke at a rally on the eve of the Night of the Barricades, alongside key leaders of the revolutionary youth like Danny Cohn-Bendit, Alain Krivine and Daniel Bensaid.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/JCRrallyMay101968-2.jpg]
Mandel with Danny Cohn-Bendit, Henri Weber, Daniel Bensaid and Alain Krivine, Paris May 68

At the November 1970 ‘Red Europe’ rally in Brussels (not mentioned in the book) thousands of young militants from across the continent celebrated the new ‘arrival’ of the Fourth International, many of them at the conclusion of the final rally holding up four fingers rather than a clenched fist. ‘Construisons le Quatrième International!’ proclaimed the next issue of Rouge, the Ligue Communiste paper. As detailed by Stutje, the euphoria was sustained by the Ligue Communiste-FI demonstration on the 100th anniversary of the Paris Commune in 1971, attended by perhaps 25,000 people, at which Mandel was the key speaker.

There was significant growth for the FI in the 1970s, but by the end of the decade – and Stutje is absolutely right about this – significant new difficulties. The new difficulties were twofold: first how to stabilise mainly young organisations for a long term intervention in the workers movement, and second, more fundamental, the onset of the worldwide capitalist counter-offensive and the swing to the right.

Out of these difficulties, primarily caused by defeats of the workers movement and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union, came organisational stagnation and internal crisis for the FI. These revealed some of Mandel’s weaknesses and Stutje makes some acute comments about all this.

On the organisational front was the collapse of the ‘leadership of all the talents’, the concentration in Paris of leaders from around the world in a single over-arching ‘Bureau’, politically led by Mandel and Charles-Andre Udry. Stutje quotes one of the Bureau, Daniel Bensaid, as saying this project employed ‘megalomaniac ambition’. It was a group of generals without an army, capable of making high quality analyses, but not of directing the sections of the Fourth International, let alone the world revolution.

The mismatch between ambition and reality led to a long attempt, mainly successful, to redefine the role of the International in more modest ways, no longer ‘the world party of socialist revolution’ but one detachment of the movement for revolutionary social change..

But more fundamental, and again Stutje is correct on this, was the shift to the right and the difficulty of being revolutionary in a world with little time for revolution. Mandel was resistant to accepting the need for redefinition, but then so were lots of people.

Stutje charges Mandel with a persistent failure, an inability to politically stand up to valued allies for fear of breaking with them. I think there is something in this, but it has to be qualified. Leading an international revolutionary tendency is a complex business and compromises are inevitable. We saw, for example, the light-minded way the British Socialist Workers Party broke with their American co-thinkers in 2002 over very secondary questions, an act of self-defeating stupidity. Mandel rightly tried to avoid that kind of thing.

But Stutje’s charge that Mandel compromised too much with the ‘guerrillaist’ orientation in Latin America in the late 60s and early 1970s, in order not to break with the young and leftist French leadership, probably has some weight. It had negative effects right through to the mid-1980s. The compromise with the American SWP in the 1970s, engineered by Charles-Andre Udry, eventually involving the disastrous ‘turn to industry’, was backed by Mandel who must have had severe doubts about it.

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Mandel was unwilling to break with people he regarded as important intellectuals. For example, when the rightward-moving Ken Coates was expelled from the British section in 1967, Mandel defined it as a ‘split’ and maintained his personal links with Coates. Ernest thought that you couldn’t build anything significant without winning a section of the most important Marxist intellectuals in any particular country. He was able to use his personal prestige to build a wide network of personal contacts, but had frequent illusions in people who impressed him intellectually, sometimes wildly exaggerating the possibility of recruiting them. On the other hand his personal prestige enabled him to do some very positive things, outside the formal framework of the International. The attempt he made to win over Rudi Dutschke and a section of the SDS leadership in Germany in the late 1960s was absolutely right; the local section stuck in social democracy was incapable of doing it. His relationship with Perry Anderson led to very positive results, both for New Left Review and the International. The same is true for a series of personal intellectual exchanges he conducted with Marxist intellectuals worldwide, outside any attempt to recruit them to the Fourth International.

Stutje spends a long time charting Mandel’s increasing frustration with the turn of events internationally and his refusal to face up to the possibility of capitalist restoration in Russia and the Soviet Union, a shocking refusal to look reality in the face. But here it’s not just a question of an old man’s obstinate optimism, but of theoretical failings.

Ernest stubbornly held onto quite dogmatic and unnecessary schematism when it came to discussing Stalinism. For example, he defined Stalinism as subordination to the Soviet bureaucracy, without seeing that the Chinese regime or even the Vietnamese had – to put it politely – significant traits in common with East European and Russian Stalinism. Here social reality was subordinate to a definition.

Over the Soviet Union he held on mechanically to the idea that there was a triangular struggle between the working class, the bureaucracy and emerging capitalism - and inevitably the bureaucracy would fight capitalism to defend itself. The possibility that important sections of the bureaucracy would recycle themselves as a key constituent of a new capitalist class was excluded – because it didn’t fit the theory.

One of the most interesting suggestions that Stutje makes is that Mandel never developed a theory of the party, outside his early 1970s pamphlet The Leninist Theory of Organisation, which is really, as the author suggests, a theory of proletarian class consciousness, not of party organisation. Which doesn’t mean that most sections of the Fourth International didn’t have fairly fixed notions of party organisation, and fairly rigid there were too at least in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Since then there has been substantial rethinking and some of the most important discussion is contained in the new book by Daniel Bensaid about to be published by Resistance Books.

Much debate on this issue revolves around the relevance of Lenin’s alleged model of the party for modern times. But is it really true that Lenin had a fixed notion of party organisation? This is a long debate, but it seems to me that Lenin was the ultimate pragmatist on organisational forms. Be that as it may, Ernest’s ‘failure’ to develop a theory of party organisation isn’t really a failure, because it was probably impossible to develop one in the period he was active. I suspect that it is not possible, faced with the diverse circumstances we face today and with experiences like the New Anticapitalist Party in France and the Left Bloc in Portugal, to develop any general theory of the party, or at least any general model. Of course we have to defend the party form against anarchism and ensure the organisation of Marxists. Beyond that? – it depends.

I started out this review saying that people can’t be judged outside their time and circumstances. Unfortunately historical rhythms are no respecters of individual biographies. You do what you can with the resources you have in the period in which you live.

To quote Mao again, in a thousand years time we’ll all look pretty ridiculous. Whatever the final verdict on Ernest Mandel, another Ernest Mandel is impossible. The sum total of human knowledge, even important general

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knowledge let alone scientific discovery, makes it impossible for any individual to synthesise the most important aspects of that knowledge for revolutionary practice. Team leaderships – and thus lots of political and theoretical disagreements – are the only way to develop militant left organisations. The era when international tendencies could be dominated by the thought of a single individual is over. Towards the end of Mandel's life this was already obvious, when the accumulated gains of 'Mandel thought' were insufficient to explain a series of developments like the ecological crisis and an intelligent Marxist response to it.

My verdict of Stutje's book is that it is overly concerned by the disappointments of the final years of Mandel's life, by Polish nonsense and his personal life. Ernest Mandel played a vital role in transmitting the revolutionary heritage of the pre-war period to new generations, of re-establishing the reputation of authentic Marxism after years of Stalinist distortion, of revitalising what was in the 1950s a near-moribund revolutionary Marxist movement and of preparing that movement for inevitable capitalist crisis. You don't have to write hagiography to recognise that. Mandel's political 'children', the type of people who are today found in the leadership of Marxist organisations like the New Anticapitalist Party in France, the Left Bloc in Portugal, Sinistra Critica in Italy and the PSOL in Brazil, but also involved in a wide range of political activism and theoretical work worldwide, represent an astonishing array talent that continues to embody Mandel's revolutionary commitment, without the illusions.

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