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### **The legendary optimism of Ernest Mandel**

Let me start with an anecdote, a recollection of the economic historian André Gunder Frank, told in an in memoriam Tribute to Ernest Mandel in 1995.

Frank recalled standing on a street corner with Mandel waiting for his wife Gisela, who did some shopping.

Ernest asked him: “don’t you agree that we Trotskyites do the best analysis of what is going on in the world?”

Frank answered: “yes I do”

Well, riposted Ernest: “then you also have to agree that we have the best political practice”.

“No”, answered Frank, “I don’t agree and I do not have to, because what you say is a complete non-sequitur”.

In the biography of Ernest Mandel, which will be published in Dutch language at the end of coming March, I might have come to the conclusion that where these giants each claim there right, they both fail in the same way.

**First:** because even the Trotskyites of the Fourth International didn’t always have the best analysis of what was happening in the World. And **Second:** even these same Trotskyites sometimes managed to have a political practice that could be called adequate and effective.

And yes indeed: the best political practices do not always coincide with the best political analysis and vice versa: this paradox is one of the themes, I had in mind writing Mandels biography. And there is good reason to believe, there is a connection between this paradox and Mandels more or less legendary optimism.

Before entering into this subject in a more detailed way, first some remarks about Mandel, his life and work.

Mandel was a thinker, always being in revolt: at **three** different but interconnected levels:

### 1: **First Level**

Mandel was a heterodox thinker. His *Marxist economic theory* which was published in 1962, was a provocative experiment. In the **first** place, because Mandel replaced history back into the core of Marx' economic theory and he did so amidst dominant positivism and structuralism in the social sciences and in confrontation with deterministic, often Soviet inspired interpretations of Marxism. And provocative, **secondly** because: Mandel superseded the undisputed Eurocentrism by independently asking attention for pre-colonial Asia, but also for Africa, the Islamic World and Pre-Columbian America.

Unlike Althusser, Mandel – as elaborated in *The formation of the economic thoughts of Karl Marx: 1843 to Capital (La Formation de la pensée économique de Karl Marx, de 1843 jusqu'à la rédaction du Capital)* – understood Marx' scientific method as genetical-evolutional with the task of performing historical research on each fundamental category. It enabled him to present a theory of late capitalism in which the dynamics of the system were not deduced from one single category – as was the case in the work of Henryk Grossmann, for whom over-accumulation was the motor of capitalist development; or the work of Rosa Luxemburg and Paul Sweezy, who attributed the main role to the problem of realisation of surplus-value. In Mandel's eyes the complexity of modern capitalism left no room for reductionism, and for that reason he represented a theory in which the dynamics were deduced from an arrangement of dependent and partly independent variables: a theory which, as he himself emphasized, was based on a dialectic concept of determinism which left open the option of choices in the economic and historical process.

Mandel's study resulted in *Late Capitalism (Der Spätkapitalismus)*, which he finished in a turbulent West Berlin where as a visiting professor at the leading Otto Suhr Institut für Politikwissenschaft he defended his vision against a chaos of sometimes hostile criticism in lively debate with students and confrères. To his friend and mentor Roman Rosdolsky, he once declared: 'In general nothing truly good can emerge from a single brain; several thick skulls must have room to bump up against each other in order to make the sparks fly.' Sure, Mandel didn't found a scientific school, but as a

rebellious thinker he understood better than anyone else the value of critical confrontations.

## **2: The second level**

Mandel was more than a heretical thinker alone, he was a thinker of revolution too. He was not the type of person that cling to so called realism. Neither was he messianistic or objectivistic, as critics blamed him for. His theory of long waves or his dialectic concept of determinism are to proof this.

Mandel agreed with Walter Benjamins principle that “politics reigns over history”; that nothing is determined. Ernest was a man of Enlightenment, a man of reason and an optimist but his optimism had nothing to do with historical determinism. Mandel didn't emphasize what was realistic neither on necessities. He stressed potentialities and emphasized what was possible. Mandel was a daydreamer, a dreamer of revolution and characterized the human being – following his most respected friend, the philosopher Ernst Bloch – as a homo sperans, inspired by ‘das Prinzip Hoffnung’, prophecy of what is possible.

Mandel believed in human creativity and solidarity without any restriction.

“Trotskyism” – he wrote in 1952 – “is above all the belief, the unshakable faith in the capacity of the proletarians of all countries to take their destiny into their own hands.” This idea marked Mandel as a revolutionary Marxist who just as Trotsky did before him, assigned the subjective factor a leading part in overcoming what he considered as the tragedy of the Twentieth Century: the contradiction between “the maturity of objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard”.

For Mandel, this was a weighty question. He stressed the necessity of building a revolutionary workers' party that could play a guiding role in socialist movements. It is however remarkable that he never made a systematic attempt to develop a theory of the revolutionary party and of workers' movement organizations.

In an article *The Leninist theory of organization (Lenin und das Problem des proletarischen Klassenbewußtseins)* 1970, one of the few efforts to study the question, Mandel followed the young Marx, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, who stressed the revolutionary creativity of the workers movement in action. He agreed with Lenin, saying that the working class develop a ‘natural anti-capitalist’ consciousness in

revolutionary en pre-revolutionary conditions. For Mandel the revolutionary class-consciousness was number one; not the party or her comparative autonomy.

This is understandable for three reasons:

**First**, because of Mandel's effort to neutralize the idea on the working class becoming bourgeois, ideas formulated by Marcuse and Horkheimer so popular in the sixties. And his desire to fight against the distrust of Stalinism in spontaneous mass protest. Why stressing the limits of the mass movement as her legitimacy is so much challenged.

**And moreover:** after the short post-war upturn, there followed a period of discouragement and passivity; a period of revolutionaries wintering in the dominant social-democratic and communist parties. This was the wrong time to test the classical party theory to new experiences. The revolution was emigrated to the colonial and semi colonial World. This brought however no compensation whatsoever: compared with other social layers (small farmers, peasant labourers, semi and sub proletariat), the working class was small and lacked a Marxist tradition.

**And finally** Mandel's impotence to design a new theory of the party can be understood from the situation in the sixties. Not earlier than in the second half of the decade the situation changed with the dynamic youth radicalisation. Although in May 68 parts of the strike movement now and then managed to escape from the grip of the PCF-CGT, the majority rested under the influence of the traditional parties, The developments were uneven and too contradictory to give Mandel the opportunity to design a new theory.

### **3: The third level, finally**

Having memorized Mandel as a heterodox thinker and as a thinker of revolution, we must not forget Mandel was a revolutionary himself, a rebel from his childhood on. When he was fifteen, sixteen years of age, he joined the Fourth International, just founded in 1938 in Périgny, near Paris. As a revolutionary he was despised by the ruling authorities. Hans Dietrich Genscher, the German liberal Minister of Home Affairs – for example - blamed Mandel not only for his scholarly defence of permanent revolution but – what is even worse – for practicing his theories. In 1972 Mandel was banned from Western Germany, as he was banned since the end of the sixties from Swiss, France, The United States and Australia. In The Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europa he was persona non grata as well. A few weeks

before the wall fell in 1989, he was hindered by the Stasi to cross the border of Eastern Berlin; Mandel was said to be a “Gegner der Soviet Union”.

The day after he died, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noticed :“ More than anyone else this Belgium scholar was confronted with the anathemas from the right and from the orthodox left. But for the generation of 68 he was a model and a source of inspiration.

For sake of time I can't dwell too long on the revolutionary life of Mandel. It is described in extenso in the biography which I hope will be translated soon.

To conclude I will return to Mandels optimism.

Let me emphasize that Mandel was an optimist; an optimism that was founded in his strong belief that rebellion and the striving for emancipation is human. He was proud to stand on the shoulders of comparable optimists as Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky and Rakovsky, in spite of all the mistakes these ancestors made. He himself was aware to have made even bigger ones. But, to quote himself: “So what? Didn't the opponent made more miserable, more criminal mistakes.”

Mandels optimism was his *raison d'être*. He had confidence in the possibility to change the world and placed hope in even the smallest particles of resistance. His reason to exist was to blow them up, in order to analyse them in a more detailed way. It helped him joining any struggle, even when there was no certainty about victory. This was a correct way to do. It illuminates the rational element in Mandels optimism. This does not mean however that Mandel hold a naïve optimistic view on history and on her irreversible progress. As Michael Löwy correctly has stressed: Mandels optimism of the will – to use an expression of Gramsci – was balanced by an intellectual pessimism. More than anybody else Mandel was convinced that if the natural course of history continue as usual, if no revolution takes place, mankind was doomed to catastrophe.

One is only surprised to see how - at the end of the seventies, in the beginning of the eighties -, this optimism of the will was more and more blown up by an unfounded optimism of the intellect, which inspired him to overoptimistic predictions about the revolutions and about the impetuous rise of the masses in Spain, in France, in Poland, in Eastern Germany and in the USSR.

I don't think these mistakes have anything to do with a lack of conceptualisation or shortcomings of Marxist theoretical tools. The reforms in Eastern Europe and the USSR for example were analysed even in the Fourth International as contradictory. Here too, a capitalist restoration was considered as a serious possibility.

To my opinion Mandel's mistakes have to do with **three** aspects:

**First:** One can not deny that there was an ambiguity in Mandel's bilateral position as a political analyst on one side and as an organizer on the other side. That is to say: as an organizer who cares for unity in the International or who strives for resistance at a level as large as possible.

In the biography you'll notice that at several crucial occasions Mandel preferred a compromise to defending the integrity of his convictions. Mandel didn't live to see a revolution. The least he could do, was preparing a revolution, that is to say: building an International and building its sections, especially - at the end of his life - in Eastern Europe.

This provoked a conservative reflex, in which the quasi historical hope to witness the upsurge of mass sections of the International - at the apex of the crisis of Stalinism - outstripped a more realistic view of what was really happening. See for example Mandel's derailment in an unfounded over-optimism about the beginning of a political revolution in Eastern Germany after the wall came down in 1989.

This had also to do – and this is a **second** element - with a psychological aspect.

Mandel's political voluntarism was the expression of hope and fear. Hope to witness a revolution before he should die; fear that everything would be destroyed by a restoration of capitalism. Mandel was very much aware of the historical character of the eighties and the nineties of the last century. He realized it was the end of his life and he knew it would be a turning point in history. His wishful thinking about Poland, the GDR and the Soviet Union was based on an unilateral presentation of positive aspects of the situation, looking away from the contradictory elements.

Mandel's ambiguous position nor his obsession to participate in a revolution however, are sufficient elements to explain his extreme voluntarism. For a satisfying explanation – and this is the **last** element -, one has to count with the long historical period in which Mandel and The Fourth International tried to change the relations of power. I mean the century starting with the Second International in the eighties of the nineteenth century and ending in the eighties of the twentieth century with the

breaching of the wall. During this long period the working class was growing unceasingly, experienced a major social and cultural development and gave birth to huge trade unions and political labour parties.

Mandel rightly maintained that the capacity of the working class to resist can not be deduced mechanically from what is happening 'here' and 'now'. Class consciousness is the expression of experiences of a more extended historical episode. The question, I would like to raise, is whether the eighties did produce such a breaking point that this surprised Mandel with new unexpected circumstances. For example: analysing the structure and consciousness of the working class, Mandel used to underline her enormous numerical growth, in particular since the Second World War. He observed a homogenisation in trade union activities as well and declared with a remarkable objectivism: "when we are ascertaining an increase of trade unionism, we are noticing an increasing combativity too".

Two remarks about this lapidary contention:

In the **first** place: yes indeed the homogenisation of the working class increased. But at the same time the social meaning of belonging to the working class changed, as far as the traditional form of the Proletariat vanished. Limiting the proletariat to modern wage labour, Mandel was ignoring too easily the not free and informal labour force in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as what Marx called the impoverished Lazarus-Schicht of job-less, sick and disabled human beings in the industrial world. This blind spot was the source of a lot of mistakes, as soon as what was called the waste of the past society increased spectacularly in the seventies and the eighties. Together with the occurrence of mass unemployment and the transformation of fordist-keynesian structures into flexible neo-liberal relations of production, this spectacular increase of 'marginal' labour was the driving force in changing the tendency from homogenisation and strengthening to differentiation and decreasing of the social economic power of the working-class. For the second time, after a first decline during the crisis of 1929-1932, there occurred a slowing down in the relative growth of the working-class.

I come to an end. The question is whether Mandel has fully taken into account these social economic changes. Repeatedly Mandel uttered his believe in the objective forces of the working class, which should have remained unshaken. Should we seek

here the sources of his reckless over-optimism? An over-optimism which was given an unrefutable urgency, because of his ceaseless warnings for an imminent disaster, if there was no worldwide revolutionary action against the system. After 1985, socialism or barbarism was increasingly replaced in Mandels discourse by a new choice: socialism or death.

Was this utmost apocalyptic conception of the future the other side of his over-optimism? Mandel didn't succeed to understand the character of the world in which he came to age. After the bourgeois unification of Germany and the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, his optimism flew away. From this moment on he stressed more and more the ethical urge to resist, the categorical imperative to struggle against all social conditions in which human beings are exploited, oppressed and alienated.

This duty to struggle he defended until his death.

However difficult it might seem to understand Mandels optimism confronted with the facts. I have to conclude: the more the world is overwhelmed with these so called hard fact, the more I feel a desire, a nostalgia for Mandels optimism and humanism – and for his analyses, just to find a way out.