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All Nation, No Class: A Brief Review of the Book 'Between Nation and Class' (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

All Nation, No Class: a short review of Between Nation and Class

I read with interest the book 'Between Nation and Class: Leftists and the Cyprus Problem, 1920-1974' by the Cyprological Series Rotsos, as it deals with the most crucial period in the history of the Cypriot Left, 1920-60. It contains many facts and figures that any Cypriot leftist needs to know.

However, the book has two major weaknesses. The first is that, with the exception of Sakellaropoulos, who draws some critical conclusions about the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and CPC-AKEL politics, the other authors are primarily descriptive and hesitate to draw the conclusions that demonstrate the events they describe. There is no adequate evaluation of the parties' positions, something that Nikos Trimikliniotis rightly points out in the epilogue to the collection.

Trimikliniotis also rightly says that "The real question is what criteria one uses to arrive at a position evaluation". (361)[1] I would also add the question, referring to the title of the book: by class or by national/nationalist criteria?

And we come to the second problem of the book, which is this: the book evaluates history on essentially national criteria. Looking at the title, one would assume that the book would be about whether the leftists in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey at the time should have prioritised the issue of national liberation/integration or the class struggle to overcome capitalism. One would assume that it would be concerned with the significance and relationship of the categories of nation and class for the left, with whether or not anti-colonial national movements could have a progressive bias in the 20th century. But the book does not do that. It doesn't deal with the class category at all, it takes for granted that national struggles are of paramount importance, and it deals with whether the left in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey should have supported independence or enosis [union with Greece]. A better title for the book would therefore be "Between Independence and Enosis".

Trimikliniotis points out something similar in his criticism of Antoniou and Sakellaropoulos. For

example, he rather correctly accuses Sakellaropoulos of “seeming to accept the position that if the CPC (Communist Party of Cyprus) was more 'united' and if it applied the appropriate tactics, it would have better results in achieving the strategic goal which was 'self-evidently' 'Enosis', and secondarily only the socialist transformation.” (358-9) But Trimikliniotis himself does not escape from a national perspective. Although he endorses the CPC's original position of a workers' and peasants' socialist federation in the Balkans and Turkey, he does not seriously consider this position and it becomes clear that what he is interested in is the rejection of Enosis for the sake of independence. He invokes Lenin and the right to self-determination, but criticises others, e.g. Antoniou, for taking a negative view of the Zurich-London agreements. Lenin, however, would be totally against the agreements, as they were imposed on the Cypriot people against their will, violating the right to self-determination. What the socialist revolution that Lenin wanted had to do with the Zurich-London agreements, only the AKELites know.

Needless to say, there are significant inaccuracies in the book as to the meaning of various concepts for the left. For example, the book's editor Nikos Christofi confuses Leninist support for the right to self-determination with support for any struggle for self-determination, telling us “to remember Lenin's analysis that imperialism provides the means of legitimation for all the national struggles for liberation that he predicted would follow in the colonial or semi-colonial world.” (33) But Lenin approached the national question primarily strategically. His support for the right of nations to self-determination was strategic, not a position of principle as it is usually presented: “While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle.”[2] He supported struggles for self-determination only if he thought they brought closer to socialist revolution, and many of the struggles in the Third World for self-determination were far from tending towards revolution.

See for example the following extract from Lenin's *Theses on the National Question*, 1913: “The Social-Democratic Party's recognition of the right of all nationalities to self-determination most certainly does not mean that Social-Democrats reject an independent appraisal of the advisability of the state secession of any nation in each separate case. Social-Democracy should, on the contrary, give its independent appraisal, taking into consideration the conditions of capitalist development and the oppression of the proletarians of various nations by the united bourgeoisie of all nationalities, as well as the general tasks of democracy, first of all and most of all the interests of the proletarian class struggle for socialism.”

Or this quote from *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, 1914: “The demand for a “yes” or “no” reply to the question of secession in the case of every nation may seem a very “practical” one...The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle. Theoretically, you cannot say in advance whether the bourgeois-democratic revolution will end in a given nation seceding from another nation, or in its equality with the latter; in either case, the important thing for the proletariat is to ensure the development of its class. For the bourgeoisie it is important to hamper this development by pushing the aims of its “own” nation before those of the proletariat. That is why the proletariat confines itself, so to speak, to the negative demand for recognition of the right to self-determination, without giving guarantees to any nation, and without undertaking to give anything at the expense of another nation. This may not be “practical”, but it is in effect the best guarantee for the achievement of the most democratic of all possible solutions. The proletariat needs only such guarantees, whereas the bourgeoisie of every nation requires guarantees for its own interest, regardless of the position of (or the possible disadvantages to) other nations.”

Another major problem with the book is that it shows ignorance of what internationalism is. In his text, Antoniou talks about an anti-colonial internationalism that emerged after the end of World War

II, but this was in fact nothing more than a conglomeration of various nationalisms, each claiming to create its own nation-state. There was no ultimate internationalist goal in most of these movements that made them internationalist. The mistake of this so-called 'anti-imperialism' lies in the naturalisation of all nation-states as political subjects and as fields of potential political action, a mistake to which Antoniou also falls. He agrees, as is typical in today's Left, with the imperialists in their political horizon: the existing international nation-state system. The Left can be divided into local and national leftists who take one position or another on national issues - for example, independence or enosis - but all these leftists, and certainly those referred to in the book, are on the same side, that of adaptation to the global capitalist imperialist system. But socialism-communism was not intended to be a political ideology of "national liberation", but of a global political and social transformation that was intended to respond better to the need for liberation from national oppression under capitalism.

I end by returning again to Trimikliniotis, as it is in his epigraph that the inability of Cypriot leftists to draw the conclusions to which the history they write leads is most evident. In particular, Trimikliniotis rightly analyses AKEL's path towards Enosis as follows: "The newly-formed AKEL, while it started out dynamically, destroyed its relations with the Turkish Cypriot workers, and eventually lost the initiative of actions and became the tail of the church, accepting the hegemony of Greek Cypriot nationalism[...] The party is thus unable to play a pioneering role in building class unity of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot workers and other subordinate classes, and became, according to the critics of the party leadership, the tail of Makarios." (351) A few pages later, however, after describing AKEL as the tail of Greek Cypriot nationalism, he tells us that "AKEL, to its credit, showed in practice that it represented the Cypriot working class as a whole, regardless of its ethnic origin". (360) Was AKEL ultimately the representative of the interests of the Cypriot working class as a whole, or the tail of Greek Cypriot nationalism? The events described in the book point to the latter, but our historians find it hard to admit it. And if they find it difficult to acknowledge the mistakes of AKEL in the distant past, how much more difficult it is to criticise the vibrant AKEL of today that continues its unabated tailspin.

In short, there continues to be a lack of recording the history of the Cypriot Left from a leftist, communist, Marxist point of view.

The views expressed are the personal opinions of the authors.

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[1] All page references are from the book 'Between Nation and Class: Leftists and Cyprus, 1920-1974', edited by Nikos Christofis, Psifides, 2022.

[2] Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self-Determination, 1914. [Translator's note: For the purposes of this translation, I used the translations of the quoted works of Lenin as they appear on the Marxist archive [here](#) and [here](#)]

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