

Peter Mathias CBE (1928-2016)

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Peter Mathias rose to fill some of the most prestigious and influential academic positions in the UK and was one of the leading economic historians of his generation in Europe. His academic career began shortly after the end of the Second World War when he won a scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford, where he studied economic history under the direction of Charles Wilson. His early work on the brewing industry and its contribution to British economic growth before and during the industrial revolutions addressed business as well as economic historians. To underline the breadth of the changes that contributed to the broader processes of economic growth that lay behind the industrial revolutions of the 19th century, Mathias drew attention in particular to the critical roles played by changing patterns of consumption, the development of marketing networks and systems of retailing.

As well as focusing attention on topics that historians of the industrial revolution had previously overlooked, Mathias's work was conspicuous for the breadth of his archival research and range of approaches, setting models that many others would follow. In 1955 he was appointed to a university lectureship at Queen's College, Oxford, and his status as a leader in his field was subsequently acknowledged when in 1968 he was elected to the prestigious Chichele Chair in Economic History at All Souls College, Oxford. He remained in Oxford until 1987 when he was appointed Master of Downing College, Cambridge, the post that he

held until his retirement in 1995, after which he remained an active and productive scholar down to the time of his death earlier this year.

During a long and successful career Peter Mathias played a major role in shaping the study of modern economic history in the UK and on a much wider stage. His scholarly reputation was based on the quality of his own research and publications, his commitment to the development of economic history as a field of study and his belief that the discipline should address new questions and benefit from new forms of disciplinary collaboration. Open and constructive, Mathias was nonetheless critically selective and had very clear ideas about the sorts of collaboration that were desirable and those that were not.

As a historian of the industrial revolutions he had necessarily been drawn into the fierce polemical debates of the post-war decades, when the pessimistic interpretations that had dominated the radical Fabian tradition out of which British economic history had grown were being redirected along new paths by Marxist historians like E.P. Thompson and E.J. Hobsbawm. Mathias remained convinced, however, that in the longer term the industrial revolutions had emancipated a large part of the global population from abject poverty, and insisted that approaches inspired by abstract and general theories rarely stood up to the test of empirical research.

An unsparing critic of what he believed to be the theoretical over-simplifications of Marxist economic historiography, Mathias was no less forthright in his criticism of the abstract and ahistorical premises of post-war "econometrics". Originating in the United States, the vogue for quantitative economic history was driven by a desire to re-write economic history in line with macro-economic theory. Mathias was quick to point out that this meant reducing the historically complex processes of economic growth to a limited number of quantifiable variants, leading to conclusions that were verified through complex quantification and "counter-factual alternatives". Mathematical formulae, no matter how ingenious, could not conceal dubious historical conclusions, and Mathias insisted that the error

lay in trying to apply the “perfect equilibrium models” of macroeconomic theory to the untidy realities of economic history. But the greatest weakness of the new approaches, he argued, was to overlook the multiplicity of different and often unseen variables, whose interactions ought instead to be the central concern of the economic historian.

Sceptical of over-arching and heavy handed theory irrespective of its origins, Mathias was not an uncritical empiricist and he always insisted that the task of economic history was to accommodate the infinity of variables that have influenced historical patterns of economic development. For that reason he welcomed new approaches that encouraged open-ended empirical research to explore the connections between these different variables, and he encouraged economic historians to learn from the approaches of social, and more recently, cultural historians. He was, for example, an early and enthusiastic supporter of the “institutional economics” pioneered by the American economic historian Douglass North and others. While he was sceptical of some of the more ambitious objectives set out for the newly established study of “protoindustrialization” by Franklin Mendels, Mathias saw this as a very promising body of approaches grounded in empirical research that looked to develop new ways of connecting the complex interrelationships between social and economic forces that shape economic growth. He welcomed the multi-disciplinary approaches evident in recent attempts to write long term histories of the economic relations between the West and the rest of the globe (‘mega-economic history’ of ‘The West and the Rest’) and was very supportive, too, of more recent explorations of the roles played by consumption in modern economic growth that he believed promised to link economic, social and cultural history in quite new ways.

All of these positions were clearly set out in a frequently updated essay that began its life as his 1971 Oxford inaugural lecture; *Living with the Neighbours. The Role of Economic History*. The lecture offered a broad critical reflection on key developments in the profession of economic history, and was subsequently up-dated and re-

vised at different points in his career to accommodate new historiographical agendas and trends.¹ Its title well illustrates how Peter Mathias understood economic history to be a collaborative exercise, and his receptiveness to new approaches and new lines of inquiry providing that these could enrich and expand the discipline as a whole. But he was always wary of developments that risked fragmenting economic history into isolated and detached subspecialisms, each with its own independent structures and organization. He saw these tendencies at work not only in the UK but on the international stage as well, and he was constantly on the alert to defend the integrity of economic history as a cohesive and coherent field of research and intellectual exchange.

Peter Mathias's ideas will be perpetuated through his rich bibliography of monographs and research papers and by his widely read and translated text books have brought the history of the industrial revolutions and the historiographical debates generated by the interpretations of modern economic growth to many generations of students in the UK and far beyond. No less important are his contributions to European economic history, in which Mathias had taken a keen interest since the 1950s.

As Professor Richard Smith commented in the obituary notice published by Downing College, although most of his academic career was in Oxford, from early in his career Mathias had developed close contacts with the larger group of economic historians at Cambridge. His contacts with M.M. Postan, then the Cambridge Professor of Economic History and editor of the *Economic History Review* were particularly important. With Postan, Mathias was involved in editing and producing the *EHR* and in the preparatory initiatives that led to the formation of the *International Economic History Association* that was founded by Postan and the French historian Fernand Braudel at the XI International History Congress in Stockholm in

¹ Peter Mathias, *Living with the Neighbours. The Role of Economic History*, Inaugural Lecture, Oxford University, April 1971.

1960. Subsequently, Postan invited Mathias to join him as joint editor of the multi-volume *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (1996-1989).

In Professor Richard Smith's words these contacts would make Peter Mathias "the most internationally oriented of economic historians".² That role was later recognized when he was elected to serve as President of the *IEHA* from 1974 to 1978. By then Mathias had established contacts with many European universities and research institutes, taking an active role in many new initiatives and served, for example, as a member of the Directorate of the International Institute of Economic History, Francesco Datini in Prato and of the Advisory Committee of the Central European University founded by George Soros. His international commitments extended beyond Europe and he played an important role in promoting Anglo-Japanese cultural relations and academic exchanges.

Mathias's collaboration with the *Journal of European Economic History* (*JEEH*) grew out of his European and international interests, his earlier editorial experience with the *Economic History Review*, his close contacts with the *IEHA* and his friendship with Professor Luigi de Rosa in Italy. Mathias has described the origins, aims and subsequent development of the *JEEH* in detail in the journal's 1992 special issue that was published to commemorate its launch twenty years earlier.³

Without repeating those descriptions in full, it is worth mentioning a number of the points that Mathias underlined in his comments. Drawing attention to the ways in which the launch of the journal was linked to the broader internationalist agenda of the *IEHA*, he acknowledged the critical role played by the *Banco di Roma* not only in funding the new venture but also in defining its scope and purpose. The representatives of the *Banco di Roma* wanted a journal that

² For the comments by Professor Richard Smith see www.dow.cam.ac.uk/index.php/about/news/487-mathias.

³ Peter Mathias, *The Journal of European Economic History. Its First Twenty years (1972-1992)*, *JEEH*, vol. 21/3, Winter 1992.

would focus on European economic history, defining Europe in its broadest geographical terms while at the same time looking to ensure that it would reach an international scholarly readership. This was the reason why it was decided that English should be the language of publication, rather than French which many argued would be more appropriate for a European journal.

The success of the *JEEH* owed much to the support of the leading European economic historians who served on the journal's Advisory Board, but above all Mathias paid tribute to the indefatigable commitment and drive of Luigi de Rosa, without whose contacts, skills and unfailing energy the venture would never have been realized or maintained. He said little about his own role, despite the fact since its inception in 1972 he had played a close part in the *JEEH* and had contributed to its success in many critical ways.

It was through the *JEEH* that I first came to know him, a decade after I had first met Luigi de Rosa. That took place in 1971 when I was doing research in Naples for an Oxford doctoral thesis as a *borsista* of the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici*. My research soon brought me into contact with Luigi de Rosa just at the moment when he was working with Mathias and many other European economic historians to prepare the launch of the *JEEH* and its first issue. As well as offering valuable advice on my research de Rosa invited me to become involved in the new publishing venture, helping with translations and proof editing, and with typical generosity giving a young and inexperienced research student the opportunity to write book reviews. My wife and I had many opportunities to enjoy the hospitality that Luigi and his wife Ermelinda so generously offered at their beautiful house at Marechiaro overlooking the Bay of Naples, and it was from this long lasting friendship that I had the opportunity to work with Peter Mathias.

The occasion was another of Luigi de Rosa's international initiatives, when with support and funding from the Avvocato Gherardo Marotta, the President of the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici* in Naples, he launched a series of residential English language summer seminars in economic history for Italian graduate

students. The first of these seminars, on “The First Industrial Revolutions”, took place in Oxford in the summer of 1984 and was directed by Peter Mathias. The seminars subsequently resumed at the Centre for Social History at Warwick University, where I had been teaching since 1972. Between 1987 and 1990 four residential seminars were held at Warwick attended by over 70 Italian graduate students. At each of the seminars, Peter Mathias gave the keynote lectures and these, together with the papers given by the invited speakers, were subsequently published in five volumes edited jointly by Peter Mathias and myself.⁴

Following his retirement from Downing College in 1996, Peter Mathias remained an active scholar and teacher and he continued to travel and give lectures and seminars abroad, including many at Italian universities and research institutes. His annual seminars on economic history at the *Istituto per gli Studi Filosofici* in Naples were subsequently published in Italian (*Cinque Lezioni di storia e teoria dello sviluppo economico*, ESI, 2003,⁵ as was his last lecture in Naples on *L’Idea di Europa. Mutamenti di concetti e realtà attraverso i secoli*.⁶

In the light of the outcome of the referendum that took place shortly after his death that will radically change the United Kingdom’s future relations with Europe, Peter Mathias’s brief but incisive reflections on the changing perceptions of “Europe” from antiquity to the present and on the origins and subsequent development of the EEC, the EC and finally the European Union take on a special interest. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the crisis of 2008, with characteristic economy and insightfulness Mathias drew a

⁴ Peter Mathias & John A. Davis, *The First Industrial Revolutions*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989; Peter Mathias & John Davis, *Technology and Industrial growth from the 18th century to the present*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991; Peter Mathias & John A. Davis, *Enterprise and labour from the 18th century to the present*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996; Peter Mathias & John A. Davis, *Agriculture and Industrialization from the 18th century to the present*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996; Peter Mathias & John A. Davis, *International Trade and British Industrial Growth from the 18th century to the present*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997.

⁵ Peter Mathias, *Cinque lezioni di storia e teoria dello sviluppo economico*, ESI, Naples, 2003.

⁶ *L’Idea di Europa. Mutamenti di concetti e realtà attraverso i secoli*, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Naples, La Scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2009.

broad picture of the changing perceptions of the idea of Europe and the origins of the post-Second World War European project in its international political and economic contexts. But while there is no doubting his sympathy with the broader objectives of European integration and cooperation, the concern he registered at the failure to find solutions to fundamental internal contradictions and tensions now seems in many ways prescient.

Even when limited mobility made it impossible for him to travel, Peter Mathias kept up a close interest in the *JEEH* whose future after the death of its founding editor was often far from certain. As well as support and advice, he continued to offer practical assistance, for example taking responsibility for checking and proof reading each issue before it was published.

Peter Mathias's contributions to the development and success of the *JEEH* have been very considerable, but they represent only one dimension of a life-long commitment to promoting international scholarly exchange, excellence and cooperation; objectives that can best be recognized through emulation on the part of those who follow him.