

## **HajiMatheos HajiNikolas – a home-grown radical thinker.**

**Peter Loizos**

HajiMatheos HajiNikolas lived in Argaki village, three miles from Morphou, in W.Cyprus and for a brief period was visible in the politics of agrarian representation in the island. He was born just before the twentieth century started, and died in 1961, aged about 70. He may have been a member of KKK, the Communist Party of Cyprus, but this is not certain. It was suggested that after the Octovriana disturbances of 1931, like many others who took part in the uprising, he was confined to his village for a period by the colonial authorities. He is mentioned briefly in Katsiaounis' study of the Consultative Committee, and in more detail by Elias in his reminiscences on the left's agrarian movement in Cyprus, incorrectly suggesting he was from Akaki [Katsiaounis 2000:90] ; Neophytou Elias 2002 pp 49; 59; ] He is not thought to have been a member of AKEL, or if he was, it would have been for a few years only, early in its existence, and if he was briefly a member, he may have left over differences of opinion.

HajiMatheos was for a time the General Treasurer of PEK, Panagrotiki Enosis Kyprou, the farmers' union which came to be dominated by conservatives. He was criticised by right-wing elements in PEK because along with some AKEL supporters he was a co-signatory of a memorandum to the colonial government about the need for wages to be tied to a cost-of-living index. He was briefly the General Organiser of EAK, Enosis Agroton Kyprou, the leftwing farmer's movement which was created in 1946 when he and other progressive thinkers left PEK. EAK was re-named EKA at Independence. Elias mentions him giving lively speeches on several occasions. In one of these

speeches he argued that agrarian conditions in Cyprus were leading towards a revival of feudalism. [Elias :2002: 59] and this thought also occurs in the pamphlet which follows this brief introduction.

During my fieldwork in Argaki, 1968, I was presented with a copy of the pamphlet here offered in translation 'The Agrarian Class in Cyprus' which bears his name. It was published in Nicosia in 1945, and the printer was Zavallis. The format was pocket-book size. It was probably published at the author's expense, but it is possible that the printer paid the costs, if he expected that it would sell well. I have no information as to numbers printed, or means of distribution – the firm has long since gone into liquidation. The man who passed it to me remarked that it might interest me, and certainly HajiMatheos' name came up whenever anyone mentioned the beginnings of left-wing politics in Argaki. Some people suggested that HajiMatheos might have influenced my father [Prokopis Papaloizou ] towards communism, although my father's reminiscences gave dramatic emphasis to hearing speeches by an organizer recently returned from Greece, called Vatiliotis. This man was the first General Secretary of KKK, and a Cypriot who has studied in Greece, joined the Greek Communist Party, and the First International, and was sent to Cyprus to help with the organization of the Cypriot Party. My cousin Thomas Diakourtis, aged 80 in 2003, remembers that as a young man he himself actively sought the company of HajiMatheos because he had interesting ideas, he was "wise", and he read a lot. But Thomas remembers himself being formally recruited to communism by a man from Zodia called Asiouris.

The pamphlet which follows this introduction lay unread and unconsidered for many years – there usually seemed something more urgent to do than read it, and the Greek was not particularly easy. That appears with hindsight to have been a mistake. It might have decisively altered my view of the period he was active

in, and it would have given me a better sense of the connectedness of the village to national politics, and a sharper sense of a voice which was critical of colonial rule, but equally critical of the dangers of prioritising “the national struggle” e.g. the pursuit of Enosis, over bread-and-olives issues of livelihood, working men’s wages, prices, tariffs and taxes. At one point in the paper there is a single statement in favour of Enosis. But the whole thrust of the pamphlet is to emphasise agrarian class problems, and to preach a unity of interests among agrarian people, Muslims and Christians alike, equally exploited by the colonial regime, and by bourgeois exploiters who sought to divide the two communities. Those Nationalists who try to divert people from this common struggle by fostering antagonism between the two main ethno-religious communities are strongly denounced.

The pamphlet is certainly influenced by certain broadly left-wing ideas, but is far from being orthodox Marxism,, and indeed, Marx is never mentioned. It seems improbable that HajiMatheos invented a serviceable socialist wheel single handedly and single-mindedly from the confines of Argaki village. It is more likely that he was reading socialist tracts, accepted the general framework, and improvised from his own wit and experience. We know he travelled the island as a merchant, seeking flax as far afield as Lefkara, which is where he met Dr.Vassos Lyssarides, who became his personal physician, and spoke of him to me as a friend. Since he was chosen for political office in the 1940s, a time of extraordinary political ferment and transition in Cyprus, we may suppose he had frequent meetings and conversations with other activists, and sharpened his own ideas in argument with them.

HajiMatheos sees society as divided into rural classes which are productive, and urban classes which are in Cyprus at least, parasitic. He uses the term “astiki taxi” throughout, and I have been instructed that this should translated as “bourgeoisie” , but we have no

way of knowing how HajiMathaios might have understood the term, which has been heavily freighted with a further 50 years of theoretical and practical marxism. Perhaps he saw things more simply? His core imagery is of the bees, and the drones, a relatively ancient idea in European thought, appearing in early Greek thinkers, and various medieval texts. He can imagine that doctors and engineers could under ideal conditions make a contribution to national wealth, but argues that in Cyprus they have set their rates of remuneration so high that they are wealth-extractors, not wealth creators. It seems unlikely that he knew the passage in the Communist Manifesto in which Marx pointed to the extraordinary creativity of the bourgeoisie, but if he did know it, he found it difficult to apply literally in Cyprus. There is a single sentence which hints at the Marx "creativity" phrase, and that appears at the very end of the first chapter.

Since orthodox Soviet Marxism favoured rapid industrialisation as the red route towards societal development, HajiMatheos' enthusiasm for the peasant producer, particularly the small producer, might have been seen in orthodox Marxist circles as special pleading, and his appeals for agrarian unity as unrealistic, since larger landowners, smaller landowners and the landless would have been deemed to have had necessarily and intractably conflicting interests. When HajiMatheos describes urban, or bourgeois women consuming luxurious clothing and painting their faces, we can hear a rural voice expressing thoughts which have occurred to many other rural men in other times and other places. Whether it is the National Socialists insisting that "The German woman does not paint her face" ["Die deutsche Frau schminkt nicht"] or the Andalusian peasant suspecting that virtue cannot reside in urban aristocrats, reported by Juan Caro Baroja the conflation of luxury and immorality is a first line of attack in many populist critiques of irresponsible wealth, both from the right and from the left. HajiMatheos is hoping for capitalists to come forward who will put the national interest above their personal

interests. The true patriot, he insists, is one who creates new jobs, brings new income to his country, while retaining only modest profits.

HajiMatheos is no lover of British rule – he lambasts the colonial government for protecting British manufacturing interests at the expense of rural producers and consumer in Cyprus during the Depression, and again during the second world war. A good deal of the pamphlet's space is devoted to this theme.

He is also worried about a kind of self-hatred in the agrarian classes, a flight from farming, a preference for white-collar employments. He wants government to protect farming interests to such a point that people will wish to remain in farming, and will produce to meet their own needs, rather than producing to earn money, and buy imported luxury clothes. He suggests it is better for rural people to wear "Cyprus cashmeres, Cyprus aladjia" rather than European cashmeres, silk stockings and high heels. Is this a simple manifestation of peasant conservatism? During the EOKA insurgency, there were moves to boycott imports and promote Cypriot textiles, but these were aimed specifically at the British. Were these ideas "in the air" ? Perhaps HajiMatheos had been reading about Gandhi's economic boycott campaigns against British manufactures in India? Such measures could, he suggests, take women out of the fields, back into the home, weaving materials to dress their families, and leaving men, and only men in agricultural production. This certainly does look like peasant patriarchal conservatism. This was not the way things were destined to go, yet HajiMatheos is remembered by some Argaki people, as having had extraordinary prescience. He "predicted" phenomenal rises in the prices of livestock; he predicted universal availability of electricity, cheap air travel, and even conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots after Independence. Interestingly, the things he got wrong – the ever

increasing dependence on imports, ever rising urbanisation, the marginalisation of agriculture, and women who work outside the homes, were ignored or forgotten by those who remember him as a brilliant forecaster!

HajiMatheos, like many an inexperienced writer, could get carried away by a metaphor. His attempt to evoke a sequence from the Hollywood film "Ben Hur" in chapter 6 is evidence of this. And his sentences could develop for a long time so that it is hard to pin down the main argument, and understand who is doing what to whom. But this is hardly important. What is important is that here was a man with little formal schooling [he completed primary school only] but with the self-confidence to make a criticism of the political arrangements he could see around him, and who was willing to make proposals, to stand up for what he believed in, and to accept office. Vassos Lyssarides was happy to describe him as a "pioneer", [1] a man ahead of his times. He added that HajiMatheos was not easily swayed --once he had thought something through, he would stick to his opinions unwaveringly. I asked Dr. Lyssarides why, he supposed that HajiMatheos had had a brief period of political prominence,[1943-50] but had then, as far as I could ascertain, dropped out of public view. Lyssarides ventured that perhaps it was the result of his diabetic condition taking its toll.

Andreas Panayiotou, a political sociologist who has studied the period and the rise of the Cypriot left in detail suggested [Panayiotou 1999] that HajiMatheos was a "transitional figure" in a transitional period. In 1943, when AKEL emerges, there is a period when right and left Greek Cypriots support an anti-fascist war even though it is led by imperial Britain, and many of AKEL's Central Committee and ordinary members volunteer to join the British armed forces. There are public demonstrations in the towns of Cyprus in which Greek

Cypriots carry the flag of Greece and Turkish Cypriots carry the flag of Turkey, and both communities march peacefully against fascism. But within three years, the right-nationalist farmer's union PEK is refusing to collaborate with the left farmer's union, EAK, and HajiMatheos moves from the first to the second, probably because of the cost-of-living index issue. [Panayiotou, 1999:349, passim]. HajiMatheos' 1945 pamphlet catches one moment in a time of flux, one man's pro-poor, pro-rural populist views which articulated with other views, but were not subjected to party orthodoxy.

Perhaps later historians of agrarian movements in Cyprus will find out more about HajiMatheos. Meanwhile, here is an authentic rural voice from 1945, telling us how one thinking man saw his world. Given that he is writing only ten years before the EOKA insurgency was to permanently change the relations between Greek Cypriots and their colonial rulers, and to sour relations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, it is worth keeping in mind that there were less divisive political visions which were pushed to one side by the violence of the nationalists in the two communities. Had there been more people who thought like HajiMatheos, and had they been able to punch their weight politically, the history of Cyprus might have developed rather differently. But it seems they were rather rare, or by their very pacific approaches, unable to influence the men with nationalist dreams and the readiness to take up arms. In my village, when left wingers said or did things the EOKA leaders did not like, the EOKA men sent their young militants to speak with them, and there were implicit threats in those "conversations." And such tactics did not stop when the British left - they were still employed in 1968, when I was carrying out my fieldwork, and received several warnings not to publicly criticise "the government of Greece" in the coffee shops. The fact is that after April 1<sup>st</sup> 1955, EOKA became the politically dominant force in the Greek Cypriot community, and a man like HajiMatheos may

have understandably found it sensible to keep a lower profile.

Field research in a village community forces the academic to realise that rural communities often contain men and women who had they had the chance of higher education would have undoubtedly distinguished themselves. It is a humbling experience. I missed meeting HajiMatheos by a few years, but I'm sure if we had met, he would have taught me a great deal.

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1. Dr. Lyssarides was interviewed at his home December 13<sup>th</sup> 2003.