

Mariátegui on the Woman Question



José Carlos Mariátegui

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	4
The Woman and the Politics (1924) . . .	5
The Feminist Demands (1924)	12
The Third International Congress of Sexual Reform (1929)	18

Preface

This is a compilation of works by José Carlos Mariátegui in regards to the woman question. Mariátegui founded the Communist Party of Peru in 1928 on a Marxist-Leninist basis and led it until his death in 1930. Opportunists in the Party would later negate him and abandon his line, leading the Communist Party of Peru onto a road of revisionism until its reconstitution.

All works were obtained digitally from the Marxists Internet Archive.

Compiled, produced, and translated from Spanish to English by **RedLibrary.info**.



First Edition, January 2024.

Second Edition, April 2024.

The Woman and the Politics

*Published in **Variedades**, Lima, March 15, 1924.*

ONE of the substantive events of the 20th century is the acquisition of the political rights of men by the woman. Gradually we have reached political and legal equality of both sexes. The woman has entered politics, parliament and government. Their participation in public business has ceased to be exceptional and extraordinary. In Ramsay MacDonald's Labor ministry one of the portfolios has been assigned to a woman, Ms. Margaret Bondfield, who rises to government after a laborious political career: she has represented England at the International Labor Conferences at Washington and Geneva. And Russia has entrusted its diplomatic representation in Norway to Alexandra Kollontai, former People's Commissar in the government of the Soviets.

Ms. Bondfield and Madam Kollontai are, for this reason, two very topical figures on the world scene. The figure of Alexandra Kollontai, above all, has not only the contingent interest conferred by

current events. She is a figure who has been attracting European attention and curiosity for some years now. And while Margarita Bondfield is not the first woman to occupy a state ministry, Alexandra Kollontai is the first woman to occupy the head of a legation.

Alexandra Kollontai is a protagonist of the Russian Revolution. When the regime of the Soviets was inaugurated, she already held a position of first rank in Bolshevism. The Bolsheviks elevated her, almost immediately, to a People's Commissariat, that of hygiene, and gave her, on one occasion, a political mission abroad. Captain Jacques Sadoul, in his memoirs of Russia, a moving chronicle of the historic days of 1917-1918, calls her the Red Virgin of the Revolution.

The history of the Russian Revolution is, in fact, closely connected to the history of the achievements of feminism. The constitution of the Soviets grants women the same rights as men. Women in Russia are electors and eligible for election. According to the constitution, all workers, without distinction of sex, nationality or religion, enjoy equal rights. The communist state does not distinguish or differentiate between sexes or nationalities; it divides society into two classes: bourgeois and proletarians. And, within the dictatorship of her class, the proletarian woman can exercise any public function. In

Russia there are innumerable women working in the national administration and in the communal administrations. Women, moreover, are frequently called upon to serve in courts of justice. Several women, Krupskaya and Menzhinskaya, for example, collaborate in Lunacharsky's educational work. Others intervene conspicuously in the activity of the communist party and the Third International, Angelica Balabanoff, for example.

The Soviets greatly encourage and stimulate female collaboration. The reasons for this feminist policy are notorious. Communism found in women a dangerous resistance. The Russian woman, the peasant mainly, was an element spontaneously hostile to the revolution. Through their religious superstitions, they saw in the work of the Soviets only an impious, absurd and heretical work. The Soviets understood, from the first moment, the necessity of a clever work of education and revolutionary adaptation of women. To this end they mobilized all their adherents and sympathizers, among whom were, as we have seen, some women of high mental category.

And it is not only in Russia that the feminist movement appears markedly in solidarity with the revolutionary movement. The feminist demands have found in all countries energetic support from the left. In Italy, the socialists have always advocated

women's suffrage. Many socialist organizers and agitators come from the ranks of suffragism. Sylvia Pankhurst, among others, having won the suffragist battle, joined the extreme left of the English proletariat.

But the victorious demands of feminism are really the fulfillment of a last stage of the bourgeois revolution and of a last chapter of the liberal ideology. In the past, women's relations with politics were morganatic relations. The women, in feudal society, only had an exceptional, irresponsible and indirect influence on the course of the state. But, at least, women of royal blood could reach the throne. The divine right to reign could be inherited by females and males. The French Revolution, on the other hand, inaugurated a regime of political equality for men; not for women. The *Rights of Man* could have been called, rather, the *Rights of Male*. With the bourgeoisie, women were much more eliminated from politics than with the aristocracy. Society was divided not only into classes but into sexes. Sex conferred or denied political rights. Such inequality disappears now that the historical trajectory of democracy is coming to an end.

The first effect of the political equalization of men and women is the entry of some vanguard women in politics and in the management of public business. But the revolutionary significance of

this event must be much more extensive. The troubadours and lovers of feminine frivolity have no reason to worry. The type of woman created by a century of capitalist refinement is condemned to decadence and sunset. An Italian writer, Pitigrillo, classifies this type of contemporary woman as a type of mammal of luxury. Well, this mammal of luxury will be gradually depleted. As the socialist system replaces the individualist system, feminine luxury and elegance will decline. Humanity will lose some mammals of luxury; but it will gain many women. The clothes of the woman of the future will be less expensive and lavish; but the condition of that woman will be more dignified. And the axis of feminine life will shift from the individual to the social. Fashion will no longer consist in the imitation of a modern Madam Pompadour dressed by Paquin. It will consist, perhaps, in the imitation of a Madam Kollontai. A woman, in short, will cost less, but will be worth more.

The literary enemies of feminism fear that the beauty and grace of women will suffer as a result of feminist conquests. They believe that politics, the university, the courts of justice, will turn women into unlovable and even unfriendly beings. But this belief is unfounded. The biographers of Madam Kollontai tell us that, in the dramatic days of the Russian Revolution, the illustrious Russian had

time and spiritual disposition to fall in love and get married. The honeymoon and the exercise of a People's Commissariat did not seem to her absolutely irreconcilable and antagonistic.

To the new education of women we are already indebted for several sensible advantages. Poetry, for example, has been greatly enriched. Women's literature has in these times a feminine accent which it did not have before. In former times women's literature was sexless. It was generally neither masculine nor feminine. It represented at most a neutral genre of literature. Today, women are beginning to feel, think and express themselves as women in their literature and art. A specific and essentially feminine literature appears. This literature will discover unknown rhythms and colors. The Comtesse de Noailles, Ada Negri, Juana de Ibarbourou, do they not sometimes speak to us an unusual language, do they not reveal to us a new world?

Félix del Valle has the mischievous and original intention of arguing in an essay that women are evicting men from poetry. Just as they have replaced them in various jobs, they seem to be close to replacing them in poetic production as well. Poetry, in short, is beginning to be a woman's job.

But this is, in truth, a humorous thesis. It is not true that masculine poetry is dying out, but that for the first time we hear a characteristically feminine

poetry. And that this makes it, temporarily, a very advantageous competition.

The Feminist Demands

*Published in **Mundial**, Lima, December 19, 1924.*

THE first feminist concerns are latent in Peru. There are some cells, some nuclei of feminism. The proponents of ultra nationalism would probably think: here is another exotic idea, another foreign idea that is grafted in the Peruvian mentality.

Let's calm these apprehensive people down a bit. Feminism should not be seen as an exotic idea, a foreign idea. We must simply see it as a human idea. An idea characteristic of a civilization, peculiar to an epoch. And, therefore, an idea with the right of citizenship in Peru, as in any other segment of the civilized world.

Feminism has not appeared in Peru artificially or arbitrarily. It has appeared as a consequence of the new forms of women's intellectual and manual labor. The women of real feminist affiliation are the women who work, the women who study. The feminist idea thrives among women of intellectual or manual trades: university professors, workers. It found a favorable environment for its development in the university classrooms, which attracted more and more Peruvian women, and in the work-

ers' unions, in which factory women joined and organized with the same rights and the same duties as men. Apart from this spontaneous and organic feminism, which recruits its adherents among the various categories of female labor, there exists here, as elsewhere, a somewhat pedantic and somewhat mundane feminism of dilettantes. Feminists of this rank turn feminism into a mere literary exercise, a mere fashionable sport.

No one should be surprised that all women do not come together in a single feminist movement. Feminism has, necessarily, several colors, several tendencies. One can distinguish in feminism three fundamental tendencies, three substantive colors: bourgeois feminism, petty-bourgeois feminism and proletarian feminism. Each of these feminisms formulates its demands in a different way. The bourgeois woman solidarizes her feminism with the interests of the conservative class. The proletarian woman consubstantiates her feminism with the faith of the revolutionary multitudes in the future society. The class struggle - historical fact and not theoretical assertion - is reflected on the feminist plane. Women, like men, are reactionary, centrist or revolutionary. They cannot, therefore, fight the same battle together. In the present human landscape, class differentiates individuals more than sex.

But this plurality of feminism does not de-

pend on the theory itself. It depends, rather, on its practical distortions. Feminism, as a pure idea, is essentially revolutionary. The thought and attitude of women who feel themselves to be both feminist and conservative lack, therefore, intimate coherence. Conservatism works to maintain the traditional organization of society. This organization denies women the rights that women want to acquire. The feminists of the bourgeoisie accept all the consequences of the existing order, except those that oppose the demands of women. They tacitly maintain the absurd thesis that the only reform that society needs is feminist reform. The protest of these feminists against the old order is too exclusive to be valid.

It is true that the historical roots of feminism are in the liberal spirit. The French Revolution contained the first seeds of the feminist movement. For the first time, the question of women's emancipation was raised in precise terms. Babeuf, the leader of the conjuration of the equals, was an asserter of the feminist demands. Babeuf harangued his friends: "Do not impose silence on this sex that does not deserve to be scorned. Enhance rather the most beautiful part of yourselves. If you do not count women at all in your republic, you will make of them little lovers of the monarchy. Their influence will be such that they will restore it. If, on the con-

trary, you count them for something, you will make of them Cornelias and Lucrecias. They will give you Brutes, Gracchi and Scevolas.” Polemicizing with the anti-feminists, Babeuf spoke of “this sex that the tyranny of men has always wanted to annihilate, of this sex that has never been useless in revolutions.” But the French Revolution did not want to grant women the equality and freedom advocated by these Jacobin or egalitarian voices. The *Rights of Man*, as I have once written, could rather have been called *Rights of Male*. Bourgeois democracy has been an exclusively masculine democracy.

Born of the liberal matrix, feminism could not be implemented during the capitalist process. It is now, when the historical trajectory of democracy comes to an end, that women acquire the political and juridical rights of men. And it is the Russian revolution that has explicitly and categorically granted women the equality and freedom that more than a century ago Babeuf and the egalitarians claimed in vain from the French revolution.

But if bourgeois democracy has not realized feminism, it has unintentionally created the conditions and the moral and material premises for its realization. It has increased the value of her as a productive element, as an economic factor, by making an ever more extensive and intense use of her work. Work radically changes the feminine mental-

ity and spirit. Woman acquires, by virtue of work, a new notion of herself. Formerly, society destined women to marriage or to concubinage. Today, she is destined, first and foremost, to work. This fact has changed and elevated the position of women in life. Those who challenge feminism and its progress with sentimental or traditionalist arguments claim that women should be educated only for the home. But, practically speaking, this means that woman should be educated only for female and maternal functions. The defense of the poetry of the home is, in reality, a defense of the servitude of women. Instead of ennobling and dignifying the role of women, it diminishes and demeans it. Woman is something more than a mother and a female, just as man is something more than a male.

The type of woman produced by a new civilization must be substantially different from that which has formed the civilization now in decline. In an article on *The Woman and the Politics*, I have thus examined some aspects of this subject: "The troubadours and lovers of feminine frivolity have no reason to worry. The type of woman created by a century of capitalist refinement is condemned to decadence and sunset. An Italian writer, Pitigrillo, classifies this type of contemporary woman as a type of mammal of luxury.

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The subject is very vast. This brief article attempts only to ascertain the character of the first manifestations of feminism in Peru and to rehearse a very summary and rapid interpretation of the physiognomy and spirit of the world feminist movement. Men who are sensitive to the great emotions of the times should not and cannot feel strange or indifferent to this movement. The feminine question is a part of the human question. Feminism seems to me, moreover, a more interesting and historical subject than the wig. While feminism is the category, the wig is the anecdote.

The Third International Congress of Sexual Reform

*Published in **Mundial**, Lima, October 18, 1929.*

NEVER debated with the freedom and extension of today: the sexual question. The empire of religious taboos reserved this question to church casuistry until long after the Middle Ages. Sociology restored the attention of science and politics to the sexual regime in the modern age. In the course of the last century, something like a process of secularization of the sexual has taken place. Engels, among the great theoreticians of socialism, distinguished himself by the conviction that one must seek in the sexual order the application of a series of historical and social phenomena. And Marx drew important conclusions from the observation of the consequences of industrial and capitalist economy on family relations. The importance that Sorel, a follower of Proudhon in this and other aspects, attributed to the same factor is known. Sorel was astonished by the insensitivity and prudishness with

which statesmen and philosophers neglected his appreciation, who aimed to reform social organization from its foundations. In the concern of literature and art for the theme of love, he saw a sign of sensitivity and not frivolity, as serious scholars were likely inclined to say.

But the universalization of the debate on the sexual question is of our time. In mid-September, the Third International Congress of Sexual Reform was held in London, at which the theses of Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Alexandra Kollontai and other prominent intellectuals were discussed. This congress has been convened by the "World League for Sexual Reform," founded at the second congress in Copenhagen which took place during July last year. At the second congress the following questions were considered: the form of marriage, the status of women in society, birth control, the rights of the unmarried, freedom of sexual relations, eugenics, the fight against prostitution and venereal diseases, the aberrations of desire, the establishment of a code of sexual laws, the need for sex education. At the third congress, papers on sexuality and censorship, sex education, adolescence, marital union reform, abortion in the USSR, etc. were discussed.

There will soon be no civilized country where these works are not studied and followed by groups in which the presence of women will always be

indispensable and essential. The statesmen, the sociologists, the reformers of the whole world realize today that the destiny of a people depends, to a great extent, on its sexual education. Alfred Fabre-Luce has just published a book, *Pour une politique sexuelle*,¹ which, truthfully, does not advocate an absolutely new idea in this era of the USSR and the World League for Sexual Reform. The Soviet State has a sexual policy, just as it has a pedagogical policy, an economic policy, and so on. The other modern states, although less declared and defined, have it too.

The fascist state, by imposing a tax on celibacy and campaigning for an increase in the birth rate, is doing nothing more than intervening in the previously private or confessional domain of sexual relations. France, by protecting the single mother and thus placing itself on a terrain of social realism and religious heresy, had long felt the need for this policy.

One does not study, in our time, the life of a society, without finding out and analyzing its base: the organization of the family, the situation of women. This is the aspect of Soviet Russia that interests the men of science and arts, who visit the country the most. It is discussed, with careful observation, in all the travel reports of the USSR. Singularly shrewd

¹RedLibrary: Translates to *For a sexual policy*.

are the pages written on this subject by Theodore Dreiser and Luc Durtain.

And the attitude towards the sexual question is in itself, generally, a political attitude. As our compatriot César Falcón cleverly observed some years ago, Marañón² had already voted against Primo de Rivera and his regime ever since he condemned Don Juanism.

²RedLibrary: Gregorio Marañón.