

## Interview

# Peter van Spall talks to Paul Mattick

(1973)

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From: **DISKUS** No.4, Frankfurt 1973, reprinted in Paul Mattick, **Marx und Keynes**, Vienna, Räteverlag, 1973, p. 358ff.

Questions as well as answers have occasionally been shortened by the editors

Transcription/HTML marking: Thomas Schmidt for **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

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### **Peter van Spall:**

The parliamentarism of the capitalist West is structurally adapting itself to the sham parliamentarism of the state-capitalist East. The economic-political power of the capitalist techno-bureaucrats thus increases more and more. Is then the American "presidential dictatorship," of which even the bourgeois oppositionists have been talking lately, not symptomatic of the development from liberal parliamentary democracy to the authoritarian-fascist system of leaders and followers of a newer type, which is now becoming apparent in the high-capitalist societies as well? The predominant form of government throughout the world is - as US Senator Fulbright keeps pointing out - dictatorship. We would be interested to know how you see things.

### **Paul Mattick:**

The "presidential dictatorship" is not a new phenomenon in America, nor is it a dictatorship in the sense of the authoritarian states of the 20th century. The American constitution has granted the president an extraordinary power of disposal, which can be extended far beyond the legal possibilities by an excessive cult of the state and of personality. At the same time, politics is generally conceived of as a business, and the resulting cynicism necessitates the ideologically exaggerated glorification of state institutions and especially those of the president, but also conditions the puffery of political struggles for state positions. Like capitalism itself, politics as a business entails an all-pervasive corruption of public life. Since the system itself is not yet questioned, all political relations relate to persons. The impression is given that politics and business depend on the ruling party and therefore on the president, but this is not the case. American domestic and foreign policy, for example, from Roosevelt to Nixon, has remained

unchanged by its dependence on capitalist development trends and the constellations of economic and political power resulting from World War II. Whether the parliamentarism of the West approximates the sham parliamentarism of the East is completely irrelevant from the workers' point of view, since in both cases it does not refer to relations of production as class relations, but is merely the traditionally handed-down form of pretending political participation. However, in the context of bourgeois emancipation, parliamentarism was a political means of capitalist economic development and, within certain limits, the ground of social reforms to consolidate capitalist rule, whereas the sham parliamentarism of state-capitalist oriented societies serves only as an instrument of control of authoritarian state power. Capitalist ascendancy, like the state of capitalist decomposition, knows no other unified stance of the bourgeoisie than that against the working class. Even within monopoly capitalism, capitalist competition prevents a united centrally directed front of capital as is possible in state capitalist systems. The process of capitalist concentration and centralization, which is not yet completed - and cannot be completed on the ground of private property - continues to be accompanied by political-parliamentarian struggles. Pervasive state capitalism - if not imposed from outside, as in Eastern Europe in particular - requires social upheaval; it is not an automatic product of capitalist development. The "dictatorship" exercised in the United States thus expresses only the domination of the decisive part of American capital, which, however, and necessarily, determines the general direction of political development. However much imperialism is a vital necessity of capital, it affects the various groups of capital quite differently, so that the general direction has to prevail over opposition. The antagonisms in the bourgeois camp come out, for example, in the split over the war in Indochina. There is no point in talking about the economic-political power of technocrats. We live in a capitalist society in which technology, like everything else, is subordinated to the accumulation of capital. Technology can only be developed insofar as it contributes to the extraction of unpaid labour power. It continues to serve the politico-military requirements of imperialist competition, but in this variety it is only a burden that reduces profit. Technology refers to the direct labour process, whereas social development depends on the class relations represented in capitalism as "economic relations". Economic and therefore political power is in the hands of the owners of capital; the parasitic state apparatus depends on the exploitation of the workers mediated by capital. The technocrats, under these circumstances, have no positions of power of their own. They are themselves partly owners of capital, partly themselves employees of other capitalists, and in both functions are bound to the reproduction of existing social relations. When there is talk of the possibility of fascism in America, we are not dealing here with eventual processes such as took place in Italy or Germany, for example, but simply with the intensified application of all the repressive measures already in place. A fascist mass mobilization is still as unlikely here as the emergence of a socialist mass movement. Conscious of its weakness, the part of the population accessible to socialism tries to operate within the framework of the given political institutions and poses no direct danger to the ruling class. Both "right" and "left" radicalism are still marginal phenomena. However, this says nothing for the future. As economic difficulties increase, spontaneous movements may occur in which further means of repression held in reserve will have to be employed. But states of civil war are nothing new to America; on a local scale they have accompanied all American history, and the brutality of state power applied in them rivals that of no other country. In this sense, the present state may already be considered a "fascist" one.

**Peter van Spall:**

What is state capitalism for you as opposed to decentralized private capitalism? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these systems from the perspective of the working class?

**Paul Mattick:**

State capitalism has hitherto been the form of capitalist relations of production which offered underdeveloped countries the possibility of attempting to extricate themselves from their state of backwardness and exploitation in relative independence, despite monopolistic world market control. Capitalist development, which goes hand in hand with industrialization, could not prevail here over the already highly centralized advanced countries by way of liberal competition, but only through a concentration and centralization of capital that surpassed monopoly capitalism. The capitalist monopoly in the developed countries conditions the state monopoly in the underdeveloped ones. However, not all backward countries have succeeded in combining their national-social liberation with state capitalism, so that in many there is only an imitation of the mixed economy of the developed countries, i.e. the predominance of private capital, which one tries to support by state intervention. From the capitalist point of view, state capitalism is a different form of society from private capitalism, simply because it puts an end to the class domination of the capitalists by handing over control of the conditions of production to the state, i.e. to a different group of people. For the displaced bourgeoisie, state capitalism is identical with socialism, since the one system, like the other, excludes their domination. But from the point of view of the workers, the relations of production have not changed. They still lack the power of disposal over the means of production and over their labour products. They have only exchanged one capitalist relation for another, and the state bureaucrats now personify capital for them as the capitalists did before. It will take another social revolution to abolish wage labor and bring production under the control of the producers. For the workers, state capitalism is not socialism, but a modified form of exploitative society. It has no advantages for them, unless capitalist development par excellence is taken as a model, but it has the disadvantage of greater difficulty in struggle against the new authorities. In any case, state capitalism is also a transitional stage for the workers' movement of the capitalist developed countries. For them it is not only a question of developing a proletariat and accumulating capital, but of abolishing capital with the proletariat. This, however, does not change the fact that there is an effort to build state capitalist systems in the developed countries as well. It is to be hoped, however, that in view of the actual conditions in the state capitalist countries, the workers will oppose these efforts and set their own socialist goals against them.

**Peter van Spall:**

In the U.S. and other leading industrial-capitalist countries, the contradiction between public poverty and private wealth is taking on life-threatening forms. In this context, liberal and socialist scholars warn that the destruction of the "environment" will be unstoppable in just a few years.

Are the leftists right who, on the basis of this development, believe that "late capitalism" is in its final phase?

**Paul Mattick:**

Overexploitation and the destruction of nature accompanied the whole capitalist development. This becomes all the more threatening the longer capital dominates the world. This process cannot be stopped without the simultaneous destruction of the capitalist mode of production. The moral outrage of liberal scientists and politicians over the destruction of the environment indicates either their stupidity or hypocrisy or both. Rational for capital is only profit, the basis of its existence. Anything that stands in the way of that can have no consideration. This is not a contradiction between "public poverty and private wealth", as shown by the enormous expenditure on armaments and war as the only possible capitalist form of "public wealth", but the preservation and multiplication of capital and its inherent class relations. The emphasis on environmental degradation as an argument against capitalism can mean no more than a demand for reforms to preserve capitalism's environment. There is no such thing as "inhuman technology" because it is shaped and applied by human beings. However, there is the fetish of technology in capitalism because of commodity fetishism. But behind it are hidden certain, historically conditioned, class and property relations, which already says that the fetish character of technology can be overcome by revolutionary means. With the social revolution, science and technology also lose their independent characteristics, which are "real" only in capitalism, and turn out to be human activity for the satisfaction of consciously conceived goals. It is not technology that dominates people, but technology applied capitalistically as a means and expression of capitalist domination. We do not have to worry about technology, but must eliminate capitalism in order to apply the technology of a socialist society accordingly. Socialist democracy is possible only in a classless society and presupposes social revolution. Revolution has nothing to do with democracy in the bourgeois sense, but with the attempt to break the domination of one class by another. Only after the destruction of capital is the democracy of the working people the precondition for preventing a new authoritarian regime on a state capitalist basis. The council system in its original form seems to be equal to the demands of a workers' democracy; but only if it succeeds in preventing the formation of a special state apparatus standing alongside it. The construction and structure of the council system is in part an experimental question. Where nothing stands in its way politically, we are dealing here with technical-organizational problems which can in principle be solved.

### **Peter van Spall:**

The bourgeois media spread the opinion that since the protest movement against the Vietnam War died down, there is no longer a "serious" left in the USA.

### **Paul Mattick:**

There can be no question of an 'oppositional' labour movement in America as yet, although an increasing critical attitude to the course of events is already noticeable. It is also directed against the official attitude of the trade unions and industrial associations - which here present the only remarkable as well as questionable form of a workers' movement - and finds its expression in wildcat strikes'. For the time being, however, what we have here is a spreading dissatisfaction with economic conditions and the war that was associated with them. The general ill-feeling also seizes upon working-class youth and students, as well as the minorities hardest hit by the economic decline. What is here called the "Left," i.e., the radical movement of Negroes and students, has so far, like every hopeless cause, no permanence. It jumps and ebbs with the

changing situations not determined by them, as, for example, on the occasion of the protest movement at the resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam. However, the bourgeois media's view of the waning of the protest movement expresses only a pipe dream. As things stand, the near future, with the intensification of all capitalist contradictions, will also bring the intensification of social unrest.