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Discuss how Flora Tristan blazed a trail
among utopian socialists in her treatment of
'the woman question'

It is perhaps sad to note, that as time moves forward, some people are forgotten by history. These people, no less real than Marx or Socrates, lived and impacted the lives of countless others, but as time unraveled, were swept away in its waves, never to be cited in the history books, never rightfully credited for their work. One such victim of time, was Flora Tristan. Owing to a combination her early death, "*la domination sans partage du marxisme-léninisme*" (Bédarida, 1983: 14) or the misogynistic tendencies of history, Tristan was effectively forgotten until her first biography, written by Jules Puech, emerged in 1925. With this, a trend began which would lead to a still-growing body of literature in the study of this remarkable woman.

When considering how pioneering an idea was, or indeed is, it is important to consider it in its past, present and future contexts. That is to say, one should ask: were they the first to propose the ideas contained within their ideologies? Were they the leading, or sole movements of their kind at the time? Did they leave a lasting legacy or inspire others to carry forward similar initiatives? For the question at hand then, let us consider these three time perspectives. Was Tristan the first to criticise the unequal contemporary societal organisation? Certainly not, for it is well known that Condorcet proclaimed equality for slaves and women long before sexual inequality was constitutionally formalised by the Napoleonic Code of 1804. Neither was she the only person to champion equality of the sexes under the July Monarchy in France, for the utopian socialists held sex equality in high regard, and in England, Chartism carried forward Tristan's struggle for a unified workers' movement. With regard to a posthumous following, the remarkable "remembering and forgetting" (Cross, 2013) surrounding Tristan impedes a linear study. Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto envisaged the "formation of the proletariat into a class" in 1848, four years after the

publication of *l'Union Ouvrière* (1844), and whereas fleeting mention in Engel's *Die heilige Familie* (1845) proves irrevocably that they were aware of Tristan's work, lack of citation by the former makes it difficult to draw a direct line of influence from the latter. Through consideration of Tristan's treatment of 'the woman question'; the specific nature of equality envisaged; her unique, universal synthesis of workers and women and her active methodology, this essay will discuss how Flora Tristan blazed a trail among utopian socialists.

Utopian socialism, which took its first steps in the context of the Restoration Monarchy and grew mature under the July Monarchy, is credited by many as the cradle of first-wave feminism (LeGates, 2012). That is not to say that they were the first in France to formally demand equal rights for women, that title perhaps owing to Condorcet or Olympe de Gouges for her 1791 "*Declaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*", rather that they constitute the first "collective effort to alter the relationship between the sexes" (Moses, 1982:240). Three main sects of utopian socialism would emerge in France and England in the first half of the 19th century, each envisaging their own bespoke version of 'utopia', "a world of harmonious association and social wellbeing" (Allison, 2011:715), namely: Saint-Simonianism, Fourierism and Owenism. As we will discuss later, these utopias envisaged an 'equal' role for women, and it is logical to assume that it was this relatively positive opinion which attracted Tristan. They offered her "the formulas to express her feminism" (Moon, 1978:23), without defining it, and so Tristan's feminism grew alongside utopian socialism, rather than within it. Indeed, Tristan's dissatisfaction with their views was an unquestionable factor in her creation of an entirely bespoke approach to 'the woman question'.

In his discussions of Saint-Simonianism, Bouglé (1932) quoted German theorist and socialist politician, Karl Grün:

"Le Saint-Simonisme est comme une boîte pleine de semences : la boîte a été ouverte, son contenu s'est envolé on ne sait où, mais chaque grain a trouvé un sillon et on les a vus sortir de terre l'un après l'autre." ([1845] *ibid.*:51)

By taking this assertion a step further and applying it to other sects of utopian socialism, we can see that trying to classify Tristan as a member of a specific doctrine is neither useful nor accurate. More appropriate is to recognise that Tristan, as noted by Bédair in his introduction to *Promenades dans Londres*, was a sharp social observer who "*prend son inspiration partout où elle le juge bon.*"

(1983:43). The fluid, developmental nature of her doctrine has come under scrutiny by Dijkstra, who criticised the “contradictions” (1992:22) in her early work. Yet Tristan herself acknowledged in *Nécessité de faire bon accueil aux femmes étrangères* (1835) that “we can only learn from experience”, and given the solitary nature of her mission, unique past and influential experiences in Peru, England and France, it is wholly understandable that her ideology would morph and develop as she herself did.

This synthesis of contemporary ideas, sociological observations and the recognition of “the universality of her own experiences as a woman” (Moon, 1978:23) cultivated her feminism and clear differences with the utopian socialists become visible when we compare the varying natures of the equality envisaged and specifically the unwavering centrality of women’s emancipation to Tristan’s work. *La Religion Saint-Simonienne* proclaimed that “*la femme et le prolétaire avaient tous besoin d’affranchissement*” (1831, cited in Bédarida, 1978:41). Fourier was no less reserved about the importance of the ‘the woman question’, declaring within his central work, *Théorie des quatre mouvements* (1808, cited in *ibid.*) that “*L’extension des privilèges des femmes est le principe général de tous les progrès sociaux*”. Yet the romantic nature of Saint-Simonianism primarily considered women as “symbols of reconciliation”, whose “passion and emotional nature” (Talbot 1991:222) was key to the establishment and survival of their vision of utopia. Thus, emancipation was an incidental “natural consequence” (Moses, 1982:242), rather than the aim of Saint-Simonianism. Furthermore, whilst the Fourierist perception of women’s rights as a representation of society’s progress is an unquestionable example of their dedication to emancipation, this was far from the main aim of operation, which chose instead to focus on the “safer elements” of the doctrine, for example the establishment of *phalanstères* (Dijkstra, 1992:24). That is not to say that Tristan’s ideas were free from romanticism, as *Union Ouvrière* did envisage different roles for women, as “*bonnes mères de famille capables d’élever et de diriger leurs enfants et [...] servir d’agents moralisateurs pour les hommes*”, (1844, 62) but this was always coupled with complete economic independence from men. This, together with her rejection of the sexual roles imposed by the Fourierists and Saint-Simonians and her woman-centric approach showed that her feminism, which demanded satisfaction of “*ses droits sacrés et inaliénables*” (1844:48), was vastly more developed than that of utopian socialist contemporaries and more akin to that of later feminist movements. Far from being realised, Tristan’s demands for natural rights for women were carried

forward into the suffrage movement of the 20th century (Cross, 2013), as in Puech's affirmation in 1932 that:

Ce n'est pas pour le plaisir de vous sentir citoyenne que vous voulez user du droit de suffrage, c'est parce que c'est un droit. (1932, cited in *ibid.*:2)

Given Puech's unparalleled knowledge of Tristan's work, this is a clear confirmation that her ideology inspired future movements.

Forget (2001) comments that Saint-Simonian feminism was ultimately limited, as it was defined by men. With this in mind, perhaps it would be more accurate to link Tristan to the utopian socialism of women like Désirée Véret and Marie-Reine Guindorf. Having defected from Enfantin's henceforth male-led religion in search of *La Femme Messie*, these women and others went on to found such journals as *La Tribune des Femmes*, *Conseiller des femmes* (Eugénie Niboyet, 1833) and *Mère de famille* (Madeleine Sirey, 1833), described by Moses as "the first collective venture in history whose purpose was specifically and exclusively feminist" (1984:252). Yet, despite the clear proximity of their ideas, these women came into little contact and Tristan opted instead for a martyrdom which would characterize her life and indeed death. Dijkstra (1992:23) asks why Tristan would fail to communicate with these women and her psychoanalytical considerations of Tristan's embrace of the Saint-Simonian *Femme Messie* and self-constructed status as a pariah led Dijkstra to question the "purity" of Tristan's motives, deeming her concern for the working class and women, although profound and serious, as self-serving, allowing her to "accumulate the [...] pity she felt she deserved" (*ibid.*:23). She was certainly unique in her seizure of this mystic construction, and whereas it does not translate into later struggles for equality, it offered her tactical advantages and set her aside from other contemporary movements. This uncouth methodology, therefore, should not be seen to have a detrimental effect on her role as a trail blazer, rather that, "*en refusant de jouer les rôles qui lui imposait son époque, elle a rejoint les rangs des pionniers*" (Bloch-Dano, 2001:15).

The usefulness of comparisons between parallel ideologies is still limited, as in certain respects, Flora Tristan's was entirely unique. According to Desanti "*elle fut la première à penser, à vouloir souder deux revendications essentielles. La nécessité pour les opprimés de s'unir pour combattre [...] et la nécessité pour les femmes de s'unir à cette même lutte.*" (1972:II). This unique synthesis of the working class and the feminist cause would take physical form in *L'Union Ouvrière*, where she

called for unification, to form "*la partie [...] la plus nombreuse et plus utile de l'humanité*" (1844:82). Carrying forward the notions of working-class utility and unity of "*la trinité Owen-chartisme-O'Connell*" (Bédarida 1978:42), and combining it, as never before done, with the utopian socialist values of industrialism and universal association (Moon 1978), the natural rights reached by this woman-inclusive union would guarantee "*l'égalité entre tous et toutes*" (1844:85). Tristan found "the means to realize the abstract sexual and social harmony of the utopian feminists" (Moon, 1978:34.). In Tristan's identification of women and workers as society's pariahs, one can find a parallel with the struggle for equality of second-wave feminist and anti-racist activist movements of the late 20th century. Although it is true that the two never formally unified, (perhaps for lack of a unifying figure like Tristan) there are "striking parallels between the theoretical debates" (Lloyd, 1998:71). Furthermore, the inclusion of women in Tristan's envisaged union was not the only pioneering aspect of her ideology, but also that its feminist message was intended to echo throughout the entire world, rallying the proletariat from all countries to form "*l'union universelle des ouvriers et ouvrières*" (1844:110). As noted by Livingston (1986), this call for transnational solidarity and unity preceded Marx & Engel's demand that "Workers of the world, unite!" (1848) by four years. In recent years, historians have used this fact to declare Flora as the pre-cursor for the Workers' International movement (Cross, 2016), absolute confirmation of her trail-blazing nature.

Yet the individuality of Flora Tristan stretches beyond her ideological treatment of 'the woman question', and into the methodology by which she envisaged its realisation. One of Tristan's principal criticisms of utopian socialism was its purely ideological nature, an opinion which she voiced in letters to the editors of Fourierist journal, *La Phalange* (1835, cited in Talbot, 1991:225) declaring this utopic vision "cold, sterile and paralysing to progress". She henceforth committed to a new, active approach, which would unite science and action (Bédarida, 1978:21), thereby mirroring the worker's tendency to "*manifester son opinion par des faits*" (Tristan, 1844:iii). Moses (1982) ties this to the development of a more reformist tact than her revolutionary-minded contemporaries, in which she replaced the mystic 'Attente' of Saint-Simonianism with social action. Using her "*caractère noble, fier et indépendant*" (Blanc, 1845:8), striking beauty and literary talents, which allowed her to "*exercer une grande influence sur ceux qui l'entourent*" (ibid.:11) as her tools for change, she would embark on a tour around France, committing to a task which the utopian socialists had failed to do: speak to the workers, rather than about them. Of course, given the

subordinate status of women in workers' communities, which explicitly excluded women from the workplace, this journey would not be without its challenges. Indeed, Tristan had already been ridiculed by the workers' journal *L'Atelier*, as "*O'Connell en jupons*" (1843, cited in Desanti, 2001:255) and even feminist Saint-Simonians, such as Eugénie Soudet warned her of the unrealisable nature of her work (1843, cited in *ibid.*:256). Yet despite the odds and the frustrating rejection which she encountered on her journey, Tristan developed methods of convincing the workers of her message. By linking working class misery to the deep-rooted inequality experienced by women, Tristan declared that "*si elle leur manque, tout leur manque*" (1844:51), thus illustrating the indispensable condition of a union in order to emerge from an age of oppression. It is beyond doubt that this pioneering approach to change through action left a mark and she gained a considerable following in cities such as Marseille and Lyon. Such would be her effect in Lyon, that after gathering to hear her speak and recognising the need to further spread her message, "*un groupe d'ouvriers et ouvrières tout à fait dévoués à la cause*" (1844:iv) raised 1,000 francs to facilitate the publication of the third edition of *L'Union Ouvrière*. Upon reaching Bordeaux in September of 1844, Tristan's mission was nearing its premature end and she would die two months later in the home of Saint-Simonianists, Charles and Elisa Lemonnier, of the typhoid which had been slowly taking a hold of her. But with this tragedy came unquestionable confirmation of the effectiveness of her *Tour de France* and the legacy which it would leave behind. A group of artisans led by Lemonnier began appealing across France for donations in order to build a monument to the late Flora Tristan and, in a show of unprecedented solidarity, a tomb in her honour was erected. But her legacy was more than just symbolic, and her vigour was carried forward into subsequent movements across France. Grogan (1998:207) recalls how Unionists in Bordeaux refused to let her ideology die with her, writing that "*la mort de Flora Tristan ne doit pas interrompre l'œuvre qu'elle a commencé, et que, plus que jamais les ouvriers doivent s'unir*" (cited in Blanc, 1845:78,79). As Europe prepared itself for 1848, the "Year of Revolution" (Rapport, 2009), the workers' communities of the cities she visited hummed with the legacy of Tristan's feminist-socialist fight.

Yet the revolution of 1848 would ultimately fail to establish equality in France and memories of Tristan's message faded. Since her rediscovery, historians have struggled to decide on the exact nature of Tristan's feminism. Due to the solitary and fluid nature of her ideology, analyses have thus far only loosely classified her as a utopian socialist, but that too is only partially accurate, for her ideology defies classification. As discussed, Tristan was undoubtedly influenced by the utopian

socialists, but viewing their treatment of 'the woman question' as inadequate, she applied her own experiences and beliefs to create an entirely unique approach. It was Tristan's resolute dedication to women's emancipation; universal synthesis of the working class and the feminist cause and personal, active approach which would render her a pioneering utopian feminist. Had she lived longer and continued on her mission, perhaps the world would have explicitly recognised the contributions of 'Tristanism' to the battle for equality of the sexes and many more would have joined the likes of Puech in acknowledging Flora Tristan as "l'ancêtre du mouvement féministe" (1925: 1).

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