1.2 Ladies and working women

Parisian working women applauded the execution of Olympe de Gouges who was guillotined along with other Girondin leaders on 3 November 1793. Her call for woman's emancipation had not found support among women from the lower classes. This is not surprising. On the one hand Olympe de Gouges, just like the other representatives of bourgeois revolutionary feminism, never showed any particular interest in the living conditions of working women. On the other hand while the laws on divorce or measures in favour of greater equality between the sexes – for example in education – had aroused sympathy among working women, unemployment, misery and inflation were seen as much greater problems for them.

In any case, the French Revolution was certainly not the only event in which women had gone into the streets to protest, often

in a radical way, and to demand bread. Since the responsibility for managing the family finances and looking after the children and ill or old family members fell historically on women's shoulders, it was often women who were the detonators of social revolts caused by misery and hunger. Linking up women's experiences in these episodic social and political struggles with an emerging feminism whose protagonists were women from the middle or upper classes was far from easy.

This feminism came to be known by the organizations of the workers' movement as bourgeois feminism. This definition, which was also challenged within the feminist movement, at times took on a negative or liquidationist connotation due to a certain conservatism with regard to the demands raised by these feminists. The emergent liberal or bourgeois feminist movement generally focused on two main axes. Firstly, the demand for access to education and culture which was, at times, linked to calls for women to have the right to a full professional career. Secondly, demands for civil and political rights, above all the right to own property and inherit it, but also divorce and the right to vote. Often these demands did not link up with demands for social justice, and bourgeois women showed a lack of understanding of the specific conditions and consequently the specific needs of working women. Notwithstanding a common oppression, its specific forms varied significantly according to social class.

Henrik Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*, written in 1879, portrayed the situation of Nora, a bourgeois woman, obliged to live the uselessness and emptiness of an inactive but cosseted life, to play the role of a mere ornament whose feminine qualities were essentially expressed in gracefulness, beauty and submissiveness. This life had little in common with that of a working woman who had to not just work for more than ten hours a day in the factory, but also manage the family home, making many sacrifices and undergoing repeated pregnancies. A working woman in most cases lived in a contradictory situation. She worked in the system of production, but doing so did not

allow her to be economically independent from men. Women, in fact, were paid about half the rate for the same work and so, in the majority of cases, did not have the means to live on their own. In this situation only two paths were open: marriage or prostitution.

The blindness to this reality, the fact that bourgeois women's activism was often motivated by a demand for emancipation mainly on an individual level, made it difficult for the former to come together with the women who were beginning to organize, with many difficulties, inside the workers' movement. Often this was used as an excuse for the suspicious attitude of men from the workers' movement to feminist demands. It was the case, for example, with German bourgeois feminism, which was also characterized by a certain conservatism both on the questions of sexual freedom and civil rights. In 1865 the Allgemeine Deutsche Frauenverein (the General Association of German Women) was set up. This organization not only did not look for or establish any contacts with workers but limited itself to linking up with women from certain sectors of the petty bourgeoisie. It also did not include the extension of voting rights to women in its programme. Most of its demands only focused on access to education. It was only in 1902 that the bourgeois feminist movement included the demand for suffrage in its policies, but it did so without launching any real campaign. In terms of working regulations, it generally took a position against any regulations such as prohibiting women's night work, fearing that this type of legislation could lead to questioning women's right to work generally. In this way it showed a real blind spot concerning the unsustainable living conditions of working women, who, in addition to super-exploitation in the factory, had to take on a nurturing role at home which was made worse by lack of money, general misery and the absence of social services. All these factors, alongside some sectarianism from German social democratic women, made it very difficult and nearly impossible to build any unity of common interests around which women of different social

classes could take action.

England was a different case. Here bourgeois feminism was to maintain a degree of dialogue with the workers' movement which, for its own part, was a little more open to the feminist struggle than elsewhere. Regardless of the reasons, the English trade-union movement's moderate views meant Marxist or revolutionary positions only had the support of a small minority, and the rise of socialist ideas was based more than anything else on moral condemnation of the alienation of human relations in capitalist society. Working-class women were therefore particularly subject to the influence of bourgeois feminists without being able to develop a radical, autonomous political line. The founding of the Women's Social and Political Union by Emmeline Pankhurst, supported by her daughter, Christabel Pankhurst, marked a new turning point in the relations between bourgeois feminism and working women. This movement, which was initially linked to the Independent Labour Party, became progressively transformed, under the influence of Christabel, into a pressure group campaigning for women's suffrage, and thereby increasingly lost any representation of working women's interests. Between the end of 1906 and the beginning of 1907 it brought out hundreds of thousands of women in demonstrations, culminating in the enormous demonstration of 21 June 1908. However its ties with the working class became weaker, replaced by a "classless" political line which excluded any social or economic demands and focused exclusively on the campaign for women's votes. Even Sylvia Pankhurst's attempts to link the feminist cause with the working class were firmly opposed by her mother and sister.

1.5. Revolutionary women.

The Petrograd women demonstrated spontaneously and in defiance of the orders of their existing organizations on 23 February, 1917 (8 March) to celebrate International Women's Day, after having also convinced their male co-workers to support the strike. They certainly did not imagine

what momentous events their action would trigger. Hunger, unbearable working conditions, and the crisis caused by the war – all these factors impelled them into the streets to demand bread and peace. Instead of a demonstration about immediate demands it became the start of the Russian revolution.

Despite the limits, the backward steps, the conservative reaction, and the serious difficulties arising from the Civil War and the collapse of the economy, the first years of the Russian revolution certainly represented the highpoint of the process of women's emancipation. In no other historical event had women been able to benefit from such freedom and dignity, enjoy full citizenship rights, actively participate in political and social life, dynamically contribute to building a new social and political order, and simply be in charge of their own lives. Before the revolution the various theorists of the Bolshevik party had already placed great importance on women's liberation. Years of exile, living underground, deportations and systematic exclusion from ordinary social life meant that many of them were contemptuous of conventional norms and traditional – particularly petty-bourgeois – family relations. Life on the margins, always on the move, and solidarity among exiled comrades had in part liberated them from the conservative morality that characterized workers' movements in other countries. The family was seen, for the most part, as a place where oppression was perpetuated and conservative, reactionary values, prejudices and superstitions were inculcated. It was seen as an obstacle to a fuller, richer social life outside the walls of domesticity. Revolutionaries counterposed a positive alternative framework where people would seek more authentic relations based on reciprocal respect and not on hierarchical and dependent economic interests.

The axes of women's liberation, according to the proposals and writings of the Bolsheviks, were based on two central elements: the freeing up of women from domestic labour, and independence from men through full participation in the workforce. Freedom from domestic labour was to come from

its progressive socialization, in other words, through collective arrangements for child or adult care which would stop being a private matter carried out within the family household. It was a case of setting up a series of services – nurseries, laundries and canteens – which would have progressively achieved that objective. Solving the problem of the double exploitation of women, therefore, became identified with the socialization of domestic labour rather than through challenging traditional roles inside the family and the sexual division of labour. In fact it was considered quite natural for women to carry out the caring work in nurseries, laundries and canteens – but as salaried workers rather than mothers or wives. Women were considered more pre-disposed to this sort of work. However, the objective of freeing up time for women, allowing them to actively take part in political and social life, and opening them up to more revolutionary ideas, was clearly maintained.

Following the political line of Engels, Bebel and Clara Zetkin, the Bolsheviks also placed great importance on the full integration of women into the workforce. In order to be really free, women had to be economically independent of men. Monogamous and heterosexual relations were not put up for debate as such, and positions on homosexuality were more backward. It was hoped that there would be a radical transformation through the weakening of family ties and of interpersonal relations based on economic dependency. As for monogamy, it was not challenged as such but inside the Bolshevik party one could see the development of a discussion on free love, or rather on the nature of affection and sexual relationships. This was practically absent from the debates inside German social democracy.

Alexandra Kollontai played a key role in these discussions. Not only did she emphasize these questions in her writings, but also struggled for years against the conservatism of many party members and leaders. She belonged to the Menshevik current in exile but joined the Bolshevik party in 1915. After much persistence she managed, in 1917, to get the party to set up a department in charge of working with women. In 1919 it

was transformed into Zhenotdel – the Women's Section of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. Within the party Kollontai found Vladimir Lenin a very significant supporter. The latter, thanks to the close collaboration and ongoing exchange of views with his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and with Ines Armand, had fully understood the need for there to be a specific intervention around the particular problems facing women. Without policies able to respond to the problems and needs of women it would indeed not be possible to free them from conditions of economic dependency and of double exploitation, which was the basis of their conservative political tendencies. If you wanted to win women – the most backward element of Russian society – to the revolutionary cause, it was necessary to develop a political line that responded to their specific oppression. Alongside Lenin, there were other Bolshevik leaders who showed themselves particularly open and understood the need to encourage a greater female presence and participation in both the party and the soviets. Among these we can single out Leon Trotsky and Yakov Sverdlov who, up to his death in 1919, gave Kollantai great organizational support.

To fully understand the scale of the measures and reforms made after the October revolution one must refer back to the conditions of women in Tsarist society. Tsarist laws obliged women to obey their husbands as the head of the family, submit to his will in all circumstances, and follow him wherever he went. Women could not take a job or get a passport without the authorization of the head of the family. Divorce was very difficult because it was ultimately authorized by the Orthodox Church and, in any case, its cost placed it outside the reach of the poor. To make matters worse, domestic violence was prevalent. In peasant families it was customary for the father of the bride to present his son-in-law with a whip, to be used in case of need. In the countryside women had the added burden of working in the fields alongside husbands, fathers and brothers in addition to the domestic labour of washing, spinning, weaving, cooking, carrying water, taking care of children, old people and the ill... In

the towns they worked the same hours as the men but were paid a lot less without benefiting from any protective labour laws. For some of those suffering from hunger, occasional prostitution became the ultimate recourse. Pregnancy could cause dramatic problems and, at times, pushed women to infanticide.

So the condition of a woman in Tsarist Russia was akin to that of a slave. The revolution made her a citizen.

In the period immediately after the October Revolution a series of measures were implemented aiming at the heart of the traditional family and the patriarchal authority. The newly-instituted Family Code of 1918 allowed easy access to divorce; abolished the obligation for women to take their husband's surname; abolished the attribution of "head of family" to the man and therefore established equal rights for both partners; eliminated the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children; and abrogated the obligation to follow the husband if he moved to another area. The power of the Church was abolished and the interference of the state in marital relations was kept to a minimum. The Family Code was updated in 1927 and made access to divorce even simpler, legally recognized cohabiting couples, and laid down an obligation for divorced couples to pay for food for at least 12 months to a partner who was unemployed or unable to work. In 1920 a decree legalized abortion. The Soviet Union, therefore, became the first state in the world to give women the right to legal, free abortions. The December 1917 law on national sickness insurance was the start of a series of measures setting up social security for women's work. The right to 16 weeks maternity leave before and after birth was passed into law, as well as the right for pregnant women to do lighter work and to be excluded from being transferred to another job without the agreement of the work inspector.

A number of factors made the overall feminist project much more difficult than could have been foreseen: the terrible conditions resulting from the aftermath of the Civil War; the fierce resistance from peasants to the most progressive measures – including the attempts to set up nurseries in country villages

– and a growing lack of confidence among women workers themselves. Even though the Bolshevik government had sought to create a network of services that would have led to the progressive socialization of domestic labour, the collapse of the Soviet economy meant forward momentum in this area was severely held back. The number of nurseries were far from sufficient and the canteens served absolutely awful food. Furthermore, one of the first effects of the economic crisis was a new wave of women's unemployment. As a consequence, most women remained economically dependent on men and continued to be responsible for domestic labour. In these circumstances prostitution born of misery was widespread.

The serious deterioration in economic conditions and the consequent slowdown in the implementation of policies favouring women certainly contributed to their growing passivity and mistrust in a revolutionary government that had promised to radically change their situation. Notwithstanding the great efforts of Zhenotdel, Alexandra Kollontai and other leaders and activists, there were only 30,000 women in the party in 1923 – mostly of working-class origin.

While the policies put forward by the government of the soviets were broadly supported by urban women, the relationship with peasant women was much more problematic – in 1923 the latter made up only five per cent of women party members. In most cases the proposed policies were treated with great suspicion, even the village nurseries seemed to confirm a myth according to which the new government wanted to take babies away from their families. Obviously the backwardness of the countryside, superstitious beliefs, prejudice, and the strength of patriarchal structures explain to a large extent the peasant women's hostile reaction. There is, however, a stronger explanation to be found in the particular circumstances peasant women found themselves in during the Civil War. Alongside the serious economic situation that made it hard to implement policies, one must remember how weak the soviets were in the countryside. They were not able to protect women from male

violence and harassment. The Great War and then the Civil War had resulted in a very high number of both widows and women without husbands, many of whom tried to cultivate their pieces of land without any help from men.

These women were subject to a real process of expropriation by men who, arguing that women's labour was not sufficiently productive, were able to get land redistributed in their favour. It left women with the smallest, least fertile parcels of land. Women peasants who tried to assert their rights often became subject to denigration and scorn and, in most cases, the soviets were not able to put a stop to these situations. Moreover, there were cases of violence, and even murder, against many of those who decided to take part in women's meetings organized by the soviets or the local sections of the Bolshevik party. In these conditions the majority of peasant women clung to the old patriarchal structures, that is, to matrimony and the family, however much these were the source of their specific oppression. It still seemed safer to hang on to traditional structures when faced with the dual uncertainties of social castigation and the need to feed oneself and one's family.

Revolutionary Russia was, at least up to the end of the 1920s, the place where women were able to taste unprecedented freedom. This was despite the enormous objective difficulties, the limits of the actions of the Bolsheviks and their contradictions, and the lack of reflection about women's sexual self-determination and gender identity. In no other historical event have we seen so clearly the links between women's emancipation, self-organization and the workers' movement. After Stalinism had established its grip and infected the politics of the communist parties organized in a now bureaucratized Third International, those links were utterly destroyed.

1.8. The new feminism

During the first wave of feminism, the demand for emancipation had allowed links to be made between bourgeois feminism and feminists inside the workers' movement, and even led to unity of action in certain circumstances. Demands for access to education and employment, for full citizenship and the right to take part in politics were key, shared concerns. The first wave of feminism campaigned for the inclusion of all those who had always been excluded and fought for the full achievement of the equal rights promised by the French Revolution. Demanding equality with men was not necessarily subordination to the male framework – a criticism often made against this first wave. It was rather that the conceptual tools which the bourgeois revolutions and then the workers' movement had made available were taken up by women in order to bring out their most radical dynamic. "Equality cannot be real unless it is made with us" was the challenge thrown down by feminists to those who, under the cover of a false universalism, had conceived these values up to now only in male terms.

The second wave of feminism which rose up between the middle of the 1960s and the 1970s radically questioned this paradigm. In the period between the two waves of feminism,

in 1949, a book had been published that was to become groundbreaking – it was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

The new feminism developed out of a whole range of the 1960s and 1970s movements – students and youth, new workers' rebellions, national liberation struggles, civil rights and black power. With these movements that spread throughout the planet, feminism found the lifeblood for its resurgence in the huge blows struck against the existing social and political order by a new generation of "the ungrateful children of prosperity"; by the politicized students in the campuses of Europe and the USA, by the new black movement in the USA, and by a young rebellious working class. While it is true that the second wave of feminism was also a time of divorce between feminism and the workers' movement, the extension, strength and radicalism of women's struggles and the theoretical developments associated with them are unimaginable without the favourable context created by 1968 and the movements that followed. Youth rebellions challenged existing society, criticizing not only the relations of production but also social relations. They challenged the stereotypes and frameworks imposed on them, the culture of conformity and the conservativism behind the often voiced idea that "you've never have had it so good". They took on authoritarianism and a myriad of social power relations. The new feminists found critical instruments to use against the sexist domination of culture, society, production, politics, and the family within this radical challenge to existing society and among the attempts to try out different social and sexual relationships.

One of the characteristic features of the second feminist wave was the replacement of the emancipatory framework based on demanding equality with men with a refusal, in the name of a theory of difference(s), of an equality understood as subjection to a sexist, male framework. Demanding the right to difference was a powerful conceptual tool which was to bring about a split from the mixed social movements within which most of the feminists in the second wave had first become politicized. It

was no longer enough to ask for full participation of women in politics and society. While the experience of activists from related struggles that had criticized politics and society was useful, this had not led to a real questioning of gendered power relations. Consequently, women began to systematically deconstruct and criticize the forms of politics, society and culture in order to expose their patriarchal nature. For thousands of years only men had access to the symbolic order, they had moulded it in their image so women were inevitably excluded from it. Not even the organization and political practices of the workers' movement were spared. In fact the workers' movement also echoed this exclusion of sexuality and gender relations from political discourse. Feminists felt this and denounced it as foreign to their own experience of politicization and intervention. A second common feature of this wave of feminism was the centrality of women's self-determination: the demand for free abortion and contraception on demand, along with the condemnation of male violence and new thinking about sexuality, which included radical theories on the violence and domination inherent in sexual intercourse.

Two more central features were:

1) Theorizing patriarchy as a system of oppression that pre-existed capitalism, and considering gender power relations as the matrix for all other forms of domination, oppression and exploitation. In short, there was a general rejection of accepting a hierarchy of contradictions which saw class at the top below which lay gender, race, nationality, etc;

2) Putting forward an idea of politics that draws the personal and the political together, and thereby theorizing an immediate transformation of self and of the forms of personal existence and relationships with other men and women.

In spite of the central importance given to new thinking about sexuality and its forms, the fundamental contribution made by lesbians to the feminist movement, as well as their frontline activism and visibility, did not always find favour. In countries like Italy this led to a growing friction between

lesbians and the feminist movement, and ultimately to a split and the formation of a separate lesbian movement. The latter has sought to interpret lesbianism not simply as something pertinent to the field of sexuality, but as an eminently political position – the politics of those who are so far on the margins of an existing heterosexual order that they alone are able to carry out the most radical critique.

The origins of second wave feminism were rooted in the American college and university campuses of the 1960s. One of the major sources of inspiration for the movement were the African-American movements developing in that period that came to play a key role in the US protests of the 1960s. Feminism took some new conceptual tools from these movements: the discovery of difference as a process of affirmation and definition of one's identity; self-determination; and liberation struggle. As in other countries, second wave feminism was a movement made up mainly of young women, who had taken part in other movements – for free speech, for civil rights, and building the New Left. Women became conscious within these movements of the necessity of a separate women's movement in which there would be space for their specific needs and aspirations. Despite the massive involvement and fundamental role women played in these movements and organizations, they did not gain a corresponding leadership role as they were suffocated by sexist male leadership and methods of functioning. This tension became so blatant that it pushed women activists to bring their own gender-difference based demands to the fore.

Three books were published in 1970 that profoundly influenced not only the feminist movement in the United States, but also in many other countries: *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet and *Sisterhood is Powerful* by Robin Morgan. In the latter, Morgan, using the concept of sisterhood, puts forward the idea of a universal unity between all women against their common oppression, sexism. According to the author, sexism represents the matrix of all other oppression whether capitalist, racist or imperialist. This

idea of universal sisterhood was strongly challenged by African-American, Chicana and working-class activists who refused to identify themselves within a hierarchy of oppression outlined by white radical feminists or as a part of a sisterhood that they accused of essentialism. While acknowledging the sexism that existed within their own mixed movements, these women activists could not identify with the "feminist category" defined by white feminists, nor give up their common struggle alongside the men in their community or class against their exploitation as workers and their oppression as African-Americans, immigrants or Chicanos. The black feminist Frances Beal, one of the founders of the Third World Women's Alliance, wrote a document entitled *Double Jeopardy* where she did not mince words: "It is useless to delude yourself into thinking about a black women's existence if you limit yourself to seeing her as looking after her house and children like a white middle-class woman. Most black women have to work to survive, to put food on the table and dress their families." As long as black women experience a double or triple oppression as women, as black people, and as workers, it is not possible to establish a hierarchy between the different struggles, putting one in front and relegating the others to secondary concerns.

United States feminism and Black Power were to deeply influence the British movement too, which more than many others maintained a rich dialogue with the workers' movement. This was partly due to the fact that the Communist Party was so weak it was not able to exert a significant influence as was the case in countries like France and Italy. So in Great Britain the first women's liberation groups emerging at the end of the 1960s kept up good links both with the student and workers' movements. They took part in debates about workers' control and supported workers' trade-union struggles. Feminists there theorized the links between home and work, production and reproduction, domestic and paid labour. They sought to create a movement together with workers and users of public services to radically reform the welfare state, to challenge gender roles

inside the family, and the sexual division of labour outside it.

The first feminist group in Italy, the *Demau* (Demystification of Patriarchal Authoritarianism), was founded in 1965 and published its Programmatic Manifesto in 1966. A few years later, following the Italian youth rebellion, the foundations were laid for a new feminist movement. In 1969 the student movement linked up with the strongly rising new workers' movement which was very radical and very young. The tide of rebellion swelled throughout the next decade up to the momentous events of 1977. The new Italian feminists, for the most part – as elsewhere – were made up of young women who came out of the 1968 movement and often belonged to the New Left organizations that emerged in its wake. In 1970, the *Rivolta Femminile* (Feminine Revolt) and Anabasi groups were started, and Carla Lonzi wrote *Sputiamo su Hegel* (We Spit on Hegel), the founding text of Italy's new feminism. The real apex of the movement was reached in the period between 1974 and 1977. The first national meeting of feminist groups, which had sprung up all over Italy, was held in 1973 in the southern city of Pinarella. In 1970 a divorce law was finally put on the books. In 1974 the Italian people were asked in a referendum if they wanted to repeal this law, but over 59 per cent voted against repeal. The abortion campaign launched in 1975 ended in victory in 1978 with the passing of a law which, despite its serious limitations, introduced the right to free and legal abortions for the first time.

Italian feminism was also influenced by the United States radical feminists, and found a continuous source of inspiration in psychoanalysis and "French Theory". The feminist movement was impelled in this direction partly due to the hostility of the Italian Communist Party and the New Left organizations to autonomous women's organizations. It mostly took a separatist path, but at the same time there was an unprecedented wave of women's mobilizations inside the trade unions. Women's trade unionization was due in part to the rise in the number of women in the workforce – between 1973 and 1981 women provided 1,247,00 new workers while only 253,000 were men.

Other reasons for increasing unionization were the influence of other favorable social movements and the generally pro-worker political climate. The first groups of women trade unionists were set up in 1975, and their development was particularly strong in the big industrial centres where the working class was politically more active.

Just as in Italy, 1968 in France was characterized by the silence of women who had not been able to express themselves or play a leading role inside the movement. The Italian expression "angelo del ciclostile" – the angel of the duplicating machine – points to this exclusion. This was a recycling of the traditional "angel of the hearth" expression, in other words, from pots and pans to physically printing the leaflets indicates how the sexual division of labour had not changed. The French feminist movement of the early 1960s was similar to those in the United States and Italy. It was mostly made up of young women who were involved in the student movement and in the revolutionary left.

On 26 August 1970 some women placed flowers on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris stating: "There is someone even more unknown than the Unknown Soldier and that is his wife!" This symbolic act threw the spotlight of the mass media for the first time on the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF, women's liberation movement), a women-only organization, one of whose leaders was Monique Wittig. On 5 April 1971, 343 women published a manifesto in the magazine *Nouvel Observateur* declaring, to great consternation in French society, that they had had abortions. It was the starting point of the campaign for abortion rights which led to legislation in 1974. In the meantime, feminist groups and collectives were set up throughout France, in the neighbourhoods, in workplaces, and in the universities. They brought together demands for the freedom to control their own bodies with a criticism of patriarchy and sexism inside the mixed organizations of the workers' movement and the New Left.