

A worker between intellectuals

An interview with Paul Mattick

Paul Mattick, Paul Mattick Jr.

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Preface

This interview, recently transcribed from an Italian documentary, is truly one of a kind. New and experienced readers alike should enjoy the succinct and rich details of the life of Paul Mattick, straight from their source. In an effort to stay true to the original work, a very small number of edits have been made for an improved reading experience.

A worker between intellectuals

Interviewer:

When this interview took place, Paul Mattick lived at the foot of the Stratton Mountain in Vermont, the region (probably he meant state) on the north-east of the USA near the Canadian border. He was 74 years old, he wasn't fatigued at all, and he was writing another book on the most recent economic theories.

Born in 1904 in Berlin, Paul Mattick died on February the 7th 1981 in the US, where he lived since 1926. He was one of the most important modern economists of the Marxist tradition. He lived in Cambridge, the American college town near Boston, but he spent many months of the year here in Vermont, surrounded by nature, far away from the pollution. Mattick was an interesting person, hard to pin down. Known by a very small group of specialists, in 1968 he was discovered by the student movement. Marcuse was the philosopher; he was the economist. With him came back (a new) libertarian socialism, a critical and anti-authoritarian communism. One that didn't stay prisoned in his books and works, but one that especially came from lived experiences.

Paul Mattick always refused to give biographical interviews. "This is the first and last time," he said. He didn't like publicity. He wrote books, held conferences, but he always remained the young rebel that participated in the German revolution of 1918–1919 and the unemployed movement that took place in the US in the early 1930s.

Teaching in universities, taking part in debates and international conferences, ending up on the pages of many journals as "one of the teachers who inspired the students' movement" ...all of this didn't change him at all. He stayed true to his adventurous uncompromised life of a rebellious worker.

Rebellion and revolution

Paul Mattick:

I grew up in a family where my dad, even though in a superficial way, was oriented towards socialist ideals and was part of the union. During my infancy, I had the chance to listen to many conversations about the many types of workers' movements: the free unions, the coalitions, the socialist party, the co-ops, but all of these didn't make an impression on me.

I had my first experience with the revolutionary movement during a narrow-gauge revolution¹. One day in 1916, my mother came and told me "Boy, a revolution started!". We took the Berliner Straße² at Charlottenburg, the neighborhood where we lived, and there was a great

¹ Narrow Gauge (Railway) = a railway with a track gauge narrower than standard

² Berliner Straße = name of a train.

crowd that was being charged by the mounted police, but the crowd was so big that cops literally disappeared in the mob. In those times women used to style their hair with very long pins...I saw a woman being pushed against a house; she pulled out her pin and spear the horse back. The horse soared and another woman, the demonstrators were mostly women, took down the cop from the saddle and started kicking him. This was the first revolutionary manifestation I ever got to assist. All the stores, those without the blinds, were assaulted and the merchandise was redistributed. At one point a larger group of policemen arrived and started shooting, forcing the crowd to retreat. This manifestation took place as part of a strike taking place in Berlin's factories. The strike was called to bargain for better food and to protest the rationing cards. This was the direct consequence of a speech made by Karl Liebknecht in the Potsdamer Platz, but disorders like that were very frequent. You could feel in the air that the masses were moving towards revolutionary forms of opposition, and this was evident in their behavior.

This first example of revolutionary activity stayed impressively in my mind. For me it was an extremely exciting experience. Since I was 14 and I ended my studies, with my father's permission, I joined the "Free Socialist Youth", which had, in Charlottenburg, 200 participants. There I formed politically, at the eve of the revolution.

During the November revolution, I was already working as a trainee at the SIMES³, where I was hired in March of 1918. The strike, that was proclaimed at SIMES and other factories too after the November German revolution and the birth of the republic, was the occasion for (the creation of) many crowded assemblies in the factories. Since I was a socialist and was seen as the trainees' spokesman, I was elected to the factory council. I had the chance to get in touch with the councils from other factories, and when our plant was shut down, we walked around the streets. Naturally the streets were full of excitement...people walked around frantically. If you'd meet some officials, you'd tear the ribbons from their uniforms...they were disarmed and sometimes they'd get beaten up too.

Around Brandenburg's doors, there were some clashes. Groups of reactionary soldiers that didn't want to take part in the revolution, sided against the workers, which in the meantime armed themselves by going to the barracks and fraternizing with soldiers. Trucks full of people traveled around the streets both day and night. Red flags were waved, and somebody (even) shot against the roof where the snipers took cover. Us youngsters wanted to participate in these events, and so one day, in the middle of the night, I jumped on a truck. A spartacist, seeing how young I was, asked me "Do you know how a pistol works?" and I naturally replied, "Of course I know!" So, he said "where's the safety lock?" I didn't have a clue where it was, and so he pushed me down while the truck moved forward at a high speed.

In that same period, I saw for the first and last time Rosa Luxemburg. She was talking to the mob from a balustrade of the Reichstag. Afterwards I saw Karl Liebknecht too in a park where an endless crowd gathered. It was in January of 1919. There were armed workers and soldiers. Those were the days where the famous "January clashes" (the January uprisings) took place, that propelled the physical eliminations of the spartacist militants. All of us lived in the streets and tried to be helpful to the revolutionary movement in every way possible, despite our limitations. But, to us youngsters, they usually gave us buckets of glue and mops with the task to put up posters during the night.

³ SIMES = factory.

The revolutionary movement ended when those that fought on the front lines were defeated. Most of them in Berlin were from our group from Charlottenburg. Among them there was even a parliament member killed by the white guards. The revolutionary phase ended with the military defeat of the spartacist movement. The Spartacus league was a relatively small group of revolutionaries, and the white terror swept it away. Reactionaries and fascists literally started a manhunt from house to house, killing everyone that was found in possession of certain books and publications. During the fights, but even more after them, only in Berlin, the white guards killed more than 2000 people. At this point, the strike ended the same way every other strike ended, and the mood of the people moved against the spartacists. Most of the workers, especially the social democrat workers, thought “We did the revolution and now the spartacists are ruining it. The spartacists want to achieve immediately something like bolshevism instead of using our conquests and starting a gradual process. They only create disorder in a moment where the most severe discipline would be the most necessary. We’re talking about indiscipline elements that will bring to the end of the revolution” that’s what they thought. The fact is that the white guards were the ones destroying it. And so, following the union guidelines, the workers went back to the factories and the strike ended. Only in the assemblies that followed, the defeat was recognized. But at that moment, nothing was left to do. Berlin was occupied by the army and the same situation took place in the other German cities too.

Interviewer:

Paul Mattick was a toolmaker. Politically always tied to the most radical wing of the workers’ movement, he never made a myth out of the workers. How could he? The intellectuals were the ones to paint an image of a compact and revolutionary working class. Mattick, instead, was a realist. He saw how the working class, at the start of WWI, felt victim to the nationalist hysteria and marched singing to the war despite the pacifist principles always proclaimed.

Paul Mattick:

At the start of WWI, all Germany’s population was enthusiastic about the war. In 1914, the leaders of the workers’ movement, which in part didn’t reflect the crowds’ enthusiasm, accepted this state of things so as to not be engulfed by the chauvinist wave that had involved the adherents of the workers’ movement, parties and unions. The working class was integrated in the system, both ideologically and on the organizational front. Naturally nobody expected how it was all going to end, and just one year after the start of the war, even the enthusiasm washed away in every warring country, leaving place to misery, suffering and discontent increasingly visible.

Interviewer:

After the Russian revolution of 1917, at the end of the war, the Germans tried (the revolution) as well. But after the republic was proclaimed and the failure of the January 1919 spartacist insurrectionist movement, the revolutionary wave greatly faded away in Germany. Paul Mattick, a young spartacist, accepted the founding of the German communist party, but since the beginning he found himself in opposition. The group he was a part of, one that later detached itself from the party, bitterly criticized the USSR and its effort to control the western communist parties. The criticisms were directed against social democracy, which in the meantime became the governing party. The German workers’ movement was then divided in groups and smaller sects that had divergent views on the meaning of socialism and the tools to achieve it. It’s in doubt though, that most of the German workers weren’t keen on rescuing those few things they had in the name of an uncertain socialist future.

Paul Mattick:

The revolutionary workers weren't part of a certain strain, a specific category...it was rather a union of more elements of the working class. Inside it there were even some petty bourgeois. In our group, for example, there were a couple of intellectuals, students. The majority were trainees like me or daily workers. Since the youth movement had close ties with the Spartacus league, many joint meetings took place, and I had the chance to get to know some party members. For the most part they were workers, every type of job was represented in the party and you cannot say that there was a specific category of workers more revolutionary than the other. The main feature of the Spartacus league was that many of the members were factory workers, while the group of intellectuals was very small and irrelevant if compared to the workers' mass. This is why the spartacist movement, since its creation, gave itself an anti-parliament and anti-union program. Indeed, the workers were more on the left than the intellectuals like Rosa Luxemburg and Paul Levi. The latter didn't want to force the situation. They were saying "Let's wait, and let's see what happens". In addition, they thought that the revolution would have moved forward anyways, and they tricked themselves into thinking that Russia would have intervened on the side of the German revolution.

Interviewer:

Lenin and Trotsky's Russia couldn't and didn't want to intervene. And even in 1923, when the economic crisis worsened so much that made many think a new wave of revolutionary sentiment was coming, the workers' movement, still divided, was unable to change the power relations in the new republican Germany.

Paul Mattick was greatly influenced by the events of 1923, by the economic and social crisis and its missed revolutionary potential. Leaving Berlin in 1921, Mattick moved to Hannover, then Bremen and eventually to Cologne. He lived day by day, like many other young workers. He took part in the political actions, in the strikes and in the demonstrations organized by the groups of the most radical branch of the left, but these groups were increasingly marginalized.

Paul Mattick didn't live through the decline of the European revolutionary left. In 1926 the desire to see the world and a ticket gifted to him by a distant relative, brought him to leave for America.

Towards America! To adventure!

Paul Mattick:

Already on the ship that brought me to the USA in 1926, I understood that immigration was something of a looting perpetuated by everyone to the detriment of the workers. On the boat the whole crew did it: the doctors, the escorts⁴, the hostesses and so on... every one of them tried to relieve the immigrants from the money they had. For example, the doctor was able to say to the patient stuff like "With this wound, with this illness, you won't be able to get to America, but I can give you a special ointment for only 20 or 50 dollars, and with this, your problems and your disease will be solved". On the boat, there even was a rebellion. A steward that refused to pour us some coffee because we didn't give him extra money, was beaten with his own coffee pot. Those that rebelled were locked up; we worked hard to organize ourselves to fight against the abuses. I myself organized the passengers so as to confront the oppression of those who ruled on board.

⁴ The Escorts = People that brought the immigrants on board.

At our arrival in New York, on Ellis Island, the authorities must have already been warned that, on board, nothing went smoothly. After that, I discovered that the way we were welcomed on Ellis Island was everything but special. That was part of the normal treatment reserved to immigrants. Firstly, the men were divided from the women and forced to completely undress in some huge chambers. Those were very cold and humid rooms. We had to stay standing up, naked, waiting for the doctor to examine every one of us, one at the time. If the examination went well, the doctor would say "Go right!" if he wasn't satisfied, he'd say "Go left". In this way, two lines formed: for those on the right, who apparently were in good medical conditions, they gave them the entry visa. As for me, they found a fracture that I didn't have and I was ordered to line up on the left, something that I did at first, but then later I sneaked into the line on the right in a moment where nobody was paying attention. After that we were all called in front of a counter to answer some trick questions. First of all, they'd ask you how much money you had and if you had the chance to receive money remittances. In the case of a negative answer, they'd ask you if you knew how to read and write and they'd ask you some questions to evaluate your intelligence. For example, they asked a Russian farmer that was standing near me "Why do cats have 5 legs?" The man was completely confused, he didn't know if such an animal even existed. He couldn't answer that question, and so he was declared "intellectually handicapped". He should have answered "The cat has only 4 legs!" but he didn't even fathom that the question was that stupid. Very probably this treatment wasn't different to the one used in the German concentration camps during the first phase. The first impression of America was one of a country that treated people in an extremely cruel manner. Immigrants were considered as beasts and since many of them couldn't speak English, they'd give them big numbers to wear until their destination was reached. Ellis Island was probably one of the biggest American crimes against humanity. If the conditions stayed always those that I saw in 1926, then Ellis Island is a shameful stain on American history.

After coming to America in 1926, I found myself in a situation where the growing prosperity created the conditions for wild stock speculation. Even workers, as capitalists, with lesser means, dedicated themselves to speculation. In the factories, like those where I worked, the first thing that workers checked was the situation of the stock shares so to check if their shares went up or down, and naturally the shares went up, we're just talking about artificial capital. And in this frenetic climb of shares, laid already the seeds of the crisis that exploded in a short period of time. But workers were so integrated in the system, that the masses, except for the organized workers which were a small minority, didn't have any type of ideological interest. They were only interested in sport, leisure time and the stock market. I was speechless when I noticed that I was the only one in a factory with 500 workers, to inform myself in 1927, about what was happening to Sacco and Vanzetti⁵ and to ask about what we had to do about it. No one of the 500 workers knew who Sacco and Vanzetti were. For example, the Boston movement that did everything it could to save Sacco and Vanzetti from capital death, wasn't supported by any workers' movement, but only by the liberal bourgeoisie and some intellectuals that were keen to that initiative for humanitarian and moral aspects. The workers didn't even know the names of Sacco and Vanzetti.

⁵ Sacco and Vanzetti = Two Italian anarchists accused of killing two men during a robbery. The two immigrants were executed. Many at the time saw them, and still see them, as innocent.

It's interesting to see how very shortly, after the 1929 crisis and already in 1930, both workers and the unemployed had a completely different attitude. Without being influenced on the ideological plane and in a situation where the old optimistic ideology didn't work anymore compared to reality, workers started asking themselves different questions.

We can say that ideology isn't important. Ideology has the capacity of being effective only when in touch with a reality that doesn't contradict it. When the contrast between ideology and reality becomes deeper, then workers don't act according to their ideology even if they still believe in it or didn't shed it; but they put it aside and act according to the necessities of the moment. Starting from their needs and the class war born from their needs, they create an ideology created by their necessities. This means that the first push isn't ideological, it's the practical necessities, the real needs that determine the ideology. This is a very important fact because it allows us to overcome pessimism. By experience we know that this stupid and numb working class doesn't need to stay like that and that, in a short period of time, the situation can change. The working class, even if it doesn't think in an orthodox way, can develop class consciousness despite the dominant bourgeois ideologies.

Into the unemployed movement

Paul Mattick:

The economic crisis of 1929 spread with great speed, and only one year later, in 1930, there were already 16 million (people) unemployed. Furthermore there was nothing that could have mitigated the conditions of these unemployed, there was no form of welfare, except for assistance funds of each individual city, which were depleted immediately. There was also a fund of national assistance, but it didn't last long. This forced the government to get involved with unemployment, and to take measures for the rapid decline of the situation. Since there was no real trade union movement with influence on the working masses, the unemployed had to organize themselves. The care/charitable centers of each city were the only places where the unemployed could turn to when seeking assistance. These centers became the natural place of assembly of the workers, to protest the low subsidies and the miserable life conditions. This way, just like in the factories, close to the centers of each district, formed groups of action, just life groups of assistance spontaneously aid.

If a person was evicted because he couldn't pay his rent, and his furniture was put on the street, these groups intervened, helping the person put the furniture back in the house, thus forcing the authorities to renege the eviction order. These spontaneous groups got to the point of occupying failed shops as meeting places. These premises were equipped/supplied, for instance, with chairs of old cinemas, or with public kitchens, that were used to feed the needy.

During the winter of 1930, the situation was so tragic that, in Chicago, at least 200 or 300 people died each day under bridges due to freezing temperatures. They didn't have anything to cover themselves with, except for some newspapers, and the cold was such that they died freezing while sleeping. In the morning trucks passed to pick up the corpses and to bring them to be buried. All of this occurred at the light of the Sun, and the people were aware of that, a pre-revolutionary situation came to be created.

For instance, in Chicago and in New York, it was possible to bring to the streets a million people within only 24 hours, by distributing flyers. The police didn't know how to manage, the

law enforcements were completely besieged by the masses, they were surrounded so much that they couldn't even draw their guns. The streets were completely upside down, the trams pulled out of the binaries, there were barricades everywhere and a revolutionary action, without any ideology, began to develop. Nevertheless, in these circumstances, the movement didn't have any other opportunity but to compel the government to adopt measures to lower unemployment.

We, who were active inside the movement, understood that the situation was revolutionary, but we didn't believe that it could result in a revolution. Despite the crisis, the capital was still too powerful and too organized, we could only, in terms of immediate measures, force the bourgeoisie to adopt a policy of public funding/spending to grant assistance and to lower unemployment. The bourgeoisie, however, has a perception of reality that is completely different. The smallest of protest rallies with street commotion, the riots, were considered as the beginning of a revolution right away. While the workers don't even think about the revolution, the bourgeoisie, occupied with the class struggle to the defense of their interests as well, is that scared, as it fears that its system could be overthrown, to supply themselves the reason, the occasion, of the rise of revolutionary action.

All that happened in the United States following the '29 crisis, is the best example. With the intense growth of mass demonstrations, and almost every day there were demonstrations, the police and the national guard showed up with the bicycles, with the fight car, armed with rifles. They shot straightaway to the crowds to scatter the people, killing about ten people and hurting many others. The fear of the bourgeoisie made the clash more bloody, and this fear, united with the worsening of the clash, brought to the fall of the government.

In the United States, since popular opinion considers politics as an endeavor to make, when an administration isn't able to improve a situation, it is considered that the one after will be able to do better. These, at least, are the expectations at the beginning, and it's because of this that the executive power passes from the republicans' hands to the democrats' ones and vice versa, following the flow of crisis and prosperities of the country.

Interviewer:

For instance, at the beginning of the 30s, when Roosevelt was elected president of the United States, everyone looked at that administration as if it like the only hope to save the people, everyone, included left-wing exponents, both socialists and communists, everyone was seduced/charmed by the Roosevelt administration, and supported it fully. I remember that just then, Mattick had written an article, where he said "People shouldn't count on the government, on Roosevelt's administration, to resolve the crisis, the workers must and can count only on themselves. This is the only real and durable way to truly resolve an economic crisis." In that article, Mattick gave an example of all that happened in the American mineral zones. The miners, whose situation was extremely desperate, seized the mines, ignoring the directives of the mining companies, extracted the coal and sold it directly, creating an alternative and autonomous industry, an industry handled by the same workers. According to Mattick, this phenomenon was an example of how a revolutionary process could be born in a country like the United States. According to him, things couldn't change with a new government, nor by relying on the left-wing parties bureaucracies, but only through mass action, and autonomous control of production by the masses. It will have to be the same workers that, one day, will seize the industry, and will direct it to the benefit of the entire population.

The years of consideration

Paul Mattick Jr.:

I was born in 1944, my first childhood memories regarding my father's activities date up to 1950. Back then I was 6 years old. The political movement of the left was by now done for. Yet I remember that in my house assemblies still took place, many people came to find us, they discussed politics. It was little groups of people, that little that remained of the intellectuals who were politicized in the 30s. Many were Marxist militants, others militants of European descent like Karl Korsch, all the people who, in short, remained bound to certain ideas and that came to us to discuss it. At the beginning of the 50s, my mother, my father, and I left New York, we moved to Vermont. The reason as to why we left the great city was mostly due to the fact that at the time, the political interest of the people died out. There was nothing to do except withdraw to study, and in the United States of the time, even the left-wing intellectuals disappeared.

Interviewer:

For almost 10 years, Paul Mattick lived withdrawn in Vermont, in a small house painted red which he constructed himself, very close-by a stream, helped by the wife and the son. These are the years of consideration.

Here, he writes his magnum opus/greatest work, a book of economic theory and of critique of the economy, titled as Marx and Keynes, in the which Mattick proposes again the Marxist analysis for the study of capitalist development, and for a critique of the so-called 'mixed economy' which Keynes is the most important theorist. Already, in the 30s, Mattick was involved in economy, with a friend Karl Korsch, one of the greatest Marxist thinkers, forced by the Nazis to leave Germany, Mattick published some magazines on which he began an analysis on the intense/deep economic changes that had intervened in the modern economic world, following the worldwide crisis of 1929.

With the release of the book Marx and Keynes, later translation in all the most important languages in the world, Mattick's theories are discussed in universities, and most importantly, on the left. In the United States, in Japan and in western Europe, the reputation and acknowledgement, received with skepticism, came to him, after the release of Marx and Keynes.

Paul Mattick is a very peculiar character: it is difficult to group him with traditional categories. He isn't identifiable with a precise political party or group. All throughout his life, he has remained an original, an extremely creative person, and an independent philosopher. But I don't want to characterize him as an individualist, I just want to say that even though Paul Mattick was a socialist, in the wider sense of the word, he always remained far from left-wing parties' bureaucracies. Mattick has always had an autonomous point of view, and thus he could have criticized the workers' organizations from this point of view. In this sense I would say that Mattick was rather important for the left, remaining away from political parties that at heart guided the ideas of their own followers, he was able to conduct very accurate critical analysis on what was happening in the United States.

Critique of politics

Interviewer:

The libertarian tradition of Paul Mattick's socialism, dates to Rosa Luxemburg and other theorists of the socialist left-wing. For Mattick, like for Rosa Luxemburg, the proletariat isn't by itself the revolutionary class awarded with the historical duty to abolish the bourgeois power, in a long contradictory process, the workers' class produced by capitalism, but also manufacturer of this system, only takes on the responsibility, for brief historical moments, to change deeply things.

In these historical periods, the alternative to socialism is barbarism, but socialism, says Mattick, must come from below, from the masses, through the participation of the great majority of the population, and the instruments of this socialist democracy, just like it happened at the beginnings of the Russian revolution and in Germany are the councils, the soviets.

Paul Mattick:

The soviets, that is to say the factory's soviets in revolutionary Russia, aren't born spontaneously. In society, there doesn't exist pure spontaneity, simply because humans arrive at the action through thought, through reflection. The organizational form of the workers' councils was given by the factory. The capital puts together the masses of the factories, forcing the workers to cooperate. Those workers who understand the organizational role of the factory, are then able to organize even outside of it. The farmers' soviets, for instance, appeared a bit later in the countryside, and they were born on the experience of the workers' soviets. The factory, already in 1905, had become the organizational basis for the actions against the tsar and against the capitalists. Even when the proletariat isn't organized, when it doesn't have or can't have trade unions or parties, it still succeeds in conducting its action. Organized in the factory, and by the factory, through the capital, it is able to find organizational appropriate forms. In the recent history of the workers' movement up until the riots of the Polish workers in recent times, we can find again this constant of organization of workers' councils through the factory.

Interviewer:

Therefore, according to Mattick, the renewal of the workers' movement, passes through the reclamation of the anti-authoritarian tradition and of its organizational appearances, even when they aren't explicitly known as soviets or worker's councils. Furthermore, without a ruthless critique of authoritarian socialism and of bureaucratized communism, without an analysis of the causes that brought to the degeneration of the Russian revolution, it will not be possible to give plausibility to the socialist prospect.

Paul Mattick:

Russia was a backwards state and therefore it couldn't stop neither economically nor politically, if not by forcing the development phenomenon of the concentration of the capital in a non-competitive regime. In the monopolistic conditions of the global market, it was necessary to create a super monopoly through which intervene more directly on the market's mechanisms, both in Russia and in the global field, so as to carry the same existence of the monopolistic economy. Therefore, state capitalism, in Russia, is the practical response to the monopolistic capitalism that had already existed in the world.

Although it had never been expressed in these terms, the soviet workers soon understood that they faced a new class. This new class didn't recognized to be such, as the idea of class was always tied to the idea of private property, and nobody had yet understood that the capitalistic conditions could continue to exist and develop even with the absence of private capital. All of the Stalin's politics was driven by the necessity to sustain the new class, the just created bureaucratic class, and which had a direct interest to the conservation of the status quo, and to the defense of

their own privileges, perpetuating a politic of oppression to the damage of the workers and of the farmers.

Every class society, both if it bases itself on private property and if said private property was eliminated by the state, supposes privileges in favor of the dominant class, privileges that can be expressed economically, like in the case of capitalism, or in terms of political power, like it happened for the new Soviet dominant class. The conditions on which class dominion relies upon suppose that the working class must remain in such a position that can't intervene in the decisional mechanisms of society. The working class is forced to live from hand to mouth, it mustn't see any opportunity to make itself autonomous, independent from the hegemony of the dominant class.

Paul Mattick Jr.:

In my opinion, what is distinctive in my father's writings, is that throughout his whole life he was able to keep connected two aspects of the theoretical Marxist tradition, aspects that generally were separated by the imitators of Marx, the economical aspect the political one. For him, capitalism is a form of social organization that creates by itself the basis for a future society, therefore capitalism's analysis becomes the theory of the economic crisis. The economic crisis, as a social and political crisis, pushes the people to create new structures of social cohabitation which arise from the same necessity of capitalism's growth. In this context Rosa Luxemburg immediately comes to mind, and with her the movement of workers' councils, and left-wing theorists like Gorter and Anton Pannekoek. In Paul's theory all this is present, furthermore we find the analysis of the modern capitalism mechanisms, developed after the second world war, in this, through which it is possible to understand the different struggles of the working class spontaneous in nature.

According to Paul the economic mechanism pushes the working class to create a class movement that is inclined to the emancipation of everyone, and it is the movement to be revolutionary, not the ideology that it expresses in certain periods. This way my father never believed in the ideologies of prosperity, and has always tried to explain how from prosperity, provisional and ephemeral, just like that of the 60s, it always falls back again into crisis, from here, the revival of the political movement, and I hope, the revival of the socialist movement.

Crisis of political economy

Interviewer:

Modern capitalism, according to Mattick, still hurries from crisis to crises, just like from its beginnings. In proportion to the capitalism analyzed by Marx, however, Mattick underlines two fundamental changes: in the first place crises have become global crises, and produce real destruction, if not real wars; in second place, the state intervenes on the economy to limit damages, that the competitive development that capitalism produces, especially on a social level. State intervention brought about a new form of market economy, "mixed economy", but for Mattick, the creation of an economic sector that relies directly to the state, by its assignments, having chosen a sector that doesn't produce for the market and that therefore remains unproductive, doesn't resolve for long capitalism's contradictions, it only weakens the consequences of the crisis, reduces unemployment, but delays the incidental problems that, inevitably, will present themselves again. According to Paul Mattick, a mixed economy encounters its own limits in the

necessity of having to increase the productive sector of the economy, to cope with the crisis at the expense of the private sector, the only one which produces real profits and that therefore is capable of making the system work. This way, according to Mattick, both in the national and the international level, two tendencies collide, the one which wants the expansion of the state's sector, and the one which tends to reduce it. In this clear contraposition, capitalism knows its own limits.

Paul Mattick:

The limits of mixed economy vary from country to country, in reason of the specific position in the context of global economy, these limits are to be put in relation with the timeframe in which a specific country can permit to increase the public debt, and with its capability to organize the economy so as to later on pay the debts. If in a mixed economy system, the crisis extends for a long time, then there is the possibility to, today no longer just theoretical, but real, that the crisis is followed by a galloping inflation. Not only does unemployment increase, but also inflation, this means that we are found in front of a progressive crumbling of the capital, a slow collapse, as the instruments used to combat the crisis become themselves aggravating factors of the crisis.

This situation has already realized itself in reality. For this reason, today, not only the capitalistic world, but also the economic theories pour into a state of crisis. The capitalistic theory, after which the contraction of profits, can be delayed with a politic of public spending deficit, and with a widening of credit, for long times hasn't proved valid. Old laws on over-accumulation continue to explain their effects, in this way, showing that the capital isn't capable to find a way to regulate its own social aspect, and that society, therefore, is still at the mercy of the contradictions provoked by the market, and of the slow erosion derived by the same process of capitalist accumulation.

Interviewer:

Paul Mattick has always been an inconvenient character, he chose to be inconvenient, a worker who happened to arrive at the intellectual lines, has wanted to assume the role of conscious critique of the worker movement. For this, his analysis of capitalism and the workers' movement, cold and sometimes ruthless analysis, doesn't offer comforting solutions. But for who feels to renew the left, must measure themselves against Paul Mattick's ideas, with his critical load, and even for those who reject the conclusions, the comparison becomes a necessary passage for an understanding without ideological layers of the modern world, in its compactness, but also in all of its inconsistency.

In this long interview, Paul Mattick has talked of himself and of his ideas, now, his pessimistic realism, and the density of his own personal experience, remain above all a testimony of a crisis of identity, of ideas, of analysis and of projects, in which today the official left find themselves in and the institutionalized workers' movement.

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Paul Mattick, Paul Mattick Jr.
A worker between intellectuals
An interview with Paul Mattick
1978

Retrieved on September 29th, 2023 from councilist.org/publication/historical/a-worker-between-intellectuals-an-interview-with-paul-mattick

Original interview dubbed in Italian with audio: youtube.com/watch?v=TKZGV_QDPWA

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