

Woman and Politics*

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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.

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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 decay. 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.