Notes on Flora Tristán’s *The Workers’ Union*

Some key philosophical concepts/themes

*Rights* (p. 77, 91)

Because PPT jumps (in the Western tradition) from Hobbes to Mill, there is virtually no discussion of the Enlightenment development of the concept of *individual rights*, which is a core feature of modern liberal thought. While this does get some coverage with **de Gouges and Wollstonecraft** (**MST)**, it seems like a regrettable gap in a course called “Philosophy and Political Thought.”

*Negative vs. Positive rights* (p. 47, 53, 54, 106)

Although she does not use this language, Tristán advocates strongly for the view that we should honor not only *negative* rights against interference, but also the *positive* right to life: i.e., rights to employment, education, and representation. The debate over negative vs. positive rights continues to play out in contemporary political philosophy, legal thought, national and international policy, etc.

*Negative vs. Positive liberty* (p. 6)

Tristán offers a trenchant critique of workers who think only of individual *negative* liberty, thereby forgoing the much greater *positive* liberty they would achieve if they worked together.

*Power (from below)* (p. 6, 8, 13, 37-39, 41, 51-52, 53, 58)

Throughout the rest of PPT, up until we get to **Gandhi**, it is assumed that power – and the ability to improve people’s lives – rests solely in the hands of the ruler/state, and that the solution to poverty, misery, etc. is good governance (along with, as **Huang** emphasizes, good institutions). Tristán, however, asserts that the people have power and ‘wealth’ in themselves, so long as they unite. This foundational idea, in which Tristán anticipates **Marx (MST)**, lies behind all social movements for change.

*Human nature and natural equality* (51, 80, 94, 124, 135)

Like **Hobbes**, Tristán believes in the capacities of human beings are fundamentally equal. However, she rejects the view that human beings are naturally selfish and doomed to deadly competition. Like **Mengzi** and unlike **Xunzi**, she believes that vice arises through hard material conditions and cycles of abuse. As emphasized in **CSI**, she identifies social structures and socialization as the root cause of wrongdoing, rather than blaming individuals. Moreover, she sees a fundamental connectedness between all of humanity, referring to the “great body” (p. 118-19) in language reminiscent of **Santideva**.

*Praxis, knowing vs. acting* (11, 25, 37, 42)

Tristán is accused of being utopian, but she is serious about implementing her plan, as evidenced by the inclusion of thoroughly practical details. Tristán is totally engaged in *praxis* – that is, theorizing for the purpose of acting – and continually urges her readers to take action. Like **Plato** and **Wang Yangming**, she believes that wrongdoing arises from ignorance.

*Feminist theory* (Ch. 3)

Tristán discusses a number of key feminist ideas, most importantly the socialist feminist idea of *social reproduction*: her ultimate justification for educating women lies in the socially necessary *reproductive labor*, both biological and moral,that they perform in raising the next generation of workers. Here she is especially concerned with moral education (p. 118, 150), as is **Mengzi**. She also touches on *misogyny* (p. 76, 78, 89), calling out **Aristotle** and connecting to ideas from **Marinella/de Pizan [MST])**. And she defends an *intersectional* thesis that the lot of workers cannot be improved without the improving the lives of women (83, 97). Although she shares many beliefs with **He-Yin Zhen**, her arguments are clearly quite different.

*Poverty alleviation, reform vs. revolution* (11, 13-15, 20, 22, 49, 64, 108, 133, 137)

Tristán emphasizes that mere charity will never address the root causes of poverty. However, she also repeatedly stresses that she is not a revolutionary, and that there is common interest and good will between the bourgeoisie and the workers. All these claims remain highly relevant, urgent, and contested to this day.

Possible discussion questions

What is the basis for the rights that Tristán ascribes to workers? How do we know whether something is a right or not?

Is human nature fundamentally egoistic/individualist/ or altruistic/collectivist? How would **Mengzi** or **Xunzi** respond?

What do you think of Tristán’s argument for women’s right to education? Does this square with contemporary feminist ideas?

Is reform without revolution enough to truly eradicate the poverty and misery of the workers? Up to what point is the bourgeoisie likely to support Tristán’s project?

How would **Hobbes** respond to Tristán’s proposal? In what ways does his version of “unification” differ from hers?

Is Tristán’s stress on collective unity compatible with **Mill**’s emphasis on individuality?

How would **Huang** respond to Tristán’s educational proposals?

How does Tristán’s conception of social order and disorder, and whether revolution is justified, compare to that of the **Mengzi** and **Xunzi**? (p. 134-35)

Why is it important for Tristán that the workers’ palace be beautiful? How does this relate to **Xunzi**’sideas on ritual? (p. 36, 114-15)