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Reviews

# The life of an unorthodox Marxist

- Reviews section -

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*The Well-Dressed Revolutionary: The Odyssey of Michel Pablo in the Age of Uprisings* by Hall Greenland, Resistance Books, September 2023 RRP: £18, €22, \$US25 (print); £9.99, €14.99.

Incarcerated by a Greek dictator, narrowly escaping the Nazis in occupied France, and tried and convicted of aiding the Algerian revolution in the Netherlands in 1961: never a dull moment for the well-dressed revolutionary Mihalis Raptis. Hall Greenland has written a sympathetic but critical biography of the man better known as Michel Pablo, long-time secretary of the Fourth International.

## The life of an unorthodox Marxist

Someone to admire or to debate; but to hate, to vilify? Unfortunately the name Pablo and the derived concept of Pabloism stand for something else. At least in the eyes of self-styled 'orthodox' Trotskyists. Even today, for some Pabloism still seems to be revisionism incarnate. For those who want to know who this man really was, where he came from and what his aims were, this biography sheds light on an original thinker who indeed was anything but orthodox. But what is an orthodox Marxist, except for a contradiction in terms?

Born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1911 from Greek parents, Raptis grew up in Crete and went to Athens to become a civil engineer. There he joined the left communist Archeo-Marxists, and finally a Trotskyist organisation. In 1938 he went to France together with his lifelong companion Helene/Elly Diouvouniotis. Of the central leaders who helped bring together the European Trotskyists during the Second World War, he and Ernest Mandel were the only two to survive. From 1943 until his arrest in 1960 Pablo, as he was to call himself during and after the war, was the secretary and most influential leader of the Fourth International. From 1961 he led his own international current, at first within the framework of the Fourth International and from 1965 outside it. In the 1980s and 1990s Raptis was an influential public figure on the Greek Left, writing columns in two daily newspapers.

In order to understand the real Pablo, Greenland has to explain a lot about the debates among the followers of Leon Trotsky, who had to come to grips with a reality they had not been prepared for. Already during the war, with large popular resistance movements in France and Italy including a strong presence of the Stalinist communist parties, they were uncertain about what to do, some of them taking refuge in sectarian positions. After the war Europe was divided between the two cold war blocks. Stalinism was stronger than ever, and though there were radical movements and possibilities for deeper change, the workers movement came out of the postwar period divided between Stalinists and social democrats, with the revolutionaries more and more isolated.

## Ways out of the desert

Michel Pablo tried to provide answers for the new realities, but obviously he was not infallible. 'In his search for a way out of the "desert" of isolation of the International he would be drawn to what were to prove mirages, although they were not entirely illusory.' On top of that his handling of organisational matters in the Fourth International did not help. Of course it was important to understand that whatever the future was going to bring, important developments would take place in and around the large Stalinist and reformist workers parties. And 'orthodox' reactions from part of the Trotskyists did not help in finding concrete orientations that went above the level of propagandist sects.

The sweeping conclusions Pablo drew from his analysis of the situation were twofold. First, there was a risk of a new world war in the near future. And second, given the relatively weak forces of the Trotskyists, they had to be where the masses were, in the mass parties. This policy was contested by a majority of the French and American organisations and in 1953 led to a split that was partly overcome ten years later. The reality of 1950 was a real war in Korea. World war was not only Pablo's fear, many analysts at the time expected it, or even wanted to organize it, like the original commander of American forces in Korea, General MacArthur.

The mirages Greenland mentions were elsewhere. The Trotskyist forces were too weak to have much of an impact as independent parties, but also too weak to get much done inside the mass parties. Where results were obtained, this often led to a wish to retain them by adapting to political culture in the parties. In the Soviet Union and the other so-called 'workers states' there was no crisis at first. When it came, a reform led by Khrushchev left the power of the party and state bureaucracy intact. When workers rose against the Stalinists, as in East Berlin in 1953, in Poland and especially in Hungary in 1956, Trotskyists saw this as the first signs of the expected political revolution. They did not see that these were partial rebellions by people who retained memories and organizing cadres from before the war, rather than forerunners of a return to the political scene of Soviet workers. The Soviet leadership crushed the rebellions with their tanks.

## The colonial revolution

In the Global South there was more than just mirages. In 1949 the Chinese communist party took power at the head of a peasant army. It helped the Koreans drive the Americans back in 1950-51. In Vietnam the Viet Minh fought the French and defeated them at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In Cuba the Movement of the 26 July led by Fidel Castro chased away the dictator Batista in 1959. And closer to home for Pablo, the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) started a rebellion in Algeria that led to a large-scale colonial war on France's front lawn. Movements for independence arose in Africa and Asia. The colonial revolution was the most successful movement of the second half of the 20th century. Pablo was determined not to let the opportunities slip.

He advocated all-out support for the Algerian revolution. He rapidly established close contacts with several FLN leaders. The FLN was under fierce attack from the French, including assassinations by the secret services. They targeted FLN leaders and (potential) providers of arms. Pablo and the Dutchman Sal Santen were the ones most closely involved. But others, from France, Germany, Argentina and Greece were involved too. They arranged transport of money and persons across then still real European borders. Less known is a full-scale clandestine factory set up in Morocco to make sub-machine guns for the FLN. Dozens from Europe and the Americas were involved. Very few of them talked about it, even years after the victory of the FLN in 1962.

In France the war led to the coming to power of Charles de Gaulle, who in 1958 established a presidential system that is still functioning today. As this took place in the framework of a right-wing rebellion in the army in Algeria, the Fourth International's Secretariat was moved to Amsterdam. Greenland makes a plausible case for this move as being motivated by better opportunities to collaborate with the FLN.

Amsterdam was the place where Pablo and Santen were arrested in June 1960. A very small part of the Trotskyist network was involved in this rather special operation. Of course official papers and IDs had been forged. But as an extension of this high-quality graphical art and printing, preparations were made to forge French francs for the FLN. Before printing could start the printers were arrested in Germany, as were Michel Pablo and Sal Santen. A Dutch agent-provocateur, who later made a name for himself in the right-wing press, had been contacted by the organiser of the print shop. The provocateur then brought in a specialist who was working for the Dutch security service. Neither the provocateur nor the 'specialist' were ever brought to trial.

A broad campaign for the release of Raptis and Santen was started. This turned a practical defeat into a political victory, creating broad solidarity with the FLN. Raptis and Santen were sentenced to 15 months. After release, in September 1961 Pablo and Elly went first to Morocco and then in 1962, when the FLN government came to power in Algeria, to Algiers. Pablo became advisor to the Algerian president Ben Bella, especially for organisation of large-scale agriculture that had been nationalised.

## Leaving and rejoining the Fourth International

In the meantime differences of opinion on the relative importance of the colonial revolution and the work in Europe had developed. This had soured the work in the secretariat at least since the move to Amsterdam. The conflict deepened with the way the group around Ernest Mandel reacted to the arrests. Forging money! I think an FLN leader summarized the attitude of revolutionaries in these matters very well: he compared the operation to the FLN robbing a bank in preparation for the rebellion.

In a way the first ten years after Pablo's break with the FI in 1965 were more fruitful than before. He had the opportunity to elaborate on what previously had been only hunches and beginnings.

Some of these new developments had already started during his time in prison. He wrote articles on the liberation of women, on Freud, and on Plato, and an essay 'In Praise of Trotskyism'. Greenland sees in this essay 'the seeds of his departure from the iron cage of the International and conventional Trotskyism'.

The central theme of Pablo's writing came to be the centrality of self-management as the basis for socialist democracy. It plays a large role in his work in Algeria, and it was clearly the main lesson he drew from events in France in 1968, in Italy in 1969-70, and in Chile in 1970-73 when Allende was president. Here in Chile we find another central element in Pablo's political judgement. He clearly expected a lot from the possible dynamics of the mass movement that organized in support of the government, as he had done in Algeria after the victory of the FLN, and not without reason. But the dynamics of the self-organisation of the masses were not sufficient. His paper 'Self-management in the struggle for socialism' for a congress of sociologists in Santiago in 1972 makes interesting reading as his 'working hypothesis for revolution in Europe'.

Between 1965, when he had to flee Algeria after a military coup, and 1974 Pablo and Elly never stayed long in one place. He tried to be where the action was. Furthermore, the French government only tolerated his presence, not granting him formal status. After the end of the military dictatorship in Greece in 1974, he was able to return there. Pablo kept on writing and organizing, in Greece more as an independent left public figure. Internationally he faced more and more the limitations of keeping alive a small group that was obviously not immune to the political attraction of new currents like the Greens. He did not want to dissolve his current into the Green parties, but found part of his organization doing precisely that by 1989. He himself and his closest comrades rejoined the Fourth International in 1992. He died participating fully in Greek political life in 1996. Much of the work from his last 15 years is only available in Greek.

Greenland's Pablo is a charming, devoted revolutionary who systematically overestimated possibilities. He was generous as a person and in his respect for the opinions of others. However, that respect came with limitations. It did not apply to those who resisted his entryism in the 1950s or those who opposed his exclusive wager on colonial revolution.

Almost all his adult life was shared with Helene (Elly), a strong and independent woman from an aristocratic family who accompanied him everywhere. But as that included all political meetings and she was not a person to be silent it

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could lead to complications. Most of his opponents and even his closest collaborators were unhappy with it. Pablo was too aware of her importance as his partner in everything to be bothered by such objections. And there were others who retained his lifelong friendship, such as Ben Bella. That friendship ended when the war in Bosnia put them on different sides, Ben Bella supporting the Muslim Bosniaks and Pablo condoning ethnic cleansing by the Serbs. A black spot on his memory to be sure.

Greenland clearly sympathizes with his subject, but he also shows Pablo's limitations. With this book, Greenland has succeeded in giving a full, balanced picture of the life and work of Michel Pablo.

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