

Laura S. Struminger — *The Odyssey of Flora Tristan*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988. Pp. xviii, 162.

This concise biography of Flora Tristan is the first scholarly treatment of her in English. Unjustly neglected for a long time, Tristan was France's most important woman Utopian socialist. Her early death, in 1844, at the age of 41, prevented her from experiencing the revolutions of 1848 and from finishing the activist program she had undertaken to organize French laborers into a single union. Recent interest in women's history has generated a number of studies about her and made her into a celebrated figure in France.

In the French literature, Tristan is often and briefly mentioned as a minor Utopian socialist or as the grandmother of Paul Gauguin. In 1925, appeared the solid and, at the time, definitive treatment by Jules L. Puech, *La Vie et l'œuvre de Flora Tristan*. The revolutionary wave of 1968 and the new feminism of the early 1970s caused many French writers and students, especially among the young, to rediscover Tristan. Working in the feminist library Marguerite Durand in Paris, in 1974, one could observe the French readers absorbed either in Rosa Luxemburg or in Flora Tristan. In France, the major scholar responsible for the resurrection of Flora Tristan is Stéphane Michaud. He organized the first International Colloquium on Flora Tristan which met in Dijon, in 1984, to commemorate the 140th anniversary of her death. Various political dignitaries such a Yvette Roudy, Minister of Women's Affairs for President François Mitterand, participated in the meeting. That same year, France issued a 2.80 franc stamp with the portrait of Flora Tristan and the caption "Hommage aux Femmes".

Flora Tristan has now found an American biographer. Laura Struminger has a solid background in mid-nineteenth century French labor history and obtained her degree in that field from the University of Rochester. She is also the author of *Women and the Making of the Working Class: Lyon, 1830-1870* and of a monograph on primary education in rural France, 1830-1880. Struminger has been working on Flora Tristan for over a decade, has done much research in France and has even traced her steps in Peru. The work resulting from these careful inquiries is an informative account of the life and achievements of this extraordinary woman. The organization of the book is of particular interest. Struminger bases the first four chapters on the inscription found on Tristan's monument which 1,500 workers built in her memory in Bordeaux in 1848: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Solidarity. Chapter V, called "Tour de France", deals with the last years of Tristan's life, based closely on her own diary of the "tour de France" which she undertook to organize workingmen and women in the provinces. And the epilogue bears the title "Legacy of a Pariah".

The first chapter takes Flora Tristan from birth to age thirty when she embarked on her adventurous sea voyage. Under the heading "equality", Tristan traveled to Arequipa, Peru, where she tried to claim her paternal inheritance. There, she observed that even upper-class women were denied basic rights, and she remarked that all women everywhere were legally oppressed.

After the failure to establish herself as a member of the Peruvian upper class, Tristan embarked upon her period of social activism and propaganda for social justice. In 1835, she returned to Paris where her first cause was to create the Society to Welcome Foreign Women, and she outlined her aims in a pamphlet in which she

emphasized the importance of improving the position of women in society. She discovered the work of the major Utopian socialists and entered into their intellectual and social world.

In 1839, Flora Tristan spent four months in England and published, in 1840, *Promenades dans Londres*, which Struminger calls “her first serious critique of modern life” (76). Tristan’s work differs from that of contemporary socialists; she did not create a Utopia nor was her concern with socialist theory. Instead, she reported on the conditions she observed. Two of her goals were to involve the workers themselves in the reform process and to oppose the patriarchal family which in her opinion caused suffering for both women and men.

The fourth chapter deals with 1843-1844, when Tristan dedicated all of her energies to improve the lives of the workers, both male and female. In her book, *The Worker’s Union*, Tristan argued that all laborers had the right to work and to equal pay for equal labor, and she maintained that all workers belonged to the same social class. She began to organize both men and women workers in her Worker’s Union. Unlike earlier such associations, her union was not organized along craft lines. She had to speak to workers directly and persuade them to accept her ideas. She thus set out on a “tour de France” to travel throughout the nation following the traditional itinerary of apprentices who in centuries past had traveled the same roads, stopping in the major cities to practice their craft.

On 12 April 1844, Flora Tristan began her last journey which she described in detail in the diary of her “tour de France”. She addressed workers, preached unity in one union and advocated women’s rights throughout her itinerary. She faced hardships and illness en route and, in Bordeaux, she died of a cerebral hemorrhage on 14 November 1844.

The epilogue is titled “Legacy of a Pariah” and, indeed, the word “pariah” symbolizes the life of Flora Tristan. This label is taken from the title of her second book, *Peregrinations of a Pariah* (1838). Tristan saw herself as an alienated person, the permanent outsider. She was the child of a mixed marriage, her father a Peruvian, her mother a Frenchwoman, but she was born illegitimate. Her parents’ union was celebrated by a priest, but it was never registered as a legal marriage by the state. Her father died when she was four, forcing the family to abandon a situation of affluence and adjust to impecunious circumstances. In fact, as a teenager, she had to work as an apprentice in a modest lithograph shop. Marriage to her employer André Chazal brought no relief and resulted in emotional and monetary misery. Her spouse proved to be a drunkard and violent toward her. Tristan’s experiences made her a critic of contemporary society.

Struminger’s treatment clearly points out the contrasts between Tristan’s Utopian socialism and experiences and the thought and lives of other contemporary thinkers and activists. Her road to socialism was experiential. She had known poverty in her own life and had to deal with the legal and emotional results of her illegitimacy. Tristan had experienced marital problems and had to struggle for custody of her two children. Her estranged husband tried to kill her and she never completely recovered from her shotgun wounds.

Laura Struminger emphasizes that Flora Tristan was concerned with both women and workers and was an existential feminist-socialist. Tristan insisted that

both family life and the work world had to be changed simultaneously to alleviate the suffering of the working class. Early feminists were concerned with the rights of women but not with those of workers, while early socialists were concerned with laborers but not with women. Flora Tristan realized that both had to be considered in order to correct the evils of early industrial society.

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