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# Pablo - The footloose revolutionary

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**Dave Kellaway reviews *The Well-Dressed Revolutionary. The Odyssey of Michel Pablo in the age of uprisings* by Hall Greenland (published by Resistance Book, September 2023)**

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You don't hear the term **pabloite** used much these days. I remember being a bit bewildered when the insult was thrown at people like me in the International Marxist Group (IMG) back in the 1970s. Usually it was uttered by an activist dressed up to look working class who spent all their waking hours selling *Workers Press*. We were deemed to have abandoned the orthodox Trotskyist position on the bureaucratised states in Eastern Europe and the USSR and were too interested in the colonial revolution. By that time, of course, Michel Raptis (Pablo) had long split from the majority of the Fourth International (FI) precisely over how to approach such questions. However, those sectarians and many others still try to diminish the role of Pablo in maintaining the honour and credibility of anti-Stalinist revolutionary Marxism.

## Pablo's Revolutionary Activities

Whatever you think about his political strengths and weaknesses, Pablo was an unparalleled revolutionary intellectual. He escaped capture and possible death by the Gestapo, the French state, the OAS (defenders of French Algerian colonists), the Algerian military putschists, and Pinochet's fascist regime. He was imprisoned for two years by the Dutch authorities for materially helping the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front), who were fighting for independence from the French. He was effectively exiled from his native Greece twice.

Pablo organised arms-making for the FLN, ran networks of activists who carried suitcases of money across borders, managed the forging of identity documents, counterfeited money, and was able to set up jail breaks for important leaders. Che Guevara's military operation in the Congo was helped by his intervention. Wherever revolutionary upsurges broke out, he was there like some Zelig figure—in Cuba, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Chile, Portugal, and France in 1968. His funeral was attended by the cream of the Greek progressive left. Many of the contacts he worked with and advised, including state representatives, were present.

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Hall Greenland has put together an excellent biography that is also a good introduction to the debates that traversed the revolutionary left through most of the post-World War II twentieth century. He provides the background historical context that underpins debates, which otherwise might appear a bit bizarre to activists today. For instance, what seems like Pablo's overemphasis on a new war between the West and the Soviet Union is more easily understood in the context of the Korean War and the Chinese Revolution.

Overall, it is a fair enough account that examines both Pablo's qualities and deficiencies. Surveying his impact when he was both inside and outside the Fourth International effectively debunks the myth that the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left was just a bunch of talkers totally isolated from the mass movement. It is important for our movement to give due respect to our forebears, who had to struggle both against capitalist and Stalinist repression to the extent that we in Britain have been spared up until now. We can still learn from the debates between Pablo and his co-thinkers.

Looking back at the fierce discussions and acrimonious splits, we can take away two important lessons. First, and this is noted by Hall, personal antagonisms, distinct cultural behaviour, and social pressures nearly always complicate and usually exacerbate political debates. Second, nobody was a hundred percent right on one side and a hundred percent wrong on the other. The issues were less black-and-white than they appeared at the time. For example, Pablo definitely got Khrushchev wrong, thinking his actions might open up radical developments inside the CPs. But on the other hand, the FI majority probably overdid their support for the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet disputes, thinking that Chinese communists might have a radicalising effect internationally.

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In small minority organisations, there is a greater propensity to split since it can have little impact on a mass intervention and each side thinks it can quickly rebuild. There is less pressure to maintain unity while agreeing to differ. Certainly, the two big splits in the International over entryism into the mass workers parties in the early 1950s and the later split with Pablo in the early 1960s over the bureaucratised dictatorships and the colonial revolution both meant opportunities to grow our influence were missed.

Everyone agrees that Pablo played a very important role in the 1940s in reorganising and developing the small forces of the Fourth International. It had lost important leaders both at the hands of the fascists and the Stalinists. The latter's leadership of resistance movements meant it physically eliminated Trotskyists in both France and Greece. Meetings of the leadership had to be conducted under tight security.

## **Debates Within the Fourth International**

The big political problem for the Trotskyist movement at the time was the predictions that Trotsky and his co-thinkers had made at the start of the war that the post-war period would replicate to some degree what happened after the First World War, where revolutionary crises broke out and the first socialist revolution took place in Russia. It was also assumed that there would be a deep economic crisis. In such a context, they believed that there would be a crisis between the Stalinist

and reformist leaderships and an open road for the revolutionaries to challenge the leadership of the movement. Neither hypothesis came to pass.

Although there was austerity and economic chaos for a period, the USA and its Marshall Plan turbocharged the world economy to what became known as the post-war boom. As for the Stalinists, far from being discredited, they reached the height of their popularity given the prestige their members' leadership and sacrifices had won through the resistance movements. In this context, Pablo was correct in trying to turn the international to more long-term work towards the mass workers parties. His entryism tactic always maintained the need for an independent profile and press alongside members working inside the labour or communist parties. Although important sections like the American SWP split over the matter, those forces that went in were able to grow their influence.

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Both this split and the later one with Pablo also reflected a much tighter notion of an international 'line' that has to be followed by all national sections. For many decades now, the Fourth International has allowed national sections to decide on its party-building tactics as long as the overall strategy falls within the general values and principles of the positions historically adopted by its congresses. So for instance, if a national section argues against the need for socialist democracy, for a one-party state, or against the need for women's liberation, it would place itself outside the movement. If it has a different perspective, as is the case at the moment, on the Ukraine war (short of supporting Putin), it would remain inside. Today's statutes might have avoided such past splits.

## **Support for the Algerian Revolution**

Some of the best chapters in this book are about Pablo and his support of the Algerian revolution. A detailed account is given of the material solidarity he gave to the FLN. Remember that the French Communist Party did not support the FLN for quite some time. Pablo won the trust of the FLN's clandestine leadership, and his comrades carried suitcases of money raised in France among Algerian workers and took them to secure accounts in Switzerland. This was a time when the French state was imprisoning and killing FLN members and their supporters. Agitation was organised among the French conscripts, and intellectuals and personalities were mobilised against the French government.

The pinnacle of solidarity was reached with the establishment of an arms factory in Morocco staffed by FI members who produced thousands of weapons for the Algerian resistance. Organising the production of counterfeit money led to Pablo and Santen (a Dutch comrade) being charged and remanded in prison for nearly two years. An international solidarity campaign was launched that included some Labour MPs. Pablo eloquently addressed the Dutch judges at his 1961 trial on the primacy of political engagement. The trial was not about criminal counterfeiting but about his political commitment to the liberation struggle of the FLN.

*Can you simply close your eyes to these facts and tranquilly live the quiet, selfish life without involving yourself with the 'demon of politics'? I don't think so. I firmly believe that politics - the science concerned with the consciousness, the organisation and the*

*control of society - must occupy a primordial place in the life of all free and critical human beings in order to avoid further disasters and in order that humanity can move more rapidly to the abolition of repression and exploitation and to the most complete possible flourishing of the individual. (page 116)*

He won his case and later organised his departure via London for Algiers, where the FLN had taken power. Two Labour MPs, John Baird and Annie Kerr, had accompanied him from Amsterdam to London. Can you imagine Starmer allowing his MPs to help provide safe passage to a supporter of the anti-colonial armed struggle today? However, there was a problem: the flight was scheduled to go via Madrid, where the Franco-Fascist dictatorship was. Fearing the risk of being arrested there, he faked a heart attack on the plane while on the tarmac! Eventually, he got a flight via Gibraltar.

Once in Algeria, he became a close advisor to the Ben Bella government. The FLN Congress adopted a key document he wrote on land reform. One thing is to get programmatic documents passed; another is to actually implement them. The reforms were only ever partially carried through and were held back both by the previous Algerian bourgeois owners and by FLN leaders now in the military who saw a way for individual enrichment.

We saw this pattern repeat itself in other successful anti-colonial revolutions, even more radical ones like those in Nicaragua. Pablo identified and called out these risks at the time in meetings with Ben Bella. Later on, a major part of his writings dealt with the importance of democratic self-management at all levels, to be developed before and after any successful revolution. Pablo wanted to get a position taken by the FLN in favour of multi-party democracy, but under pressure from his comrades, he withdrew it. Already at the FI Congress, which established the Transitional Programme as a founding document, he had tried and failed to get an amendment passed against any idea of a one-party state. At that congress, he also tried to push for more prominence to be given to the colonial revolution. On these two issues, he was more right than wrong. The current FI document, **Socialist Democracy**, now several decades old, adopted the multi-party position.

Pablo correctly recognised that once the anti-colonial revolution had won power, there would be a conflict between what he called the bureaucratic wing and the revolutionary democratic one. Unfortunately, he was going to see this unfold in front of him. Once the liberation army becomes a new military institution, it becomes a fertile space for the bureaucratic wing to develop. Boumediene led the putsch against Ben Bella and any radical turn of the Algerian revolution. Pablo was aware of Ben Bella's limits, but his close comrade and friend, Harbi, whom he later helped escape Algerian prison, told him at the time.

*I don't think Ben Bella is capable of going where you believe he can. Algerian nationalism has a history that you're not aware of. There's a strong streak of conservatism and the Algerian army isn't like the bearded revolutionaries in Cuba ...*

Luckily, Pablo was able to get out by the skin of his teeth. Already, the new order had been whipping up opposition to the foreign 'red' advisors. False allegations about the money the advisors were supposed to have earned were floated. Certainly Pablo, to an extent, had underestimated the Bonapartist character of Ben Bella—at one moment tacking to the left, the next cuddling up to the mainstream army elements. Harbi also thought Pablo underestimated the deep roots of traditional family and religious structures. Another issue with his advisor role was that he found it difficult to combine it with building a revolutionary Marxist movement in Algeria. This goes alongside overestimating Bella's role in generating the conditions for such a development.

It is a limitation that was repeated in Portugal after 1976, where Pablo worked very closely with Otelo Carvalho (the leftist military leader of the uprising) but failed to build a section of his current. The so-called 'orthodox' Mandelistas managed to create a group that went on to stimulate what became the third or fourth national political party today (Bloco Esquerda).

After Algeria, Mandel, Maitan, and Frank formed a triumvirate that was in charge of the FI leadership, which Pablo was unable to reintegrate. In this process, Hall tends to echo Pablo's complaints about their factionalism and neglect of the colonial revolution. For example, Pablo had wanted the FI centre to transfer to Algiers. As it turned out, this would have been a disaster. Undoubtedly, there may have been ways of keeping it together, and mistakes may have been made by his opponents in how it was handled.

Livio Maitan, in his book, *Critical Communist* (available from Resistance Books), commented on the split:

*The driving forces of Pablo's outlook and behaviour were: an exaggerated view of the colonial revolution and a vanguard, imagined as greater than it actually was, together with an underestimation of what was going on in the industrialized capitalist countries; unfair accusations against the majority and an inflation of his own role and that of his relatively small tendency. p 103*

Livio also criticises an inclination towards authoritarianism and dismissive behaviour towards critics. How far that counted is difficult to assess, as Hall points out certain exclusionary attitudes on the other side. Nevertheless, history showed that, at least in terms of building a serious international tendency with sections that intervened in the mass struggle, Mandel's side got it more right than Pablo. He more or less recognised this when he rejoined the FI for a short period. Livio claims he told him he wanted to die in the International.

## **Building a Revolutionary Movement**

Pablo's experiences in building a group in France illustrate this weakness. At a time when there was an explosive growth in independent revolutionary currents in France after 1968, Pablo maintained an entryist approach. Then his people joined the PSU, a centrist group, for a while. Finally, a large proportion went to the Greens, abandoning revolutionary Marxism. Patient party building on a national level was not his forte. As an intellectual and writer, he still had some influence. His writings on self-management are very useful, and he was one of the first, when writing from prison in 1963, to raise the need to support women not just in their social or democratic rights but also for control of their own sexuality.

The sort of issues Pablo faced in Algeria will continue to face revolutionaries. Your expertise may mean you are in a good position to advise or help a progressive government. How do you combine such a role with building a revolutionary Marxist current? How many good-left people have we seen integrated by the Labour Party despite starting out with quite a radical position? This happens at the local council level too. The process has a human side insofar as you feel good being needed at the centre of power, a distance away from the humdrum life of building a minority party. In Brazil, the FI comrades played a leading role in building Lula's Workers Party, but once there was a shift to working primarily in the institutions and becoming more moderate, the group lost key members and split. A former leading FI member in Britain now appears to operate mainly as a propagandist for the Chinese government.

Despite it all, Pablo always chose revolution and struggled against an easy life. In his later years, he became a columnist for two left-leaning Greek newspapers, but he never became an academic or became a social democratic Greek MP, which he could have easily done. Indeed, he found time to come to Britain to run a couple of sessions on self-management and other issues for his small group of British supporters. One of whom was Sir Keir Starmer...

**Dave Kellaway**

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**P.S.**

- Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 27 Sep 2023:  
[https://anticapitalistresistance.org/pablo-the-footloose-revolutionary/?fbclid=IwAR1Qy4wxuX\\_hxUXNf8yhegs4c2\\_Bzw5j5qtNLhOT21lja1Zee0UzEe\\_2mUM](https://anticapitalistresistance.org/pablo-the-footloose-revolutionary/?fbclid=IwAR1Qy4wxuX_hxUXNf8yhegs4c2_Bzw5j5qtNLhOT21lja1Zee0UzEe_2mUM)
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