

‘Marxism: Last Refuge of the Bourgeoisie?’

Marxism. Last Refuge of the Bourgeoisie? by Paul Mattick (Merlin Press).

The important part of the title of this posthumous work by Paul Mattick (he died in 1981) is the question mark, since Mattick did not regard Marxism as “bourgeois” at all. He did, however, want to explain how “Marxism” had become an ideology of regimes and movements which had absolutely nothing to do with Marx’s aim of a classless, stateless, wageless world community.

The first part of the book is devoted to a discussion of Marxian economics, where Mattick sets out to explain why so many academics have come to imagine themselves as Marxists without having understood at all what Marx’s aim was. Thus many learned works have been published on value and price, and the so-called problem of the “transformation” of the one into the other, without the authors understanding that Marx aimed at the abolition of the price system and that for him “value was a historical category [that] is bound to disappear with the ending of capitalism” Clearly, the “transformation problem” fades into insignificance in the face of a proposal to abolish both price and value. Similarly, those academics who use Marx’s ideas to make policy recommendations to governments have failed to realise that “Marxian theory aims not to resolve ‘economic problems’ of bourgeois society but to show them to be insoluble”. As Mattick puts it, “Marx was a socialist, not an economist”.

When Mattick writes about Marxian economics. therefore, he is on the same wavelength as us, even if we can’t always agree with him. As, for instance, over the supposed economic breakdown of capitalism which Mattick believed in for the whole of his political life and which he still, in this, his last book, expected to finally spark off the socialist revolution.

The second part (which is more lucid and can be read separately before, or without, the more difficult first part) deals with “Marxism” as a political and ideological movement. Here Mattick has some very pertinent things to say, pointing out that German Social Democracy in its heyday before the First World War saw socialism not as the abolition of the wages system and the control of production by the producers, but as the control by a democratically-elected government of the one Great Cartel towards which they saw capitalism tending.

This state-capitalist conception of “socialism” was later abandoned by them (in favour of a frank acceptance of the mixed private/state capitalist status quo) but was inherited, and to a large extent achieved, by the Bolsheviks. The Russian revolution, says Mattick, was “a sort of bourgeois revolution” in which “the historical functions of the Western bourgeoisie were taken up by an apparently anti-bourgeois party”. And the following comments could just as easily have come from us:

“The Bolshevik regime had no intention to abolish the wages system and was therefore not engaged in furthering a social revolution in the Marxian sense.”

“The capitalist system was modified but not abolished. The history made by the Bolsheviks was still capitalist history in the ideological disguise of Marxism.”

In this way “Marxism” became the ideology of state capitalist regimes, a theory of the totalitarian control of society by a minority, whereas Marx had always stood for a society without classes and without any machinery of coercion. It is a pity that there will be no more books from the pen of Mattick to make this point.