FROM THE CHILEAN LABORATORY TO WORLD-COMMUNICATION

ARMAND MATTELART'S INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY

Mariano Zarowsky

Foreword by Peter Simonson

Translated by
William Quinn & Peter Simonson

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Prologue

Héctor Schmucler

The year was 1973, and *Para leer al Pato Donald* [*How to Read Donald Duck*] was selling off the shelves throughout Latin America as no other text about so-called "mass culture" had ever done. To be precise, it was September 1973. A few days after the coup d'état that overthrew Salvador Allende, I received in Buenos Aires a telegram from Chile signed by someone who called himself "El Pato" ("The Duck") informing me of his imminent arrival. For security reasons the telegram did not mention the name Armand Mattelart, but "the Duck," without any coordination on our part, served as an unmistakable code word between us. And that is how Mattelart made Argentina the first stop of his long exile.

It was actually a return to Europe, from where Mattelart had departed eleven years earlier, headed for Latin America. A return, but also an exile. This Mattelart who was returning would never stop belonging to the region where he had lived the life-changing experience that made him what he was. In the "Chilean laboratory," Mattelart had allowed himself to be buffeted by the crosswinds of history and there, in that place and at the time, he put himself to the test. Arriving in France, he recovered his native language for day-to-day activities even as he learned what exile meant. Exiles share their condition with foreigners, but they also know that they cannot return to the place they consider home. When others labeled him "the one from Chile," Armand Mattelart, I suppose, must have felt like a stranger in his own land. It was in these conditions that he undertook the task of understanding communication in a globalized world. His perspective as an exile—an exile from Chile who continued to learn from the ongoing developments in Latin America—helped him discern the sometimes-veiled faces of planetary capitalism.

Being an exile does not imply only feeling uprooted. Exiles are also characterized by having a clear-eyed vision of the present, because they know that it is not necessarily the last word, and because, through their own past it is illuminated by other realities. At times, Mattelart had felt like an exile in Chile too: a foreigner carrying a knapsack full of questions who sometimes made people uncomfortable. A stranger who tried to recognize a diversity of flowers on the roadside where a less competent traveler only sees sameness. Mattelart dared to swim against the current in a river made of time that was *his* river, all the more so because he made a concerted effort not to be swept along by the current. It is worth noting that all critical thinkers, those who do not conform to the tranquilizing forms of academia, share the experience of exile, of exclusion: They are familiar with the wary looks of those who fancy themselves the guardians of knowledge. The turbulent waters of his Chilean river taught Mattelart to be what he still is today, forty years later: an incisive and critical shaper of lines of thought that help to make sense of today's world through the multi-faceted lens of "world-communication."

With painstaking rigor, Mariano Zarowsky reconstructs Armand Mattelart's intellectual journey in this book, from Chile in the 1960s and '70s to contemporary Europe. Zarowsky revisits the myriad paths Mattelart went down, across a good part of the planet; he stops to consider the multiple areas of knowledge to which Mattelart made contributions, and he fashions a meticulously documented and insightful interpretation of the life work of this thinker who, like few others, has left an imprint on critical studies of communication and culture. Zarowsky's assessment fills an important need: It takes an in-depth look not only at Mattelart's texts but also his actions and public positions, and makes a sustained effort to parry the stereotypes that still swirl around the perceptions of Armand Mattelart's thinking. Zarowsky's research confronts these stereotypes, takes them apart to understand their inner workings, makes use of them to construct a more solid understanding that does not dismiss but incorporates them as an analytical tool. This is not the least of the text's many virtues. Midway between intellectual history and sociology of culture, as he himself points out, the author of this intellectual biography of Armand Mattelart succeeds in writing a genuine "conceptual history," where ideas acquire meaning in precise contexts, in dialogue with other concepts, equally understandable in the heat of their own histories and the debates to which they were subjected. The approach that Zarowsky uses is doubly commendable because it not only underscores the ever-present risk of anachronistic interpretations, it also serves to draw attention to one of the greatest mistakes that commentators

have made about the work of the Belgian-born thinker: Zarowsky lays out the limitations and deformations that come from the repeated tendency to encapsulate Mattelart's expressions in contexts that are alien to the ideas that gave rise to these expressions and to the "conditions of production" of his writings. When Zarowsky characterizes the "Chilean laboratory," for example, one must read "the political, social and cultural laboratory where the *Chilean road* to socialism was tested." It was there, for example, in those precise circumstances, that *How to Read Donald Duck* was conceived, together with numerous essays that sought to shed light on the situation in which people were striving to wage an innovative battle in favor of socialism. What was not in doubt (is it necessary to recall that we are talking about the late 1960s and early '70s, in Chile?) was the socialist horizon that people seemed to imagine whatever their geographical location.

It was in that specific space, not somewhere else, where Mattelart staked out a position that did not always align with the orthodoxy championed by dominant factions of the Chilean left, afflicted as it was with a particularly short-sighted determinism. For those who shared Armand Mattelart's point of view, the option for socialism did not depend exclusively—or even primarily—on putting the ownership of the means of production (including strictly cultural "production") into different hands; it was more about imagining "another way of living." Socialism was desirable, substantially, because it implied the hope of freeing people from the bonds that held them down, rescuing them from their *reification.* The aim was to generate possibilities for people to escape the alienated condition to which they had been driven by a civilization centered on commercial materiality. Socialism, for them, represented the possibility of a renewed humanity where people could be themselves and where, in order to be themselves, they recognized themselves in others, their fellows.

Mariano Zarowsky's meticulous description leads clearly to the recognition that the name Armand Mattelart encompasses a whole web of subjects, a complex interwoven fabric in which other names from different parts of the world also stand out. The names of people that Mattelart encouraged and stimulated, and the names of those who constructed with him a shared perspective. In my own case, I acknowledge my great fortune—and this may be my only qualification for writing this prologue—in encountering Armand in the early stages of his indefatigable journey.

Among other things, the work you have in your hands gives due importance to the role Mattelart played as intellectual "translator" (in the sense of one who passes knowledge across borders), as a "mediator" and as

a "sponsor" of unique cross-pollinations of many forms of knowledge. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a number of his books were produced in collaboration. None of them are free of Mattelart's distinct imprint, but in all of them Mattelart has succeeded in sharing, stimulating, and multiplying knowledge through the thinking of others. One name, that of Michèle Mattelart, is particularly frequent, and it is no coincidence that it appears on some of the most enduring titles. In fact, I would go so far as to assert, along with my unqualified satisfaction in writing the prologue for this remarkably comprehensive analysis of Mattelart's *oeuvre*, that the recurrent presence of Michèle, his wife, represents a kind of parable of Armand's thinking, in which the subjectivity of the everyday does not diminish but rather amplifies the richness of his intellectual production.

"Armand Mattelart's intellectual journey," a kind of travelogue in which Zarowsky sets out to trace the long road traveled by this signal figure in the field of communication studies, offers us the compelling challenge of placing ourselves on a unique path that has no previously fixed destination point. Just as it actually occurs in the life of human beings and peoples, this shifting road suggests a way of living in the world with "tragic hope," an expression that Mattelart happily borrows from Edgard Morin. A hope in which uncertainty is inevitable, which results in the creation of new possibilities, new meanings of life.

The route that Zarowsky traces, in the end, highlights the existential vicissitudes of an intellectual who is embedded in his circumstances, who grounds his research in both the fluctuations of history and the latest developments of the ongoing controversies about interpretations, beliefs, and collective aspirations. Simplification has no place in this uncompromising reflection: I am referring to the author of this book, but the observation could apply just as well to Armand Mattelart himself, the chosen "object of study," whom I refer to as such with affectionate irony.