The Making of a Utopian Correspondent

Après dîner je réponds à Vinçard une lettre de 4 grandes pages, et de bonne encre ! – C’est de cette façon qu’il faut leur parler. Nous allons voir ce qu’il va répondre.

(Flora Tristan, Le Tour de France, le 22 mars, 1843)

The political circumstances of Flora Tristan’s era together with her use of the letter form as a writer and as an activist ensured a successful launch of Union ouvrière both as a political programme and as a publication. It is therefore essential to present the tensions of the historical context of 1840s France to understand the origin of Flora Tristan’s politics.

The historical background to Flora Tristan’s politics is vast, particularly as we wish to contextualize the epistolary study outside the biographical sphere. It can be classified in the following categories: the state of French society and mainstream politics, by far the most general backdrop; the history of ideas since 1789 (socialism and feminism), an equally colossal setting; class formation and class-consciousness referring to the identity of the French working class in historical studies; the state of protest politics and the growth of literacy, both part of more recent developments in historical and cultural studies.

French society and mainstream politics

The century following the 1789 revolution was to a certain extent notoriously unstable; those in power were constantly reminded of the fragility of their position with political violence threatening to topple every new regime.1 As a result the successive regimes mistrusted parliamentary opposition and repressed any popular incidents of unrest with severity, particularly after the attempted assassination of Louis-Philippe...
in 1835. Ironically the first half of the nineteenth century in French politics saw the growth of liberalism as an inspiration for good governance particularly in the area of economic policy. Tristan’s political career in the early 1840s coincided with the Guizot years of government stability. François Guizot and his fellow politicians considered that the revolutionary process was over and the duty of the Orleanist King Louis-Philippe and himself was to consolidate the constitutional monarchy for the benefit of the middle classes. After 1840, when he was appointed to lead the government, the hopes of liberals and radicals that suffrage would be extended to create a more inclusive and representative democracy were increasingly frustrated. There began a concerted effort to unite those wishing for reform behind a suffrage movement that became increasingly radical as the decade wore on. By 1848 suffrage for all men was at the top of the list of political demands from the new regime. In his study of the originality of politics in the period from 1814 to 1848, Pierre Rosanvallon regrets the underestimations of the significance of the Guizot ministry in the years 1840 to 1848 as a political moment. It was a ‘temps faible de l’histoire, et de pensée simultanément, voué à un statut secondaire, mis sans dommage entre parenthèses’.2 The shadow of the 1789 revolution hung over the nineteenth century like an ugly pall of smoke or like a faded dream depending on whether revolution was considered a curse or a blessing. The July Monarchy is often seen as a failed attempt at a compromise between the ultra-royalists who cursed all the political changes brought about by the revolution and the democratic republicans who revered the new political structures heralded by the First Republic. The memory of the regime of a juste milieu is further overshadowed by other revolutionary moments; the political institutions that evolved at other times such as the Second or Third Republics dwarf the July Monarchy and dominate nineteenth-century political studies. The perception of the first half of the nineteenth century is seen as one of a transient stage in politics.3 Tristan’s era is almost a dull moment in comparison to the heady days of 1848 or is viewed as part of a wider pattern of progressive thinking that started with the Enlightenment philosophers as precursors and thinkers of new social ideas, the utopian socialists working towards the achievement of late nineteenth-century democracy. The notion of ideas in transition was applied equally to the utopian socialists who, it was said, preceded Marxism.4 The political institutions of the period are seen as a first step, and a rather limited one, towards democratic institutions. In retrospect the July Monarchy is viewed as a time of apprenticeship for democracy when retracted suffrage was a stepping stone between the absolutism of