Along with the return of economic crisis and social struggles around the world, the term “communism”—supposedly discredited once and for all by the experience of Russia and its satellite states in the 20th century—seems to be enjoying a certain comeback in recent years. Conferences on “the idea of communism” attract significant crowds, books by professed communists like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek find readers and grab media attention. However, more often than not this (surely limited) comeback does not seem to be driven by a genuine desire to retrieve the emancipatory content the term carried in the writings of Karl Marx and like-minded critics, as well as in practical movements from the 19th century onwards. Rather, maîtres-penseurs like Badiou and Žižek prefer to pose as enfants terribles, defending Maoism and flirting with Bolshevik terror, hence reaffirming precisely the unholy traditions with which a “communism” for the 21st century would have to break.

In his new biography of Paul Mattick, a German-born worker who immigrated to the United States in 1926 and later emerged as one of the most important radical critics of his time, Gary Roth tells the story of a largely forgotten current in the 20th century that early on made a rupture with the statist caricatures of communism to which today’s media-savvy leftist intellectuals are still holding fast.1 Noting that this story is about “bygone eras in which a radicalized working class still constituted a hope for the future,” Roth steers clear of melancholy and nostalgia, instead seeking a justification for his work in the more recent reconfiguration “of the world’s population into a vast working class that extends into the middle classes in the industrialized countries and the pools of underemployed agricultural workers everywhere else.” In fact, though far from constituting a sustained, consistent assault on existing conditions, some recent struggles of parts of this class, most notably the “square movements” that spread from North Africa via Europe to Istanbul, exhibit certain traits—horizontal self-
organization (or “leaderlessness), direct mass action against state forces, a focus on occupations—that point much less to the Bolshevik-Leninist tradition than to the one Roth describes, commonly referred to as council communism, though the resemblances should certainly not be exaggerated.

Born in 1904 into a working-class Berlin family, Mattick found his way to this current during the upheavals at the end of World War I, when he was still a teenager. While the infamous role of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in that period (including implication in the murder of their former members Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by the right-wing Freikorps) is widely accepted as fact today, even by liberal historians; the fascinating landscape of workers’ radicalism in those years has largely remained a topic for specialists. Even in Germany many on the left know next to nothing about the KAPD, the Communist Workers’ Party, that broke off from the recently founded Communist Party (KPD) as the latter abandoned its initial position of abstinence from electoral politics and the established trade-union movement. Riding the wave of proletarian unrest, this party was initially able to draw with it the majority of members of the KPD, leaving a rump organization that slowly but surely turned into a local branch of the victorious Bolsheviks in Russia. Though fascinated, in the beginning, not only by Red October but by the role the Bolsheviks played in it, the council communists soon took a critical distance from the USSR, reading events there as the establishment of a new form of state capitalism under strict party control. Opposing workers’ self-directed activity to party dictatorship, they understood the councils that first sprang up in Russia in 1905 not as only a form of struggle under capitalism, but simultaneously as the germ of a new classless society under direct control of the producers, and made the “abolition of the wage-system” their rallying cry.

It was this basic outlook, formed in the heat of struggles that sometimes verged on civil war, that would inform Mattick’s activities and most sophisticated writings until the end of his life. Following Mattick through factory strikes and bars, his activities as a militant of the KAPD youth organization, and his personal life, Roth provides a colorful picture of the unique milieu encompassing the KAPD and the more syndicalist Unionen that counted several hundred thousand members in the early twenties, as well as avant-garde art circles and intellectuals around journals like Die Aktion.

With the downturn of struggles and the rapid decline of the KAPD and the milieu around it, Mattick decided to leave for the United States in 1926. It was there, in Chicago, that the second major episode of practical activity in his life unfolded. While he kept writing for what was left of the radical press in Germany and began reading theory seriously, thereby acquiring in autodidactic fashion the skills that would later make him an author of outstanding theoretical texts, Mattick made links with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as well as with the socialist German émigré community. Again, Roth brings to life a milieu from a bygone era, a milieu of politicized workers, their organizations marked by constant quarrels and splits. From 1932 onwards, Mattick, having lost his factory job at Western Electric, participated in the unemployed movement in Chicago. He later described these years as the best of his life, since he was able to live within the movement full-time. Roth’s description of this movement is interesting to read as a contrast to the social tranquility in the United States during the most recent crisis. Though quite limited in comparison to the social unrest in Europe after World War I, the radical unemployed movement in which Mattick participated was characterized by forms of direct action that combined material self-help and political activism:

The unemployed began to use abandoned storefronts for their own purposes. Locks were broken, and the
stores became meeting places, with chairs taken from deserted movie houses. Mattick estimated that there were some fifty or sixty such locales in Chicago [...]. Mimeograph machines were installed for the production of leaflets and movement literature. Paper was contributed by those still employed, who stole office supplies from their workplaces. [...] Gas lines were tapped without setting off the meters [...] Makeshift kitchens were set up in the storefronts and meals cooked around the clock.

Soon, however, these more radical tendencies were outmaneuvered by the unemployed organizations of the bigger left-wing parties, while the expansion of welfare and public employment under the Roosevelt administration led to the eventual eclipse of the movement as a whole.

Together with a group of council communists in Chicago, Mattick started publishing the journal *International Council Correspondence (ICC)* in 1934, it was later renamed *Living Marxism* and finally *New Essays*. Along with Karl Korsch (a former member of both the SPD and the KPD and the man who allegedly taught Bertolt Brecht his Marxism) Mattick contributed the bulk of the texts. Focusing on current developments like the Great Depression and the New Deal, the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe as well as debating more general theoretical questions, ICC was a prime example of independent social criticism with neither academic nor party affiliations, produced by a few precarious intellectuals and self-taught theoreticians like Mattick. With numerous translations of texts by European radicals, it also served as a bridge between America and the old continent in an era of heightened imperialist rivalry.²

During the same years, Mattick had loose and rather difficult relations with the exiled Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. The Institute, known primarily through its more famous members Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, commissioned him to write an extended analysis of unemployment and the unemployed movement in the United States but then shied away from publishing it, presumably because it exhibited more clearly the Marxist orientation the Institute was now anxious to downplay in order not to endanger its status in the U.S. This lucid analysis was first published in 1969 by a small German press and has never been translated into English. Mattick’s relationship to the Frankfurt Institute during the war years is among the subjects of which a more in-depth discussion than the framework of a biography allows would have been interesting. While some members of the Institute began working for the Office of Strategic Services, providing analyses of Nazi fascism to the American state apparatus and thus contributing to its war effort, Mattick belonged to a tiny minority of radicals for whom World War II essentially demanded the same rejection of all sides as World War I.

Partly, this stance seems logical. As Roth recounts:

> Under the banner of anti-fascism, the Communist Party embraced Roosevelt and the New Deal, egged forward the country’s economic and military policies, and found a new audience among intellectuals and professionals for whom Russia offered a means to appreciate the accomplishments of state planning. The more patriotic the party became, the more members it attracted.
Partly, however, it seems to have been based on problematic notions like that of a general tendency towards the authoritarian state, a general incompatibility of capitalism and democracy, leading to the idea that the outcome of the war made no difference. “If Hitler wins, it is true,” Mattick wrote in the Winter 1941 issue of *Living Marxism*, “there will be no peace, no socialism, no civilization, but only the preparation for greater battles to come, for future destruction. But if the ‘democracies’ win, the situation will not be different.” This leveling later extended to an equation of the Nazi system of concentration camps with the Allies’ policy in occupied Germany. Under the impression of reports from friends and family in Germany about a dramatic lack of food (and referring to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen), Mattick wrote in a letter in 1947: “If the Germans reduced a minority to a Belsen-diet; the Allies have succeeded in putting almost the whole population on a diet below Belsen.”

At the same time, it must be said, the discussion of war and fascism in *Living Marxism* and *New Essays* was highly sophisticated; the journal provided one of the few places where independent minds could try to come to terms with a deeply troubling and unknown situation. Korsch, for example, noted that the World War I-era slogan “Down with the imperialist war!” had “lost all of its former revolutionary force at the present time, when it fits in so perfectly with the tendencies of the bourgeois appeasers and isolationists,” while the slogan “Defeat of one’s own country!” had become “a practical policy of that substantial part of the ruling class in various European countries that preferred the victory of fascism to the loss of its economic and political supremacy.” At the same time, the somewhat triumphalist note on which Korsch’s piece ended—“Not Great Britain, not ‘democracy,’ but the proletarian class is the world champion in the revolutionary fight of humanity against the scourge of fascism”—turned out to be wishful thinking. It is far beyond the scope of this review to delve deeper into these matters. But in the sections devoted to them, Roth, who seems to share Mattick’s perspectives without exception, in my view fails to unfold the problem at hand.

In any case, World War II, unlike the previous one, did not end with major social upheavals. In the post-war period, Mattick mostly abstained from political activity, temporarily retreating with his wife Ilse and his son Paul to a quiet country life in Vermont. However, it was during this second half of his life when he finally emerged as one of the major thinkers of social emancipation inspired by Marx, precisely by rejecting pretty much all of the varieties of academic or party-affiliated Marxism of the time. Most importantly, Mattick took up crisis theory, a strand in Marx’s thought highly unfashionable during the so-called Golden Years after WWII, when even most Marxists believed that state management of the economy had eventually accomplished the creation of an everlastingly “affluent society” by neutralizing capitalism’s tendency towards crisis. Mattick’s main work *Marx and Keynes*, published in 1969, dispelled such notions some years before their untenability became glaringly obvious, and eventually secured him a broader readership. Having chronicled (sometimes in slightly tiring detail) Mattick’s difficulties to get his texts published, Roth describes his late success, most notably in Western Europe, where some parts of the New Left who had no inclination to go down neo-Bolshevik or Maoist dead-ends developed a real Mattick-mania for a few years. Events like the May 68 in Paris and the prolonged autonomous workers’ struggles in Italy provided a fertile ground for a rediscovery of the council-communist tradition of which Mattick was one of the few living exponents.

By following Mattick through this “lost century,” Roth provides a rich account of a radical tradition
which, after a certain renaissance in the '60s and '70s, has today again fallen into oblivion. The form of biography naturally precludes a detailed, in-depth engagement with the political and theoretical issues at stake. Roth explicitly states that he does not want to emphasize Mattick’s theoretical work because he sees “little reason to summarize work that is best read in the original” (and of which significant parts can be found on the internet today.) Still, in some cases the contours and contemporary significance of this theory could have been made clearer, while certain biographical details seem rather dispensable. For readers who will feel inspired to dig deeper into Mattick’s writings and those of his fellows, the strengths of the book by far outweigh this shortcoming.


Greenwood Press republished the three journals in their entirety in 1970 in a six-volume edition which today is unfortunately out of print; the next Occupy movement in the United States should seize the headquarters of Greenwood Press (130 Cremona Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93117) and force the company to republish this edition to be distributed freely to activists in dire need of critical theory. Alternatively, if no such movement materializes, someone should make these excellent texts available on the web.

CONTRIBUTOR

Felix Baum

FELIX BAUM lives and writes in Berlin.