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***E. Mandel: The role of the curious intellectual in de class struggle.***

***Talk by***

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Talking about Ernest Mandel is at the same time arguing with Ernest Mandel. Arguing, because the essence of dialectics is developing the arguments to foster political practise. In this talk I will not review all Ernest's accomplishments and different roles in building the Marxist movement. In various forms this has been done in important books, such as Stutje's Biography, the Essay Collection by Achcar, and Kellner's study. A most valuable addition is the (multilingual) DVD, with interviews.<sup>1</sup>

As a student of Ernest, and a long-time collaborator, I will try to mix some essential characteristics of Ernest with the, our, his, mine, and yours here in this room, ultimate goal; the creation of a democratic society without cruelties, suppression by humans of humans, and in harmony with the non-human world around us.

Ernest was a pre-eminent Marxist economist, who in his books such as his *Marxist economic theory*, *The formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx*, *Late Capitalism*, and *Long waves of capitalist development*, paved new ways to analyse the intricacies of the capitalist economic system. However, it's not only about: *The economy, stupid*, as was Bill Clinton's best known presidential 1992 campaign slogan. For Ernest, his economic studies were essential prerequisites for his political thoughts and activities.

In the intertwining of history, economy, culture, and power struggles, the dynamics of the economy is an essential driving force, but not the only one. The western capitalist mode of production has its own dynamics and laws and therefore we have to understand them to overthrow them. The western development is not unique, as the Asia mode of production showed. The historical trajectories are not imposed on societies, in itself already proof that western capitalism is not a necessary God given road to socialism.

The great thing about Ernest's personality was -in my view and experience- the fascinating interplay between a sharp and extremely curious mind, a keen interest in some simple human passions, such as his love for sweet desserts and Dachshunds, and an unwavering political commitment.

Let me recall just a small anecdote to illustrate this. Ernest visited in the early seventies a meeting of the Dutch Trotskyite group, which was in the process of changing shirts from the Pabloist *Revolutionary Marxist Tendency* to that of the *Fourth International*. We met at the house of a comrade whose companion, had a little rat in a cage. The situation was tense and we all were a bit nervous about the visit of the "great man". Ernest stood quite a while spell

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Willem Stutje. *Ernest Mandel, a rebel's dream deferred*, Verso, 2009.

Gilbert Achcar (ed.). *The legacy of Ernest Mandel*, Verso, 1999.

Manuel Kellner, *Gegen Kapitalismus und Bürokratie - zur sozialistischen Strategie bei Ernest Mandel*, Neuer ISP Verlag, 2009.

Chris Den Hond (ed.). "*Ernest Mandel, een leven voor de revolutie*", Avanti Productions, 2005.

bound in front of the cage, “look!,he shouted, he is cleaning his nose”, “look at him!” Only after some grumbles from the audience he changed compassion and started to talk about the brilliant future ahead in building the FI on the waves after 1968 and the colonial revolutions. Ernest’s enthusiasm and eloquence, combined with his broad intellectual outreach, and optimism was, in my view crucial.

This typical combination of knowledge and passion was one of Mandel’s main characteristics. Unfortunately, this revolutionary hope often overshadowed the flip side: the brutal reality of daily life and the tardiness of social changes. This can be clearly seen in Mandel’s unwavering hope, and hence believe, in the political powers hidden in the East-European proletariat that would allow for a political revolution after Stalinism.

To discuss Ernest’s role in history, we have to mill over the old discussion on the role of the individual in history. Within Marxist circles this discussion started with a famous paper by Plekhanov in 1898, ‘On the Role of the Individual in History’.<sup>2</sup>

Plekhanov is the first Marxist who systematically argues against the historians who see important individuals -great man- as essential for the course of history, as well as those who take the flow of history as a given. In this paper he uses, e.g., the Seven Years' War (1756 - 1763), the French revolution, and Napoleon as examples of how individuals in the context of their societal structure played decisive roles. He states that: “this means that every man of talent, who *actually appears*, i.e. every man of talent who becomes a *social force*, is the product of *social relations*. Since this is the case, it is clear why talented people can, as we have said, change only individual features of events, but not their general trend; *they are themselves the product of this trend; where it not for that trend they would never have crossed the threshold that divides the potential from the real*”. And: “A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical moments, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes”.

The Ukrainian born historian Roman Rosdolsky, one of Ernest’s heroes, continues the discussion in 1965 in a posthumously published paper called: ‘The role of the chance event and the Great Man in history’.<sup>3</sup>

Rosdolsky takes next to Plekhanov, works of Marx and Engels such as *The German ideology*, *Capital*, and Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach*, as basis for a discussion with E. H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher about the role of Lenin and Trotsky in the October revolution. A key phrase is a note in Trotsky’s 1935 diary: “For the sake of clarity I would put it this way. Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place *-on the condition that Lenin was present and in Command*. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring -of this I have not the slightest doubt!”<sup>4</sup>

Rosdolsky forcefully argues against Carr and Deutscher that indeed the role of Lenin and

<sup>2</sup> Georgi Plekhanov (1898). *On the Question of the Individual’s Role in History* Selected Philosophical Works in five Volumes. Vol. II, pp. 283-315, Progress Publ. Moscow, 1976. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/xx/individual.html>

<sup>3</sup> The first publication is: Roman Rosdolsky *Die Rolle des Zufalls und der “Grossen Männer” in der Geschichte*. Kritik 5. Jahrgang 1977 Nr. 14, pp. 67-96.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Trotsky: *Trotsky’s Diary in Exile 1935*. Translated from the Russian by Elema Zarudnaya, Atheneum, 1963, p.46.

Trotsky in the given historical situation was essential. This does not implicate that if there was no Russian Revolution, as we witnessed, nothing would have happened in that period.

Ernest was well aware of this problem of the right person in the right time, and in particular the issue of how to prepare the movement and yourself for these interventions that the tide of history enables.

In his study about the personalities in the Second World War (Hitler, Hirohito, Mussolini, Churchill, Pétain, and de Gaulle), he uses Plekhanov and concludes that: “They are, in other words, the powerful sources of social conformism, producing personalities which conform to the needs of social classes or their major fractions”.<sup>5</sup>

In assessing these type of analyses, we have to try and understand what this means for the working class. A class with a distinct objective interest, but without a proud stable consciousness, even worse, most often the class has only a so-called false consciousness grounded in the hegemonic bourgeois ideological superstructure. How does a period create the opportunity for some people to stand up and stand out in playing a leadership role?

For the socialist movement this entails a multifarious challenge. Not only clear inroads have to be established into the day to day experiences and consciousness of the working class by exemplary actions of individuals and parties, the development of clear maximum and transitional political programmes, but, most and for all, tackling the question on how to create an environment in which we can educate and train potential leaders and spokespersons.

Whilst the interests of the capitalist class are well articulated in society by the way education, science and management systems on all levels of human activities are grounded in a long tradition, the antagonistic approach of organising society by the labouring and subordinated people can only become explicated after a political revolution. It is all about the ‘crisis of the political leadership’ as we know from the 1938 *Transitional programme*. But in order to allow the creation of a leadership, a serious social movement is a prerequisite; otherwise the ‘leadership; reduces to an intellectual and propagandistic body. Let me be clear, it is nevertheless in all circumstances essential that we build such bodies and try to let them interact actively with all available social movements.

In Ernest’s lifetime, despite the longing for it by our movement, no revolutionary situation emerged in the western world, and hence, our *great man*’s activities were limited to teaching, educating and building organisations to be prepared for fertile situations. In that sense we have to value Ernest’s role as voluntarist and over-passionated ‘cheer leader’ for the exploitation of even the most minute potentialities, a feature he shared with many of his generation. On top of that he expressed his wide ranging cultural and scientific interests. In a very interesting, and equally pessimistic, paper (in Dutch) by his comrade and collaborator Paul Verbraeken, it is shown that Ernest was well aware of the terrible situation of the socialist movement and the need to advance the subjective factor in mobilising the potential powers of the working class. An important issue is the loss of the conviction that a socialist future is possible.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ernest Mandel. ‘The role of the individual in History: the case of world war two’, *New Left Review*, 157, May/June 1986, pp. 61-77.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Verbraeken. *De worsteling van Ernest Mandel*(The wrestle of Ernest Mandel), Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift, Vol.29 (4), 1995, pp. 33-46.

[http://www.ernestmandel.org/nl/anderen/txt/de\\_worsteling\\_van\\_ernest\\_mandel.htm](http://www.ernestmandel.org/nl/anderen/txt/de_worsteling_van_ernest_mandel.htm)

Mandel's socialism goes beyond the field of economy in order to understand capitalism in its intrinsic strong and weak aspects, but expands into the broad sense of the human inquiry into nature, including humankind itself.

Mandel as an example of, as Gilbert Achcar phrases it, "an increasingly endangered species of theoreticians of militant Marxism", "[He]...felt a duty to pass on what he knew, to communicate this thirst for knowledge and his intellectual passions".<sup>7</sup>

It is the historical situation in which he rose (as well described by Stutje), and worked a necessary but almost unreasonable amounts of energy had to be spent in the defence of Marxism, not only vis-a-vis its natural enemy, the bourgeois state and ideology, but also, and often even more forcefully, against the terrible practises of Social Democratic and Stalinist degenerations. This defensive battle weakened, necessarily, the development of offensive new vistas.

Given Ernest Mandel's solid education and political training, he was well situated to play a crucial role for the emerging of new socialist forces after the decolonisation revolutions such as in his close interactions with Che Guevara and the cadres of the spectacular upheavals in 1968 and following years.<sup>8</sup>

Mandel's message is always clear, that although the general historical trend is a result of the development of the productive forces, the actual is the result of the conscious intervention of its players, that is to say the prepared political praxis of the working class.

In a not well known paper on morality<sup>9</sup>, he quotes Marx in a letter to Siegfried Meyer. Meyer (1840-72) was a German-American socialist, member of the First International, who took part in the organization of the German workers' movement in New York: "Why I never answered you? Because I was perpetually hovering on the verge of the grave. Therefore I had to use every moment in which I was capable of work in order that I might finish the task to which I have sacrificed my health, my happiness in life and my family. I hope this explanation requires no further supplement. I laugh at the so-called "practical" men and their wisdom. If one chose to be an ox one could of course turn ones back on the agonies of mankind and look after one's own skin. But I should really have regarded myself as unpractical if I had pegged out without completely finishing my book, at least in manuscript".<sup>10</sup>

This cry from the heart certainly reflects Ernest's own attitude towards the proletarian moral and his statement that Marxism comprises a *unity of two different historically determined societal* activities: the scientific practice and the emancipatory (liberating, socialist) practice.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Achcar: Introduction, Ernest Mandel (1923-1995): An intellectual Portrait, in Gilbert Achcar (ed.) *The legacy of Ernest Mandel*, Verso, 1999, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent, not very political, popular inventory of the miraculous year 1968 see: Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, Vintage Books, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Mandel, 1983, In Dutch: Marx, Engels en het probleem van de zogenaamde 'dubbele moraal' (Marx, Engels and the problem of the so-called double moral standard). In: *Veelzijdig marxisme, acta van het colloquium "De actualiteit van Karl Marx"*. Interestingly he quotes Kauksky, Lenin, Marx, and Engels, but only refers to Trotsky's famous *Their Morals and Ours*.

Available at: [http://www.ernestmandel.org/nl/werken/txt/1983/dubbele\\_moraal.htm](http://www.ernestmandel.org/nl/werken/txt/1983/dubbele_moraal.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Hanover, 30 April, 1867. MEW Band 31:542, International Publishers, 1942

[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_Engels\\_Correspondence.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Engels_Correspondence.pdf)

In this paper, he then attacks the idea of political interference in scientific work, as we have witnessed in Stalinism. For Mandel anthropologically and humanism dove tail in the socialists' activity of deep research into the laws of motion of the economy in its different phases. The combination of the moral as a guide for ending the exploitation of humans by humans must in its political expression be based on deep knowledge of society and the way people are mentally and psychologically educated in the historical determined capitalist phase of society.

This working like an ox, without chosen to be one, is also reflected in a paper written shortly after Mai '68 in which he gives a historical account of the role of the intellectual in the class struggle over the last centuries. He argues that the changing role of students as "apprentice brain worker" does make their emancipation in line with the working class, but given the relatively free status of students limits their capacities. He concludes with: "The growing integration of mental labour in the production process allows objectively integration between revolutionary students and intellectuals in the revolutionary movement. They will be able, with their permanently increasing political and technological knowledge, to deliver an important contribution to a direct transformation of science that will become a force for societal change. But this does not concern the role of the intellectuals as a social group in the class struggle. That is now only a role of the individual intellectual in solving the central problem of our time: the formation of an effective revolutionary leadership of the proletariat, in order to accomplish a socialist transformation of society".<sup>11</sup>

So, we see Ernest as a tireless activist who sees his role on two fronts. The main battle field is the building and developing of the *Fourth International*, the second front is the persistent scientific study and analysis of this very social battle field itself, on which the forces of the *Fourth International* fight.

In this respect it is useful to touch the important issue of the notion of what a science means. Against all kind of utopian ideas, Marx and Engels adhered to a strict notion of science as an objective activity. This is well illustrated in a letter from Engels to Paul Lafargue, clearly criticising a draft paper of the last: "Marx would protest against 'the political and social ideal' attributed to him by you. When one is an economist, 'a man of science', one does not have an ideal, one elaborates scientific results, and when one is, to boot, a party man, one struggles to put them into practice. But when one has an ideal, one cannot be a man of science, having, as one then does, preconceived ideas."<sup>12</sup>

We have to bear in mind, that the understanding that also scientific theories and methods are historically contingent only came forcefully to the fore half a century later than this dressing down of Lafargue by Engels, and is still an outstanding problem to be solved.

Mandel is well aware that although the economy and the development of production forces and its consequences for the working class are embedded in wide ranging cultural and social traditions. In order to escape and fight economic determinism and its fatalistic tenets, his innate curiosity let him explore many cultural fields and scientific investigations. His love for music and the arts are well known. Any possibility to visit a museum during his many trips

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Mandel, 1971. Die Rolle der Intelligenz im Klassenkampf, In: Ernest Mandel, *Die radikalisation der Jugend*, Internationale Sozialistische Publicationen, 1971, pp.16-28.

<sup>12</sup> Engels to Paul Lafargue, about 11 August 1884, *Marx & Engels Collective Works*, vol. 47, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 179.

was considered. But also his deep interest in biology, anthropology and the historical trajectory of Homo sapiens as such must be emphasised. Because, if we don't know what humans are and where they come from, how can we develop a peaceful human society?

Also the natural sciences which he discussed with his brother Michel, who was a professor of physical chemistry at Leiden University, played a role in his outlook to further vistas for shaping a picture of a socialist society, where the production process could be tailored to humans instead of the other way around. New technologies induce further alienation in capitalist society where the fruits of technology are only used to curb the decline of the profit margins. But in socialism, why could nuclear power not free workers due to its -in principle- unlimited energy capabilities. "Would it be possible to have safe nuclear energy under workers control?" as he once asked me.

Not a strange question at all, but not yet on the horizon as the nuclear energy as we know it, is produced by not more than a moderated atomic bomb. New energies, like all balanced new technology need long term planning and that demands socialism in the first place.

As said in the beginning of this talk, talking about Ernest Mandel is also discussing with him. Discussions, which is his real legacy, about all aspects of human culture.

In 1984 he published his *Delightful Murder*.<sup>13</sup> The book is an attempt to put the elements of greed, private ownership and other human vices in a historical and sociological context. In interviews he explained this activity with the words: "I don't drink and I don't smoke, so reading those thousands thrillers relax me, it helps against the day to day frustrations".<sup>14</sup> In many a critique, it was said that it was too easy and too much of an anticapitalistic template and not a literary critique as such. But the essence of this hobby was, as he said himself, a kind of escapism and in escapism we often express our frustrations, angers and angst in blown up pictures of reality. Reality that in the present society is built on suppression, expropriation and mutual distrust, in other words: crime. So, even if we are critical about Mandel as literary critic, his point is clear and interesting.

Overcoming this unhappiness about the world-as-we-know-it in its positive negation is the conscientious political struggle. Organising this struggle was one of Ernest's greatest obsessions. In this alienated world we have to join forces and build permanent structures to resist and develop strategies for the future. For him it meant building the International and advance open-minded education. On both issues we are confronted with obvious internal tensions. Building an International organisation, including dozens of cultural traditions and histories will always be a - sometimes more, sometimes less - diplomatic wheeling and dealing. The myth of a so-called Leninist party is mainly based on the unfortunate and stupid decision on tenth party congress in 1921<sup>15</sup>, further exploited in the Stalinist tradition by the religious conviction that the party is the kernel of all trues and wisdom. The very fact that this discussion took place at that time is already proof of the many diverting opinions that filled the discussions. In his excellent book *Lenin Rediscovered*, Lih<sup>16</sup> also shows that complete unity was certainly more a dream than reality in the period Lenin wrote his *What is to be done?* In the same way our own International is constantly struggling with this issue. Unified cohorts

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<sup>13</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder*, Pluto Press, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Jon Jansen van Galen, Trotskist als Thrillerkenner, *NRC Handelsblad*, March 2, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> See for the resolution:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/party-congress/10th/16.htm> .

<sup>16</sup> Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered. What is to be done? In context*, Haymarket Books, 2008

are more an aesthetic notion known from military and industrial cultures. In the present so-called net-worked society we have to find a new balance between common goals and principles and practical organisational models.

As Trotsky eloquently argues in his *Their moral and ours*, every goal has its own tools and vice versa. Up and until today, the discussion on how to build parties and an international is our obsession. Because the alternatives such as: individual terrorism and petrified organisational structures will not unify in the struggle all those different cultures and traditions.

As we witnessed, Mandel was certainly wavering in his attitude towards the various currents in our Marxist tradition. In my view, although I did not agree with him in some important discussions, his attitude was understandable. We have to unite in action and socialist outlook. In the same vein was his attitude towards education. On the one hand he was hammering on the essential tenets of Marxism and dialectics, as scaffolding for all political issues; on the other hand he was well aware that a scaffold is only a tool. Literally it is a temporal platform in order to build a complicated building. This temporality is expressed in the fact that historical materialism is a way of analysing changing circumstances. One of the great problems of Ernest's generation, as said earlier, was that a lot of energy had to be spent in defending Marxism against forces that claim right of inheritance.

It is our task to develop the rigging of a new and again offensive Marxism, including harsh reflection on our own past and tradition and the open-minded development of new outlooks. We cannot do otherwise then to ensure that the knowledge of the past century, be it in psychology, genetics, technology, sociology, or pure science is understood and incorporated in our vision of the future. Socialist education is not transmitting what we know from the past, but most and for all is seeking a comprehensive understanding of the present in order to define understandable goals beyond simplistic anticapitalistic notions. This is why Ernest Mandel considered our *International Institute for Research and Education* as so important. To foster the tradition and the culture of reaching out into a dynamic culture of contradicting capitalism in all its aspects, in fighting it, and ultimately overcoming this phase of human society. Political activism is top sport.