Paul Mattick and Council Communism

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The following pages do not constitute an attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis and interpretation of “council communism”, nor are they intended to situate Paul Mattick within the context of the current discussion concerning capitalism’s structural changes and the limits of the “mixed economy”. They are instead composed of some notes whose purpose is to present the political-theoretical current of council communism as distinct from what is commonly referred to as left communism and, at the same time, to provide a few interpretive suggestions and propositions concerning Paul Mattick’s activity as an outstanding representative of that current.

Although a discussion of Paul Mattick’s economic theories is now underway in Italy—and some writings by other representatives of council communism, such as Pannekoek and Korsch, for example, have been translated—little is known about the common context in which the theoreticians of the councils worked. The historical limits of a workers movement decidedly in the throes of a worldwide crisis can all the more easily be identified through a critical rediscovery of those exponents who best represent the consciousness of that movement’s difficulties. The following pages are intended to serve merely as a contribution to this task.

I

While the concept of “left communism” (Linkskommunismus) has now come to form part of the hagiography of the workers movement—although with different articulations depending on the author—“council communism” (Rätekommunismus) constitutes an almost-unknown current for official historiography; in the best cases it is viewed as a secondary variant of the former.

In reality, council communism was born towards the end of the 1920s in Holland, on the ruins and the shoulders of the failed experience of left communism. The concept of council communism was
formed by way of reflection on the events of the Russian Revolution with its statist deviations, bringing to a conclusion a process of self-liberation from the elements that characterized the Leninist tradition which were still part of Linkskommunismus. Council communism, by taking up a specific anti-Leninist current within left communism, defined itself as anti-Bolshevist only in the face of the practical self-definition of “Leninism” during the 1920s.

While left communism was the result of a structural weakness of the German revolutionary movement and was the product of a period of repression in the contradictory evolution of that movement, the council communists were the final product of the failure of the European revolution and, at the same time, constituted an element of criticism in opposition to the traditional workers movement during a long counterrevolutionary phase.

In Germany, left communism comprised the majority at the founding Congress of the German Communist Party, advocating, against Rosa Luxemburg, abstentionism and anti-parliamentarism. It was one of the currents of western communism that Lenin would later define as “infantile extremism”. In October 1919, at the Heidelberg Congress of the German Communists, the left majority was expelled from the KPD. This break was preceded, on the part of the left, by campaigns against the trade union movement and in favor of the factory organizations and the workers councils. In April of the following year the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) was founded and revolutionary factory organizations—formed during the previous two years in spontaneous strikes that often displayed an anti-trade union character—were organized in the General Workers Union of Germany (the AAUD).

Of these two organizations, only the AAUD could be characterized as a truly new type of organization. Towards the end of 1920, before its decline, the AAUD had approximately 300,000 members. With the parallel founding of the KAPD, which was of a purely political character, profound disagreements arose among the “unionists” of the AAUD. If, on the one hand, the latter were unanimously in favor of preventing the formation of “leadership cliques” and bureaucracies within the mass organization (whose purpose was to organize the entire proletariat) that would necessarily become independent of the rank and file, they were on the other hand divided with regard to the problem of relations with the KAPD and concerning the option or the necessity of accepting a separate political organization alongside the AAUD, with distinct goals of its own.

A minority within the AAUD, opposed to collaboration with the KAPD and “dual organization”, split from the AAUD and founded the AAU-Einheitsorganisation (unitary organization). The principle inspiration for the new AAU-E came from Otto Rühle, whose theories were to acquire decisive importance for council communism. According to the unionists of the AAU-E, “die Revolution ist Keine Parteisache” (the revolution is not a party matter), and the unitary organization of the proletariat must simultaneously have political and economic goals; bureaucratic statutes and machinery are superfluous; and, if the proletariat is not yet mature enough to make decisions and act autonomously in the course of its own struggles, this does not mean that these tasks must be delegated to a party. The “dual organization”, even that of the AAU and the KAPD, is nothing but a
reprise of the traditional organizational schema: separate party and trade unions with a rigid division of tasks.

If the KAPD, on the other hand, thought that the revolutionary party was still necessary, it was far from considering the mass organization to be a thing of the past. The party, however, had to be an elite, therefore, based on the “quality” rather than the “quantity” of its members. “Revolutionary cadres” are therefore necessary, whose purpose is to act within the masses, to mold them and to serve as catalysts in their actions. The task of organizing the masses themselves in the factories, at the point of production, falls to the AAU. The latter must fight against the traditional trade union and destroy its influence over the working class and, finally, it must fight for the transformation of the factory organizations into workers councils controlled directly by the class as a whole. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” is nothing but the AAU extended to every workplace.

With the defeat of the revolutionary actions of 1921 and 1923, the left communists and their organizations saw the number of their followers steadily decline. The workers “vanguards” were frustrated and/or returned to the traditional organizations.

In a 1945 essay, Paul Mattick wrote that all revolutionary groups to the left of the Communist Party at first stagnated and then collapsed. “It did not help that these groups had the ‘right’ policy and the Communist Party the ‘wrong’ policy, for no questions of revolutionary strategy were here involved. What was taking place was that world capitalism was going through a stabilization process and ridding itself of the disturbing proletarian elements which under the crisis conditions of war and military collapse had tried to assert themselves politically.”

After 1924, “left communism” as an organized movement ceased to represent a significant political factor within the German workers movement. Even those groups that during the second half of the 1920s broke with the Communist Party and moved towards the left did not manage to assume a political dimension. According to Mattick: “Although organizationally the ‘ultra-left’ groups continued to exist up to the beginning of Hitler’s dictatorship, their functions were restricted to that of discussion clubs trying to understand their own failures and that of the German revolution.” Later in the same essay he observed that “The necessity of restricting activity to educational work became a virtue: developing the class-consciousness of the workers was regarded as the most essential of all revolutionary tasks.”

Council communism was born from the disintegration of these organizations in Germany and from the reflections of similar groups in other countries.

The first council communist group, the GIC (Groep van Internationale Communisten), was formed in Holland in 1926 as a result of a split in the Dutch Communist Workers Party—a parallel
organization of the German KAPD. In France, Belgium and other countries similar groups were formed during the 1930s. In the United States the council communists (among whom Paul Mattick figured as one of the movement’s first founders) were active primarily within the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW), which at the end of the 1920s had no more than 20,000 members. After a split within the originally Leninist and minuscule Proletarian Party of America, they founded the United Workers Party, which published the journal *International Council Correspondence*; soon thereafter they assumed the name of Council Communists. Prior to the New Deal, the American council communists were active participants, above all in Chicago, in the unemployed workers movement, one of the most radical movements to emerge from the crisis of 1929.

In Germany the first council communist group was formed in 1931 with the reunification of the AAU and the AAU-E, which had become numerically insignificant. The KAU, the Communist Workers Union, no longer concerned itself with those organizational problems that had led to divisions and splits within left communism. The new unionists defined themselves as a group whose goal was to carry out communist propaganda for an autonomous working class struggle against “the capitalists and the old organizations of the workers movement”. The class instrument they thought was most valid in this struggle was the wildcat strike.

In a 1939 article about the post-1929 “Groups of Council Communists”, Paul Mattick wrote: “These groups are Marxist because there has not as yet developed a social science superior to that originated by Marx, and because the Marxian principles of scientific research still are the most realistic and allow incorporation of new experiences growing out of continuing capitalistic development. Marxism is not conceived as a closed system, but as the present state of a growing social science capable of serving as a theory of the practical class struggle of the workers.” According to Mattick, the council communists are aware of the fact that they are merely propaganda groups, since critique and propaganda “are the only practical activities possible today and their apparent fruitlessness only reflects an apparent non-revolutionary situation”. They are “able only to suggest necessary courses of action, but unable to perform them in the ‘interest of the class’. This the class has to do itself”. On every occasion, “they try to foster self-initiative and self-action of the workers. The groups participate wherever possible in any action of the working population, not proposing a separate program, but adopting the program of those workers and endeavoring to increase the direct participation of those workers in all decisions”.

### II

Born after a failed attempt to rehabilitate the traditional workers movement and as a theoretical expression and generalization of an experience like that of the movement for workers councils,
since destroyed by counterrevolutionary regression, the groups of council communists are considered primarily for their theoretical and critical contributions, which constituted the preconditions for their purely propagandistic labors.

The most intellectually productive period for the councilist groups spans the period beginning with the world economic crisis of 1929 and ending with the second world war and coincides with the political and theoretical bankruptcy of the traditional workers movement, both of the social democratic and communist varieties. The basic themes of these groups’ contributions are the theory of the workers councils—later defined more properly as the theory of proletarian autonomy—the critique of the institutionalized workers movement and of the Bolshevik experience after the Russian revolution and, finally, the concept of an alternative model of communist society.

The council movement was not a result of revolutionary theories: it arose from the proliferation of spontaneous rank and file organizations that emerged as a consequence of the precise organizational requirements of the working class. For the council communists this movement demonstrated that pre-existing organizational forms are not necessary for mass actions. The brief life of the council movement constituted one of those episodes that followed in the wake of the first world war which, despite the fact that it was not yet conscious of its potential possibilities and was therefore incoherent, was nonetheless the first large-scale manifestation of the possible emancipation of the working class. For the councilists this does not mean that the self-organization of the revolution on the basis of the workers councils by itself constitutes the guarantee that the policies and actions of these organizations will respond to the real needs of the proletariat. If they do not, the councilists say, the councils will be destined to disappear or self-destruct. The councilists only claim that the council movement, such as it has appeared historically, has demonstrated the capacity of the workers for autonomously initiating revolutionary actions and providing them with the necessary organizational forms.

According to Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch astronomer who was one of the principle theoreticians of council communism, it is possible to predict that the workers councils—the “natural” organizing principle of the working class—will constitute the decisive institution in the development and continuity of the revolutionary process. In a volume devoted to the councils that was first published in Dutch in 1946, Pannekoek wrote: “The workers councils will unite the actions, and connect the ideas, strategies and methods; from the factory meetings will issue the decisions and proposals, and these impulses to the struggle will be brought together and debated in the workers councils. If the whole movement grows to such an extent that it paralyzes the institutions of State power, it will be the workers councils that must themselves assume the political functions.” As the revolution develops, the work of the councils will embrace more and more functions: “They will automatically become the institutions that must be responsible for organizing production.”
In their conception of the revolutionary process the council communists referred to the analysis of the traditional workers movement made by Linkskommunismus. What differentiated them in relation to the latter was their attempt to critically transcend the concept of the party. In one of the principle works of the Dutch council communists, “The Rise of a New Labor Movement”, published anonymously in 1935 in the journal Rätekorrespondenz (it was written by Henk Canne Meijer), the author defends the thesis that the revolution is an extremely complex process, but that communism, “workers democracy”, starts now; that is, the new society is born in the lap of the old. On the basis of this fundamental position, the councilists deduced an element of their critique of traditional workers organizations: the latter bear within themselves the seed of a new oppressive State; their structure, their way of conducting politics, cannot be distinguished from the other bourgeois organizations. With the onset of the first world war, at the latest, it became obvious that the workers movement merely constituted one of the currents of bourgeois society: the workers organizations of the belligerent countries proved that they have neither the means nor the intention of fighting capitalism; their only interest was to survive and to prosper within the capitalist structure.

“Socialism,” Paul Mattick wrote in 1939, “has not been the desired ‘end’ of the old labor movement; it was merely a term employed to hide an entirely different objective, which was political power within a society based on rulers and ruled for a share in the created surplus value. This was the end which determined the means.” One could not therefore expect a rebirth of the old workers movement. A workers movement that wants to be considered to be really new must destroy exactly those aspects which were considered to be the strength of the old movement, and precisely because the history of the old workers movement was substantially nothing more than the history of the capitalist market approached “from the proletarian point of view”, a rebirth of the old workers movement is thus for council communism only conceivable as the overcoming of the self-limitation in traditional parties and trade unions and as the revolt of the masses against “their” organizations.

The critique of the “old workers movement” was directed not only at social democracy, but also at those parties claiming the Leninist tradition. In his essay on the philosophical presuppositions of Lenin’s theory, Anton Pannekoek wrote in 1938: “Of course Lenin was a pupil of Marx; from Marx he had learnt what was most essential for the Russian Revolution, the uncompromising proletarian class struggle. Just as for analogous reasons, the social democrats were pupils of Marx.” By adhering to Leninism, that is, the Russian model for “building socialism”, the communist parties cannot represent a real alternative to western social democracy. For the councilists the Bolshevik revolution, whose ambiguous character conceals a predominantly bourgeois historical mission, installed a “State socialism” or “State capitalism”, which has nothing to do with real socialism.

The specific problems posed by an extraordinarily backward country ruled by Czarist absolutism rendered impossible a communism that could be situated within the global structure of capitalism: only a revolutionary situation at the national level, together with a real revolutionary process in the hegemonic countries of the capitalist system, would have allowed a direct passage from semi-feudal conditions to socialism. And the council communists are furthermore convinced that it is precisely
in the backwardness of the Russian economy that the secret of Bolshevik success and the creation of State capitalism resides: without this backwardness the latter would not even have been conceivable.

The “Theses on Bolshevism”, written by Helmut Wagner but published anonymously in the third issue of *Rätekorrespondenz* in 1934, once again takes up the thread of the analysis of the Bolshevik experience first elucidated by the left communists. The Bolsheviks’ “Jacobinism”, their theory and their organizational structure all correspond to the historical task confronted by that “leadership of the revolutionary petit bourgeois intelligentsia”, i.e.: conduct a bourgeois revolution not only without, but even against the bourgeoisie, merging the peasant-bourgeois revolution with that of the proletariat of the industrial workers.

The Bolsheviks therefore managed to hold power by systematically opposing the interests of the working class to those of the peasants and vice versa. Within this context, the soviets degenerated into instruments of Bolshevik policy and were abandoned at the moment when they no longer served the interests of the rulers. The weakness of the various classes made the existence of a government bureaucracy possible and inevitable, which by means of a skilled manipulation and balancing of the different interests, could add to its autonomy. This bureaucracy in power therefore constitutes the new class that has replaced the bourgeoisie in a State capitalist system. “Bolshevism,” one reads in the Theses, “is therefore not only unserviceable as a directive for the revolutionary policy of the international proletariat, but is one of its heaviest and most dangerous impediments.”

The first collective work published by the Dutch councilists was strictly dedicated to a critical analysis of the Bolshevik experience. *The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* (1930) remains one of the most original texts of the councilist current. Regarding the characteristics of the future communist society, Marx as well as his theoretical heirs refrained from taking any concrete positions. Very little was said about the economic structure of the new society, in order to avoid the pitfalls of utopianism, and the development of capitalism certainly did not allow for detailed considerations concerning the structure of the socialism of the future. At the time of the 1917 Russian revolution, at the latest, Marxist theoreticians found themselves confronted by the need to resolve this problem in the real world. In the Soviet Union, however, a method of calculation for the regulation of economic life that would make possible a process of development consciously controlled by the masses and that would replace the money- and exchange-based economy was neither desired nor possible.

With the disappearance of money and the market—this is the thesis of the council communists—the problem of the need for economic-social calculation would still remain for the future society: for the social regulation of production and distribution a general norm and a unit of measurement are indispensable. And since only the average social productivity exists “from society’s point of view”,
the Dutch councilists held that the average necessary social labor time contained in the products should apply as the basis and unit of measurement of the communist economy. This unit of measurement is for the purpose of regulating production and distribution through a system of social accounting of a purely technical character entirely controlled from below.

The model of communist society outlined by the Dutch group (the GIC) in the *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, although not yet sounding like something that will only arrive in a distant future—which is true of certain later works on the same theme—nonetheless remains typical of a period of regression for the movement. Here as well, as on other issues, one of the possible models (average social labor time as the basis of production and distribution) is proposed as the only one suitable for communist society. Something that in the period of struggle might have been a hypothesis subject to daily tests becomes during the phase following the defeat of the movement the only practical way, even precisely because its “practicality” is only theoretical.

Although their predictions with regard to the revolutionary potential of the proletariat were often erroneous, in their analysis of the development of capitalism and of the institutionalized workers movement the councilists were all-too-often correct. The definitive decline of the council communist groups followed their erroneous evaluation of what would happen after the second world war, when they thought that the proletariat would renew the councilist movement as the one truly revolutionary weapon. And it was the frustration of this expectation by the concrete facts of the first postwar years, rather than the limited number of its proponents or its organizational capabilities, that caused council communism to produce nothing new and to remain relegated to the status of a marginal inter-war phenomenon. This critical current could still contribute some interesting fundamentals to a diligent enquirer and certainly constitutes a valid theoretical reference point for an analysis of the contradictions of today’s capitalism. But this is only true if it is taken for what it was: an analysis of the authoritarian and totalitarian transformation of world capitalism and a still applicable critique of the degeneration of the institutionalized workers movement; a theoretical current which, however, was incapable of overcoming the limits of its own historical experience and which, if it still exists, only lives off the fruits produced before the war.

**III**

Born on March 15, 1904 in Berlin, Paul Mattick began working in a factory in 1918. He worked as an apprentice at Siemens, where he remained until 1921. Since the age of nine he was a member of the youth organizations of the working class left, first the *Freie Sozialistische Jugend* of the Spartacists and then, after the communist split in 1920, the *Rote Jugend* of the KAPD, when the
communist youth federation of the Charlottenburg district of Berlin unanimously joined the new workers party. What Mattick wrote in 1945 concerning Otto Rühle could also be applied to Mattick’s own activities in the workers movement: his “activity in the German Labor Movement was related to the work of small and restricted minorities within and outside of the official labor organizations. The groups which he directly adhered to were at no time of real significance. And even within these groups he held a peculiar position; he could never completely identify himself with any organization. He never lost sight of the general interests of the working class, no matter what political strategy he was advocating at any particular time. He could not regard organizations as an end in themselves, but merely as mediums for the establishment of real social relations and for the fuller development of the individual.”

An active member of the Communist Workers Party, Mattick left Berlin in 1921. He went first to Hannover, and then worked as an electrician in Bremen before finally moving to Cologne, where he worked as a mechanic in Deutz’s Humboldt works. 1923 was a year of runaway inflation, and early in that year the French and the Belgians had occupied the Ruhr. There were strikes against the foreign occupation, supported by the German government, but most workers struggles took place in response to the disastrous living conditions of the time.

The social-economic crisis of 1923 and the failed attempt to resolve it in a revolutionary way profoundly influenced the formation of an entire generation of the German workers movement. The dollar, which in January 1923 was worth 8,000 marks, was worth 100,000 on June 1st and one million at the end of the same month, only to reach 20 million on September 20th. The price of an egg rose from 300 marks on February 1st to 30,000 marks on August 8. This was one of the most serious crises to affect an advanced capitalist country. It was characterized by generalized poverty throughout a highly industrialized territory, the absolute pauperization of almost the entire population, the collapse of the traditional privileges and ideologies of the petit bourgeoisie, and the universal spread of speculation and corruption.

One consequence of social decomposition was the crisis of the institutionalized workers movement. Trade unionism was totally paralyzed, as its members rebelled or abandoned their organizations. The organizations and bureaucracies based on the consensus, discipline and money of their members quickly went under. There was no money for newspapers, congresses, or travel expenses. Faced with the inability of the trade unions and the social democracy to enforce contractual agreements, the workers turned against their organizations, which were accused of passivity and complicity. Once again the strict relation between capitalist prosperity and the prosperity of the traditional workers organizations comes into focus. The crisis of capitalism brought with it the crisis of institutions, including those that defined themselves as workers institutions and emerged from the struggle of the industrial proletariat.
One cannot completely understand Mattick’s writings without taking into account the historical period during which he underwent his “political socialization”. In 1923, the Communist Workers Party of Germany (the KAPD) had no more than 25 members in Cologne. The Cologne branch of the General Workers Union of Germany (AAUD), on the other hand, had several hundred members. These groups were by no means in any position to provoke or lead strikes. They did, however, actively participate in the economic and political struggle. In 1923, the united action of the rank and file reached one of its highest points. The strikes were mostly spontaneous and among the workers political disagreements were swept into the background. Only the social democratic trade union representatives, under the orders of their leaders, made frequent attempts to restrain the impulse to action. The disagreements between the “extremists” and the workers of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany), on the other hand, had their origins outside the everyday struggle.

The truncated German “October Revolution” of 1923, although marking the end of a revolutionary period, certainly did not put an end to workers struggles, which were to continue at the same level of violence until the early 1930s and the Nazi seizure of power. The left communist groups to which Mattick belonged continued their political activity, despite their increasingly hostile confrontations with the communist party. The communist party quickly succeeded in obtaining the support of the most combative part of the German working class that had broken with the social democracy, and the groups of the “extreme left” were isolated on the margins of political life, although they were always present in the struggle.

Mattick did not fully experience the period of the decadence of the left communist groups. In 1926 he emigrated to the United States. He wanted “to see the world” and the free ticket provided to him by a distant relative gave him the chance to depart for America. He lived at first in Benton Harbor, Michigan and then, in early 1927, he moved to Chicago, where he lived for fifteen years. He worked as an engineer at Western Electric, which at that time employed more than 50,000 workers. During his first years in the United States, Mattick frequented German immigrant circles for the most part. According to Mattick, in those days there were more than five thousand German-speaking workers in Chicago, among those workers who had developed political interests. The number of German workers upon whom he could really count was no more than 500. What remained of the “workers movement”, and this was true not only of the German immigrants, did not distinguish itself politically. Vaguely leftist or socialistic sports leagues and organizations for leisure-time activities, picnics or choruses published their various newspapers. Mattick, together with a group of 12 Germans, founded an Arbeiterbildungsverein, a workers cultural association that published a monthly journal and organized courses, debates, conferences and collective discussion groups for reading political texts. From this group later emerged the German political group organized around the publication of the Chikagoer Arbeiterzeitung, which Mattick had resuscitated.

The German-language “newspaper of the workers of Chicago”, the Chikagoer Arbeiterzeitung, was originally founded in 1876 by the socialist typographer Conrad Conzett. It was published in three editions per week until 1879, when it became a daily. This newspaper bequeathed its name to the
first struggle for the eight-hour day (May 1, 1886) and the famous “Chicago Martyrs”, accused of having thrown a bomb at the police and condemned to death under false pretenses, were all editors or writers for the newspaper. After the murders of the Chicago Eight, the job of editor-in-chief passed into the hands of Joseph Dietzgen, the worker-philosopher who had converted from social democracy to anarcho-communism. For a while the Chikagoer Arbeiterzeitung was the only anarchist daily newspaper. With the new century and the onset of a period of prosperity, the paper assumed a more moderate line and supported the trade union movement. During the world war it upheld internationalist positions and was the target of constant repression. The Chikagoer Arbeiterzeitung continued to be published as a weekly from 1919 to 1924, but its fate was strictly linked to the decline of the first American workers movement, suffocated by repression and the illusions of capitalist prosperity, which was to collapse with the world crisis of 1929.

It was therefore not at all surprising that Mattick would refuse to create a new newspaper, and that he instead chose to claim the legacy of a paper once published by the “Chicago Martyrs” and Dietzgen. The era of the Chikagoer Arbeiterzeitung would not last much longer. The time of organizational and political efforts limited to specific ethnic or linguistic groups had come to an end. The mass movement of the unemployed had reached a qualitatively new level that transcended minority groups. At the end of 1931 Mattick abandoned the “C.H.A.Z.” project in order to continue his own political work within the arena of the “Industrial Workers of the World” (the IWW), with whom he had been in contact since his arrival in Chicago, and he almost completely abandoned the use of the German language.

By the beginning of the 1930s, the IWW had almost totally lost the influence it once exercised over the working class in the United States before the period of prosperity that followed the first world war. In the United States as a whole its active members numbered less than 20,000, in Chicago it had about 500, and the last strike it led was the Colorado miners strike of 1927. The IWW headquarters in Chicago published bulletins and newspapers in six languages, since its members were often recent immigrants. The English-language weekly Solidarity and other periodicals like the One Big Union Monthly would continue to be published for many years to come, but the IWW definitively disappeared as an organization after the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, whose purpose was clearly anti-trade union and anti-working class. Within the IWW, whose conception of the struggle could be loosely defined as similar to that of European revolutionary syndicalism, Paul Mattick once again took up an autonomous position. While the level of theoretical discussion was very elevated within the councilist groups, consonant with the tradition of the German workers movement and the European movement in general, the IWW and its orientation towards action, however, had very little room for such things. For this reason, Mattick took the opportunity of defining his own position primarily in relation to the Dutch GIC and other councilist groups; in the United States, he directed his polemics against intellectuals like Sidney Hook or against Leninist political groups, while, on the other hand, this kind of internal debate was completely lacking within the IWW.
With the experience of the world crisis of 1929, which in the United States was followed first by the unemployed workers movement and then by the New Deal, Mattick’s period of political-theoretical education was complete. In 1929, with the onset of the crisis, Henryk Grossmann published his book on *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System*. His reading of this book, which remains one of the principle Marxist works on economics, in the light of the events after 1929, decisively influenced Mattick’s interpretation of Marxism. A reading of Marx through the lens of Grossmann is to be found even in Paul Mattick’s latest writings; but as a theoretical reference point for the practical autonomous activity of the working class, Grossmann’s position would not figure in the works of Mattick and his group until the second world war. While he was active in the IWW, Mattick could easily introduce the analysis of capitalist development set forth by Grossmann (of which we find traces in various pamphlets published between 1933 and 1935); but the “objectivist” and “catastrophist” positions discovered in Mattick by the councilist spontaneists triggered a great deal of resistance from Korsch and the Dutch councilists.

It is only on the basis of the interpretation of Marx provided by Grossmann that it is possible to thoroughly understand the positions developed by Mattick during the 1960s concerning the limits of the Keynesian economy and the new kinds of contradictions introduced by State intervention in capitalism’s developmental process.[1]

During the period of the unemployed workers movement the traditional organizations of the workers movement, parties and trade unions, entered into crisis. Their numerical base and powers of attraction among the masses, already minimal compared to the European workers movement, almost completely disappeared in the face of the spontaneous movement created by unemployment during the first two years of the crisis. Only the New Deal, which on the social plane succeeded in decisively attenuating the contradictions and explosive tensions brought about by the crisis, kept the traditional organizations afloat and gave a decisive impulse to the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the trade union movement; and that it was capable of doing so was also due to the fact that these organizations accepted and fully supported Roosevelt’s schemes. After the New Deal American trade unionism, which with its type of organization would control the decisive nuclei of the working class, constitutes an example, free of ideological prejudices, of the function of the trade union in capitalism, a structure of counter-power whose ultimate purpose is to consolidate the status quo.

In a long interview conducted on October 7, 1972, Mattick briefly recalled, among other things, the years following the Wall Street collapse:

“At the beginning of the crisis in 1929 there was a period of relative calm. Hoover’s prediction was generally considered to be correct: the crisis would be brief and would be followed by a period of prosperity. In the United States during this period there was no social security of any kind, not even unemployment insurance; there were only a few charitable organizations to take care of the ‘poor’, but these organizations had their hands full with the elderly and children and could not assume
responsibility for attending to the unemployed as well. The unemployed therefore found themselves utterly destitute if they had no savings, since no one was prepared to help them. Within a short span of time, in 1930 and 1931, massive demonstrations took place, especially at welfare offices; there were confrontations, desperate acts, and police interventions. During some of the big demonstrations, the police shot into the crowd and killed several demonstrators. After a demonstration where the police shot and killed twelve people, almost two million people filled the streets of Chicago: against such masses the police were helpless. The entire city was shut down. The police were everywhere, but there were too many demonstrators, and each policeman was so completely surrounded by demonstrators that he was unable to use his weapon. In the stores closed down by bankrupt merchants, of which there were one or two on every street, residents organized meetings and discussions. It was a completely spontaneous movement, which at first had no name or any publications through which it could be expressed. We therefore gradually tried to organize the movement, making proposals in the assemblies and distributing pamphlets. There were demonstrations almost every day. Many people were evicted from their homes. Building owners attempted to legally evict the unemployed, with the help of courts and the police. But the furniture had barely been moved to the street and the police were just gone a few minutes before the apartments were reoccupied. The police often returned, which led to confrontations and deaths. There were many acts of spontaneous solidarity. Our group often organized dinners. We cooked collectively in vacant stores, after having appropriated the food without paying for it, and then we gave it away to the unemployed. At night, strangely enough, we continued with our Capital study groups. During the year when I was teaching one of the courses, the number of students rose from 80 to 120. The activities of the political groups within the movement varied from city to city. In New York, for example, where the CP and the socialists were quite strong, the assemblies passed resolutions to send delegations to Washington. Everything was analyzed in the usual manner of making politics. We, however, preferred direct action, we preferred to re-route gas lines, so that everyone would get free gas or could light their homes with electricity taken directly from the public utilities.”

“We started an action and immediately, spontaneously, other groups would continue along the same road. At this level of mass participation in the movement, the police chose not to intervene. They opted for a different tactic. Two years after the crisis began, the misery of the masses had reached such a point that, if the police had continued with their arrests and murders, the people would have exploded. And it was precisely in these circumstances that Roosevelt’s series of reforms began, the public works and unemployment assistance. The government was forced to make this decision in 1933, since the point had been reached where a decidedly revolutionary movement could have taken form from one moment to the next. It was symptomatic that the soldiers of the first world war were protesting: when groups of this kind, originally reactionary, are radicalized, this means that tension is at its peak.”

Paul Mattick’s group, which later—always in close connection with the IWW—would have no more than 90 workers as members, including those who moved to Buffalo and New York, included more than one hundred people active in various neighborhoods and in the councils of the
unemployed. In the factory where Mattick worked, which normally employed 50,000 workers, the workforce had been reduced to 16,000 in 1931, and to 8,000 in the following year. In 1931 Mattick was laid off and after this year the movement could no longer count on winning supporters in the factories. Given the economic situation, and the paralysis of traditional trade unionism, that part of the working class which could boast of the privilege of having a job, could by no means allow itself the luxury of going on strike. Mattick’s group published the first printed periodical of the movement of the unemployed, the *Workers Alliance*, which advocated the model of councilist organization. For the IWW the assembly principle and autonomous action committees were nothing new, so that in Chicago the spontaneous movement easily accepted the councilists’ theories, while in other cities the presence of strictly “Leninist” organizations played a pivotal role in preventing the spread of new methods of action.

The New Deal which, like any other defensive means deployed by capitalism, can give the impression of a conscious and planned action, but which in reality was only a blind and desperate response on the part of a system between a rock and a hard place of its own contradictions, quickly managed to postpone the further exacerbation of social conflict until the “solution” provided by the second world war. The intervention of politics and the State in the economy was not the result of more or less “enlightened” theories that succeeded in getting accepted. To the contrary, certain theories, still accepted today, came to the fore in the face of the bourgeois State’s need to intervene in the economic field, for the purpose of remedying the most visible contradictions disrupting the system. Every practice finds its theory.

In 1935, when State measures to deal with unemployment proved their effectiveness, the movement disintegrated, stifled by the shower of unemployment assistance dollars distributed by the State. Mattick, who founded the journal *International Council Correspondence* in 1934, managed to be registered as an intellectual and obtained from the “Writers Project” a monthly subsidy of 94 dollars—while as a worker he would have been entitled to a maximum of 54 dollars. The journal, first conceived of as an organ for theoretical discussion within the movement, became after the first few issues one of the many journals of the American Left that, with a print run of 2,000, reached only a very small number of already-politicized workers. *International Council Correspondence* was the English-language organ of the councilists; later published under the name of *Living Marxism* and finally, before ceasing publication in 1943 during the war, as *New Essays*, it more definitively assumed the character of the autonomous journal of the tradition of the Dutch councilist theories, and ultimately evolved, as a result of the personal dedication of Mattick and Korsch, into a journal of analysis of the contradictions and structural transformations which capitalism was undergoing on a world scale.

Mattick became an American citizen at the beginning of the second world war. During this period in the United States, foreign citizens had neither the right to work nor to receive unemployment insurance payments. Their only right was to serve as a soldier in the United States Army. Mattick returned to Chicago where he worked from 1940 to 1948. Soon thereafter, following a brief stay in
Germany, he returned to New York. Because of his age he could not get a job and he lived on unemployment insurance payments again for two years. In 1952 Mattick built a house in Vermont, where he lived for seven years. In 1959 his wife was hired at a university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Mattick has been living there since that time. After his journal ceased publication, Mattick continued to write for academic journals and various journals and publications of the council communists. He worked with Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Institute for Social Research* when it was re-established in the United States but with the exception of Grossmann he did not maintain frequent contacts with the representatives of this school of sociology or with the other groups of German emigrant intellectuals.

During the 1960s, Mattick once again published articles in European journals. Many specialists became acquainted with his work as a result of his essays in Lelio Basso’s international journal and in Maximilien Rubel’s *Cahiers du Marxologie*. In 1968, with the rediscovery of councilism by part of the German student movement, he was presented to the European left as a critic of Marcuse—to whom he had devoted a long critical essay—and of the theories of Baran and Sweezy on monopoly capitalism, which were at that time very popular with the anti-establishment left and certain sectors of the traditional workers movement.

But it was only with the appearance of his book *Marx and Keynes*, written during the mid-sixties and published first in the United States and then in some ten countries between 1969 and 1971, that Mattick became one of the principle reference points of the Marxist economic debates of the 1970s. For Mattick, the theory of the objective limits of the mixed economy and of State intervention in the capitalist economy, and the critique of bourgeois economic ideologies and of the reformist illusions of the traditional workers movement, are derived from the Marxist theory of value rather than dogma, and constitute the interpretive nucleus for the contradictions of modern capitalism; they are hypotheses whose everyday testing is not just the job of science, but also and above all of political practice.

**IV**

Measured by bourgeois standards of “success”, council communism might be considered to be one of the most unsuccessful currents among the many attempts on the part of the working class to emancipate itself since the turn of the twentieth century. But just as Marx represented an element of lucidity in the first dawn of the movement that led the working class to organize within the limits of bourgeois society, and just as Rosa Luxemburg and other theoreticians of the socialist left constituted evidence of an historical alternative formed within that movement once it had become institutionalized, so also does council communism, within the limitations mentioned above, stand out as one of the few theoretical reference points for the process of critical rehabilitation and
practical renewal which is the only way the working class can once again discover its autonomy and its oppositional role against bourgeois society.

Within the councilist movement, Paul Mattick assumed a series of autonomous positions that often differed from those of the other leading representatives of that current, which allowed him to successively elaborate original hypotheses concerning the contradictions of mature capitalism. One of these positions, which cannot be overlooked in the context of our discussion, concerns the very concept of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. Contrary to the “leftist” tradition, which includes the most recent positions of “workerism” represented in Italy by the Quaderni Rossi group, for Mattick the proletariat is not in and of itself and in its essence the revolutionary class invested with the historical mission of overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Through a long, contradictory and by no means linear process of formation, the working class produced by capitalism and which itself produces this social-economic system has, at certain historical moments, the possibility of assuming a revolutionary role. Hence the alternative “socialism or barbarism”, revolutionary consciousness or exploitation, oppression and misery, which determines the historical process, i.e., the process of capitalist accumulation. But this process is not without limits.

Here Mattick contributes another element that distinguishes his theoretical positions from those of the other councilists. While his view of the revolutionary vocation of the proletariat spares him from experiencing the disillusionment and discouragement experienced by other representatives of the communist left, this other element, which is improperly labeled “economism” and “objectivism”, has prevented him from lapsing into consolatory reformism and the theorization of the practicable.

In 1934 Mattick, while defending Grossmann’s positions, wrote that, in Grossmann’s book on the accumulation and collapse of the capitalist system, the author did not maintain—as certain critics insinuated—that capitalism is destined to collapse for “purely economic” reasons. This did not prevent him, however, from limiting his analysis of the laws of accumulation to purely economic assumptions as a methodological guideline, so as to thereby define the limits of the system at the theoretical level. “The theoretical understanding of the fact that capitalism must collapse as a result of its contradictions does not imply that its actual collapse will take place automatically, independent of men. Without men the economy would not even exist.” From the Marxist point of view, according to Mattick, there is thus no such thing as a “purely economic” problem, since the dialectic conceives of process as a totality: the actual collapse is therefore only conceivable in the context of all the factors of the historical process. It is quite likely, Mattick adds, echoing Rosa Luxemburg, that the masses will already have carried out the revolution before the collapse of capitalism, calculated economically on the various levels of abstraction, will have run its course in reality.

Mattick, in response to Pannekoek’s critique of Grossmann, maintained that by confirming the existence of economic limits in the wage struggle, Grossmann merely proved that this struggle, too,
could assume a revolutionary and political character of its own, when capitalism has reached certain limits. Class struggles, Mattick writes, again in that same 1934 essay, depend upon the material situation of the proletariat and for that reason will always necessarily have an economic character. Only at the beginning of the phase that could be called the collapse, that is, when capital can only continue to exist on the basis of an increasing pauperization of the proletariat, will the economic struggle be transformed into the political struggle and, whether or not the masses are aware of it, the question of power will necessarily be posed. Therefore, Mattick continues, one cannot oppose the economic theory of collapse to the revolution born from the will of the workers, since they are identical. The revolutionary action of the proletariat cannot be explained by reasons distinct from those that are born from material life needs and the latter are intimately connected to society’s economic situation.

This connection between the limits of capitalism and revolution, between objective development and subjective intervention and thus the political significance of “abstract economic analysis”, is explained by Mattick in terms which faithfully reflect the conception formulated by Grossmann in a letter to Mattick dated October 2, 1934: “As a dialectical Marxist I obviously know that both aspects of the process, the objective and the subjective elements, reciprocally influence one another. These factors are based on the class struggle. (. . .) But in the interests of analysis I must apply the abstract procedure, which consists in isolating each element in order to bring to light their essential functions. Lenin often speaks of the revolutionary situation that must be objectively present as a precondition for the active and victorious intervention of the proletariat. My theory of collapse does not exclude this active intervention, but instead attempts to show under what conditions such a revolutionary situation, objectively given, can arise and progress.”

It is not by chance that at this level his analysis coincides with that of Rosa Luxemburg. The latter, in her Anti-Critique, after declaring that the catastrophe constitutes a “vital element of capitalism from its birth to its decline,” continues as follows: “The Marxist schema of accumulation—faithfully interpreted—is the precise prognosis of the inevitable end of capitalism (. . .) Will this moment really arrive? We must not forget that this is a question of a purely theoretical abstraction, since capital accumulation is not just an economic but also a political process as well.” And she goes on to assert: “Here, as elsewhere in history, theory can fully render its services only if it shows the developmental tendency, the logical end-point towards which the latter objectively leads.”

It is with regard to this point, where theory encounters its historical justification, that we can situate the continuity in the works of Paul Mattick as a critical point of reference for a rehabilitation of Marxism, the analysis of the contradictions of capitalism, and consciousness of the necessity of workers autonomy and the revolutionary project. And it is in Rosa Luxemburg, Grossmann and Mattick, regardless of all specific considerations with respect to the merit of their respective theories of the objective limits of capitalism, that this “purely economic” scientific labor is based—more necessary today than ever before—which already in Marx could seem to be a mere “imminent critique”, if not “objectivism”: “What must be proven in purely economic terms, that is, from the
bourgeois point of view within the limits of capitalist production itself, is that the latter is limited and relative: that it does not constitute an absolute mode of production, but simply a historical one, corresponding to a particular temporary era of the development of the material conditions of production.”