

Ernest Mandel

Intellectuals and the Third World

(1970)

From **Tricontinental**, No.18, May-June 1970, pp.12-15.

Thanks to Joseph Auciello.

Downloaded with thanks from the [Ernest Mandel Internet Archive](#).

Marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

Ernest Mandel, respected Belgian economist, is the author of this interesting article concerning the historical responsibility of the intelligentsia. Taking as a base the universe that pertains to each intellectual – whether he belongs to the highly developed nations or to the Third World countries – the author analyzes the role that intellectuals must play in the revolutionary task of transforming the world. Mandel is editor-in-chief of the weekly **La Gauche**, and political secretary of the Belgian Workers Confederation. Among his books are **Formation de la pensée économique de Karl Marx** (**Formation of the Economic Thought of**

Karl Marx) and Traité d'économie marxiste (A Study of Marxist Economy).

The division of the world into “rich” and “poor” countries, the growing distance between the two, the function of the world market as the mechanism through which wealth is continuously transferred from the poor to the rich countries, is without any doubt the most astounding scandal of our epoch – since it summarizes the shameful exploitation to which more than two-thirds of humanity is subjected by a tiny minority of owners of great international capital.

Certainly, for Marxists, this scandal is nothing more or less than the inevitable result of the imperialist phase of capitalist economic and social development, in itself the inevitable product of the very existence of capitalism. They understand that it would be useless to hope to fight the misery of the Third World without undertaking the battle against imperialism, and still more useless to hope to overcome imperialism without controlling the source of its power: the private property of the means of production, the existence of a bourgeois class that monopolizes this property, and the existence of another social class – the proletariat – which is obliged to sell its work force.

But in the world in which we live, most intellectuals have come to know the intolerable misery of the Third World before understanding the true origins of the evil or else without understanding them fully. It is a question of a consciousness raised by the magnitude of the scandal – all

the more startling when contrasted with more than 20 years of tremendous economic growth in the imperialist countries and an even more rapid growth in the countries that have abolished capitalism. This consciousness has been powerfully fortified by the extent of the revolt of the peoples of the Third World against the misery that victimizes them. Even when we speak of a partial or insufficient consciousness, of a semi-consciousness, to state it correctly, we speak of an undeniable fact that has profoundly influenced political, social, and cultural life in the majority of countries over the past ten years.

In France it was undoubtedly the war in Algeria that played the revealing role: in the United States – and on an international scale – the war in Viet-Nam has had the same effect. It is through this war that the basic injustice of international imperialist relations has become apparent to hundreds of thousands of non-Marxist intellectuals: the exploiters attack their victims to punish them for the crime called “attempting” emancipation.

The first reaction of intellectuals in the face of their consciousness of imperialism, and of the widespread revolt against it, has been different depending on whether the intellectual is from the imperialist countries or the Third World.

Among the former, the chief reaction is one of bad conscience: a refusal to admit colonialist repression and wars; the search for ways to stem the hemorrhage of wealth that world commerce represents today for the colonial and semicolonial countries; calls for increased aid on the part of the “rich” countries to the “poor” countries; even to the point of personal compromise (as technical assistants and in other forms) to alleviate somewhat the misery of the peoples of the Third World.

Among the second group, the reaction of individual commitment and group responsibility has prevailed more quickly. From the moment that underdevelopment is no longer conceived of as “fated” (geographically, anthropologically, historically, or sociologically), but rather as an evil to eliminate, participation in the fight for its elimination quickly takes hold. There is an obvious parallel between the widespread commitment of the intellectuals in liberal movements (that is, in the national bourgeois revolution) from the beginning of the 19th century, in the majority of European countries, and the widespread commitment of intellectuals to the national liberation movements of the Third World, following World War II.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the historic and social situation of the intellectuals of Western and Central Europe at the beginning of the 19th century, and that of today’s intellectuals confronted with the liberation movements of the countries of the Third World. The intellectuals are part of a social class whose nature can be precisely defined, even though its contours remain necessarily vague: the petite bourgeoisie, the “new” middle class (which, in general, has no means of production of its own). This social class was the revolutionary force *par excellence* during the classic period of bourgeois revolutions, on the eve of or just after the industrial revolution, when the modern proletariat was just about to be born or was still very weak. Today it can no longer play the same role, since the industrial proletariat on the one hand and the poor peasants and landless semiproletariats on the other, are the principal revolutionary forces in modern world society.

In relation to these revolutionary forces – which, historically, are the forces that will bury the misery of the Third World – the intellectuals, as a social group, necessarily occupy an ambiguous position. Attracted by the

ideals of justice and rationality embodied in the cause of the socialist revolution, the inevitable sacrifices, the continuous efforts, and the “leveling egalitarianism” implied in that same revolution make them pull back. The spirit flies to the aid of the oppressed while the flesh, which is weaker, settles for the not-unimportant material advantages that contemporary capitalist society provides for them.

This ambiguity in the social position of intellectuals is reflected in the eternal shifts in their political positions, now allied with the revolution, sometimes turning their back on it, at other times associating themselves with the imperialist and capitalist bosses. It is further reflected in their own ideology toward the key problems of the Third World.

In the imperialist countries this ideology of the intellectuals can run the gamut of variables from the propagation of international philanthropy on a large or small scale, to the elaboration of apologetic or cynical sophisms – which “show” that, for an entire epoch in history, the misery of the Third World is condemned to continue. All these ideological positions have in common the refusal to admit the fundamental responsibility of imperialism and capitalism for this misery, and also the refusal to accept the fact that only a revolution that sweeps out all the imperialist and capitalist structures can initiate the process of self-emancipation for the peoples of the Third World.

Among the many variants on this petit-bourgeois ideology we can point out: the mania for wanting to give good advice to the oligarchic governments in the countries of the Third World (as if these governments did not represent social interests deeply tied to the maintenance of the status quo – that is to say, of misery); the primary preoccupation with psychological, moral, cultural, and even religious problems in the process of development (they state things as if the

Hindu religion were the principal obstacle to the modernization of India; they do not understand that it is rather the impotence of the Indian bourgeoisie to undertake the modernization of the country that explains the survival of this religious power) etc., etc.

In the countries of the Third World, the principal variations on this typical intellectual ideology are, on the one hand, reformist illusions, the obsession for seeing the source of evil in the “feudal agricultural system” or considering that an agricultural reform carried out by the bourgeoisie would radically change the situation (as if a radical agricultural reform would not clash with the interests of imperialism and the urban bourgeoisie, as much as with the landowners who operate under the old system!), and on the other hand, an elitist tendency, which supposes that the initiative of a small group of bold intellectuals (at worst, the organizers of a coup d’etat) could put a halt to all the old confusion. The two variations usually have in common a desire to separate arbitrarily and radically “the national liberation phase” and “the phase of socialist revolution,” without understanding that one inevitably flows into the other if it is to be successful, because only the social classes interested in making a socialist revolution have the capacity to resist imperialism in the long run and to carry through to the end their national liberation, eliminating the domination of international capital and the world imperialist market on the national economy.

The intellectuals cannot reach any true clarity concerning the misery of the Third World, without real commitment. The unity of theory and revolutionary practices is a total unity: without revolutionary practice it is impossible to acquire a sufficient theoretic comprehension; and without revolutionary theory, practice is condemned to groping and to being nearsighted and ineffective. For the intellectual in

the imperialist countries as well as in the countries of the Third World – total commitment means participation in the revolutionary struggle. Without this participation, there is no way of freeing oneself of co-responsibility for the misery of more than 2000 million human beings.

The forms of this participation can vary according to the circumstances – that is to say, according to the intensity of the revolutionary process at different stages and in different countries. Often we have ridiculed the “valise carriers” (almost all of them intellectuals) who viewed an immediate act of material support for the Algerian revolution as the principal task of French revolutionaries in the period 1956-62. [1] It is certain that the patient task of constructing a revolutionary organization capable of intervening effectively when a revolutionary situation presents itself, held priority even in this epoch in France. But it is also certain that such an organization cannot be built if the selection of its members is on a purely literary basis, or according to their participation in purely reformist working class activities (there were no others in the France of that period). The participation – even though it may be indirect – in real revolutionary activities, anywhere in the world, is the necessary condition for the formation of a true revolutionary vanguard.

In this sense it is not really by chance that the new revolutionary vanguards that are gathering today in the imperialist countries, in France, in Japan, in Italy, and even in the United States, have known their baptism of fire through a real identification and a fierce defense of the actual revolutionary struggles which have developed in the course of these last years: the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions; solidarity with the guerrillas of Latin America and Palestine. Finally, this “commitment” to the revolutions of the Third World, has accelerated the resurgence of

revolutionary struggles in the imperialist countries themselves, rather than retarding it.

Note

1. During the Algerian war, Algerians living in France made monthly contributions to the Algerian revolution of millions of francs, which were transferred in valises by French sympathizers in order to avoid apprehension by French authorities. (*Ed. Note*)
