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Ernest Mandel Was One of the 20th Century's Greatest Marxist Thinkers

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Born on this day a century ago, Ernest Mandel was one of the major political thinkers of his age. From his teenage activism in the anti-Nazi resistance to his final days, Mandel was an uncompromising defender of socialist ideals and working-class interests.

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he Belgian socialist intellectual and activist Ernest Mandel was born one hundred years ago today on April 5, 1923. Mandel was a tireless agitator and scholar who wrote some of the most significant works of Marxist theory during the second half of the twentieth century.

Mandel is perhaps best remembered today for his book *Late Capitalism*, which [popularized](#) a now familiar term. The critic Fredric Jameson drew heavily upon Mandel's economic writings in his theorization of postmodernism, and "late capitalism" has become a [journalistic cliché](#) for cultural analysis.

Mandel himself, who once wrote a social history of crime novels, might have smiled at this curious appropriation of his work. But his overriding goal was to challenge the power structures of capitalism rather than analyze its cultural side effects.

He remained faithful to that goal from his teenage years as a wartime resistance fighter who survived the Nazi prison system to his final days in the neoliberal wasteland of the 1990s. Mandel's political life and work can be an important source of inspiration for the new socialist movement of today.

Resisting Nazism

Mandel was born to a family of assimilated Polish Jews of German background in the Belgian city of Antwerp. His father, Henri Mandel, had left-wing sympathies — specifically with the ideas of Leon Trotsky. During the 1930s, after the Nazis came to power in Germany, the Mandel house became a meeting place for left-wing refugees. Listening to such refugees discuss socialism, the latest

developments in the Soviet Union, and the rise of fascism, the young Ernest received an early introduction to radical politics.

In May 1940, the war came to Belgium as Nazi Germany invaded the country. Large parts of the established left were unable to respond to the new situation. Many leaders of the social democratic Belgian Labour Party and the trade unions fled the country, while former Labour Party leader [Hendrik de Man](#) called for collaboration with the occupiers.

The Soviet-German nonaggression pact was still in force at the time, and the Belgian Communists proclaimed a stance of the “purest and most complete neutrality.” Weeks after the Nazi invasion began, an assassin working on Soviet orders murdered Trotsky in his Mexican exile.

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Amid this disarray, a group of independent leftists set out to publish the first underground Flemish-language [newspaper](#), which was produced in the Mandel home. Ernest and his father wrote many of the articles in the paper. In August 1942, Ernest went underground. At the end of that year, he was arrested but managed to escape while being transported.

According to Mandel’s [biographer](#) Jan Willem Stutje, Henri Mandel paid a ransom for his son’s release. Ernest’s “daring flight” might well have been “staged by agents anxious to avoid being questioned.” According to Stutje, Mandel’s escape left him with a sense of guilt.

Undeterred, Mandel continued his resistance activities. By this time, he had become a member of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). In early 1944, the RCP produced a bilingual pamphlet about contacts between German and US corporations that directly addressed the German soldiers: “You are being sacrificed as cannon fodder while your masters negotiate to save their possessions.” On March 28, 1944, while distributing the pamphlet, Mandel was again arrested.

Having been arrested for his resistance activities rather than because he was Jewish, Mandel was sent to different prisons and work camps, at one point being forced to work in a chemicals factory of IG-Farben. As a resistance member, a Jew, and a Trotskyist who was despised by his Stalinist fellow prisoners, his chances of survival were slim.

Mandel later [recalled](#) that pure luck was one reason he managed to pull through. But he also credited his success in establishing ties with some of the German prison warders who had been supporters of the Social Democratic party before the Nazis took power: “That was the intelligent thing to do, even from the point of view of self-preservation.” The harsh conditions took their toll and Mandel was hospitalized in early 1945. On March 25, 1945, US forces liberated the camp in which he was being held.

Trotskyism After Trotsky

Although Mandel’s direct family members survived the war, his grandmother, aunt, and uncle were

all killed in Auschwitz, along with their families. Henri Mandel dreamt of an academic career for his son, but Ernest had other priorities. He wanted to continue the struggle against capitalism, the system that had produced the horrors of Nazism and the war. Throughout his life, the experience of fascism remained a political and moral reference point for Mandel.

Leon Trotsky and his supporters had founded the [Fourth International](#) (FI) in 1938. Trotsky expected that the test of the coming war would discredit the Stalinist Communist Parties and hoped that the FI would develop into an alternative. However, the important role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and the participation of communists in Europe's resistance movements brought those parties unprecedented prestige and popularity, leaving their rivals on the radical wing of the workers' movement with limited opportunities for growth.

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Meanwhile, war and repression had decimated the small groups associated with the FI. Mandel felt that it was his duty to help build the Trotskyist movement and became a leading activist in its ranks. In part, he was driven by the memory of comrades who the Nazis had killed, such as his close friend Abram Leon, the author of an [important study](#) of Jewish history and antisemitism.

Like many radicals, Mandel thought that the war would be the prelude to a wave of revolutions in Europe, as had been the case with World War I. The program Trotsky drafted for the FI in 1938 asserted that capitalism had run aground:

Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses.

Gradually, Mandel came to recognize that the system would not only continue to function, but was even able to develop further, entering into a long period of economic growth after 1945. Under these conditions, he joined the Belgian Socialist Party, keeping his Trotskyist identity secret, and help found the weekly *La Gauche (The Left)*, a paper that became influential on the socialist left in Belgium.

In this period, Mandel came into his own as a socialist theoretician and leader. In 1962, he published his first major work, *Marxist Economic Theory*. The book gave a systematic presentation of its topic, attempting to prove that one could "reconstitute the whole economic system of Karl Marx" by drawing upon "the scientific data of contemporary science."

In the introduction to the book, Mandel described his approach as "genetico-evolutionary," by which he meant that he was engaged in study of the origin and evolution of his topic. "Marxist economic theory," he wrote, ought to be regarded as "a summation of a method, of the results obtained by using this method, and of results which are continually subject to re-examination." The combination

of history and theory, continuously trying to integrate new findings, would be characteristic of Mandel's work.

Structural Reforms and Socialist Strategy

While working on *Marxist Economic Theory*, a book that ran to almost eight hundred pages in its English translation, Mandel developed a strategy of "[anti-capitalist structural reforms](#)" as part of the circle around *La Gauche*. By this he meant reforms that would not introduce socialism in themselves but would nonetheless represent steps toward it and "give the working class the ability to decisively weaken big capital."

For Mandel, possible anti-capitalist structural reforms in Belgium included the organization of a planning bureau that would guarantee full employment, public control over major corporations, and nationalization of the energy sector. He emphasized that economic reforms could not be separated from the issue of political power.

Mandel was attempting to formulate a socialist strategy that might be suitable for a highly developed capitalist country like Belgium. One source of inspiration for this effort was the Belgian general strike of winter 1960 against a series of reforms proposed by the right-wing government. Lasting several weeks, the strike involved hundreds of thousands of workers. The French strikes and factory occupations of June 1936, after the left-wing Popular Front came to power, were another example cited by Mandel.

During the postwar period of economic growth, living conditions had improved for many, but struggles like the Belgian general strike showed that capitalist development had not fully pacified the working class. For Mandel, the most powerful weapons of the workers in the struggle against capitalism were organization, political education, and an awareness of their essential economic role.

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He recognized that workers' struggles did not simply revolve around economic conditions but were also driven by resistance to alienating and oppressive work practices. Even relatively well-off workers experienced alienation and domination at the workplace. In a balance sheet of the 1960 strike, Mandel wrote that the working-class struggle against capitalism "differs from social struggles in the past in that it is not only a fight for essential, immediate interests." That struggle could become a "conscious fight to restructure society."

Mandel argued that the Belgian strike was a lost opportunity because there had been no political leadership to propose such a restructuring. For revolutionary change to come about, it was necessary to extend the struggle for economic reforms to the question of political power.

For Mandel, the struggle could only be victorious if "the opponent was confronted not only in the factories but also in the streets." History had shown, he insisted, the need to establish a revolutionary party that would "tirelessly explain" to working people that it was necessary to seize economic as well as political power in order to achieve their goals.

Dynamics of Late Capitalism

During the 1960s, Mandel developed his understanding of how capitalism worked a century after Marx had published *Capital*. He initially used the term "[neo-capitalism](#)" before settling on "[late capitalism](#)." The 1972 book of that title was Mandel's magnum opus.

In *Late Capitalism*, he attempted to "provide a Marxist explanation of the causes of the long post-war wave of rapid growth." According to Mandel, this period of growth also had "inherent limits" that ensured it would give way to "another long wave of increasing social and economic crisis for world capitalism, characterized by a far lower rate of overall growth." He correctly predicted the end of the postwar boom in the mid 1970s.

Mandel considered stepped-up rates of technological innovation to be one of the characteristics of late capitalism. This shortened the lifespan of fixed capital and resulted in an increased need for large firms to engage in planning. There was also government intervention in the economy on an unprecedented scale to avoid breakdowns like the 1929 Wall Street Crash. As Mandel observed in 1964: "The State now guarantees, directly and indirectly, private profit in ways that range from concealed subsidies to the 'nationalization of losses.'"

According to Mandel, every attempt by capitalism to overcome its contradictions presented it with new problems.

However, every attempt by capitalism to overcome its contradictions presented it with new problems. Backed by governments, banks extended cheap credit to corporations, enabling rapid growth but also leading to inflation. Such inflation damaged the major long-term investments that were central to competition between the big, capital-intensive firms.

In turn, attempts to fight inflation created problems of their own, throttling economic growth. State intervention in the economy might be useful in avoiding catastrophic crises and guaranteeing profits. But it also made it clear to everyone that "the economy" was not a natural given.

Revolutionary Horizons

Mandel wagered on the possibility of revolutionary change resulting from such contradictions. Explosions such as the Belgian general strike and the Greek [Apostasia](#) crisis of 1965 presented him with a classic Marxist dilemma. If it was true, as Marx had insisted, that "the dominant ideology of every society is the ideology of the dominant class," then how could the working class liberate itself?

Mandel recognized that the dominance of ruling-class ideology had deeper roots than "ideological manipulation" through the mass media, the school system, etc. This dominance drew strength from the daily workings of capitalism in which working people were forced to compete with each other and had to depend on the sale of their labor power.

Yet the inevitable contradictions and crises of capitalism that resulted from competition between the dominant monopolies also led to fissures in the ruling consensus. The central question for socialists was how to go beyond the outbursts of discontent that were the unavoidable result of economic turbulence. To move from defensive struggles against attacks on living conditions and wages to demands for workers' power required a "conscious leap."

In Mandel's framework, the 'vanguard' was not a self-declared elite but rather the most committed and energetic activists of the working class.

In an [influential text](#) about the need for socialist organization, Mandel developed his ideas on what would make such a leap possible. He distinguished between three groups: the mass of the working class; a vanguard of that class consisting of activist workers; and the members of revolutionary organizations. The third category partially overlapped with the second.

In Mandel's framework, the "vanguard" was not a self-declared elite but rather the most committed and energetic activists of the working class. Building a revolutionary movement meant winning such activist workers over to socialist ideas. This would provide them with organization and prevent their withdrawal from political activism during the inevitable ebb of immediate social struggles.

Radical change would be possible only during waves of unrest, when the contradictions of capitalism generated mass anger and protest. During such periods, a revolutionary party should attempt to draw ever larger groups of people into political action and propose anti-capitalist demands.

Mandel saw revolution as a process of interaction between organized action and spontaneous movements in which working people would inevitably organize themselves in different groups. This cut across a stereotypical divide between organization and spontaneity that was respectively associated with the figures of Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on the Marxist left. Half-jokingly, Mandel called himself "a Leninist with Luxemburgian deviations."

A Bridge Between Generations

The 1960s and early '70s were turbulent times during which Mandel was extraordinarily [productive](#), as if carried along by the rising tide of class struggle. Along with *Late Capitalism*, the other books he published in those years included a study of the contradictions between US and European capitalism, a scholarly text on [The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx](#), a critique of the [Eurocommunist](#) tendency among the West European Communist Parties, and an examination of the cycles of boom and slump in the history of capitalism, [Long Waves of Capitalist Development](#). During his life, Mandel published over two dozen books and hundreds of articles.

At the same time, Mandel was a tireless agitator and debater. In 1964, he was invited to Cuba to participate in [debates](#) over socialist planning. Che Guevara had read *Marxist Economic Theory* with great interest and held extensive discussions with Mandel.

The US authorities denied Mandel entry in a case that the Supreme Court's conservative majority later cited as a precedent to justify Donald Trump's 'Muslim ban.'

For his part, Mandel was greatly impressed with the Argentine revolutionary leader. When the Bolivian army captured and summarily executed Guevara in 1967 as he was trying to launch a campaign of guerrilla warfare, Mandel published a passionate tribute to “a great friend, an exemplary comrade, a heroic militant.”

The governments of capitalist states found Mandel to be an unwelcome presence on their territory. In 1969, the US authorities denied him entry in a case that the Supreme Court’s conservative majority later [cited as a precedent](#) to justify Donald Trump’s “Muslim ban.” A few years later, the West German government intervened to block Mandel’s appointment at the Freie Universität Berlin and had him deported from the country.

France was another country that banned Mandel from its soil. In May 1968, he was invited to speak at meetings of the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), a radical group that had moved toward the Fourth International. The JCR was [heavily involved](#) in the riots and protests of May ’68.

In what must have been a satisfying opportunity to engage in some practical activity, Mandel helped build barricades in the Paris Latin Quarter during the “[night of the barricades](#).” The car in which he had come to Paris was destroyed during the street fighting. A reporter overheard Mandel exclaim “How beautiful! It’s the revolution!”

For the new generation of revolutionaries, Mandel was a link to revolutionary history and experience. [Daniel Bensaïd](#), a leader of the JCR, recalled how Mandel helped them to discover “an open, cosmopolitan and militant Marxism.” For these young radicals, according to Bensaïd, Mandel was “a tutor in theory” and a bridge between generations — someone who made people think, rather than thinking for them.

Mandel had strong pedagogical skills, practiced in countless meetings with workers, trade unionists, student radicals, and revolutionary activists. His 1967 [pamphlet](#), “An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory,” became a widely read classic.

Socialism or Barbarism

There is something tragic in the fact that Mandel, who had fought so hard for socialist change, passed away in 1995, when neoliberal hegemony was at its height. Mandel had difficulty adapting to the decline of social struggles from the late ’70s on.

Looking back in the new century on a popular introduction to Marxism that Mandel had published in 1974, Bensaïd [argued](#) that its optimistic political analysis about the prospects for socialism drew upon Mandel’s “sociological confidence in the growing extension, homogeneity, and maturity of the proletariat as a whole.” According to Bensaïd, this confidence “transformed into an irreversible historic tendency the specific situation created by post-war industrial capitalism and its specific mode of regulation.” Yet the neoliberal offensive of the 1980s sent this process into reverse, undermining the forces of organized labor:

Far from being irreversible, the tendency to homogenisation was undermined by the policies of dispersal of work units, intensification of competition on the world labour

market, individualisation of wages and labour time, privatisation of leisure and lifestyles, the methodical demolition of social solidarity and protection. In other words, far from being a mechanical consequence of capitalist development, the rallying of the forces of resistance and subversion of the order established by capital is an incessant task recommenced in daily struggles, and whose results are never definitive.

Later in his life, Mandel's exuberant optimism was combined with warnings against the long-term effects of capitalism. The historical choice was barbarism or socialism, he insisted, and a socialist outcome was not guaranteed.

During this period, Mandel returned to the study of capitalist barbarism as expressed in the [World War II](#) and the [crimes of Nazism](#). Although he remained a lifelong admirer of Trotsky, he reevaluated some of his earlier judgments, becoming more critical of Trotsky's practices during his "[dark years](#)" in the early 1920s when, as Mandel saw it, "the strategy of Bolshevik leadership hindered rather than promoted the self-activity of workers."

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Mandel took pride in situating himself within what he considered the essential tradition of the Enlightenment — the striving for human emancipation and self-determination. Although he did not like the term, there was, as Manuel Kellner has [observed](#), a utopian dimension to Mandel's thought. This was utopianism in the best sense of the word: faith that society can be remade, by human action, into something much better.

The crisis of socialism and communism was in the eyes of Mandel first of all a crisis of this belief. "The principal task of socialists and communists," he wrote shortly before his death, "is to restore the credibility of socialism in the consciousness of millions." He described the goals of socialism in "near biblical terms":

Eliminate hunger, clothe the naked, give a dignified life to everyone, save the lives of those who die for lack of proper medical attention, generalise free access to culture including the elimination of illiteracy, universalise democratic freedoms, human rights, and eliminate repressive violence in all its forms.

For Mandel, the hope for such a future was based on the spark of rebellion that had always made people rebel against oppressive and alienating conditions. The task of socialists was to fan that spark into a flame by supporting all such rebellions and by presenting an alternative way forward.

That task has not changed. In a different historical period, Mandel's legacy of writing and activism can help us in the search for a new path.

ALEX DE JONG

P.S.

- Jacobin. 04.05.2023 :
<https://jacobin.com/2023/04/ernest-mandel-marixism-late-capitalism-postmodernism-socialism-economic-theory>

- Alex de Jong is editor of the socialist journal *Grenzeloos* and an activist in the Netherlands.