Between France and the World:  
Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in the Work of  
Flora Tristan

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In her account of her travel to Peru, *Peregrinations of a Pariah*, published in 1838, Flora Tristan apologized to her readers for the book's chauvinistic tendencies. As she explained, at the time of her journey, five years earlier,

> I was still quite far from having those ideas which have since developed in my spirit . . . I was very exclusive, my country occupied a more important place in my thoughts than all the rest of the world . . . I did not see that all men are brothers and that the world is their shared country.¹

Tristan thus suggested that her journey from France to Peru also comprised a second, parallel voyage, which took her from a narrow, chauvinistic view of the world to a broad, cosmopolitan one. Disengaging herself from the limitations of nationality, she set aside her sole commitment to her place of birth, France, and instead came to imagine herself as a citizen of the world. Upon her return to France, Tristan further explored the possibilities of cosmopolitanism. Joining the emerging socialist movement, she discovered that cosmopolitanism could function not only as a personal identity but also as a means of promoting a more just and equitable society for workers. While rulers promoted national rivalry in order to strengthen their own power, she noted, the common people recognized that only in tearing down national boundaries and combining their strength could they gain

civil and political rights. But in Tristan's view, cosmopolitanism would also lead to the emancipation of another oppressed group: women. Excluded from full citizenship in the nation, women were already natural cosmopolitans and thus ideally suited to spread humanitarian ideals in the world.

Tristan not only promoted the benefits of cosmopolitanism, she also criticized the rise of nationalism in Europe. Returning to this narrative of a cosmopolitan awakening in an 1840 account of industrialization in England, London Promenades, she condemned English chauvinism and announced, "for a long time I have rejected . . . the spirit of nationality, a narrow, petty sentiment that can only engender evil." This denunciation of nationalism is certainly consistent with Tristan's image as a great socialist and internationalist. Yet it obscures a second narrative that she initiated in Peregrinations. In this narrative, rather than discovering the commonalities of oppression that united various peoples across the globe, her Peruvian experience led her to recognize her distinctive commitment to Europe and, specifically, to France.

Subscribing to an evolutionary view of history in which Europe represented the peak of civilization, she documented instances of French influence in Peru as a way to gauge the country's status on the ladder of progress and concluded that, in civilization, Peru still lagged far behind Europe. Yet not all the nations of Europe were equally civilized

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in Tristan's eyes. In particular, she sought to defend France's role as leader of liberal ideals in Europe against the liberal and humanitarian claims of England. This nationalist narrative runs throughout Tristan's later work, where it was manifested as a fierce Anglophobia and a strong commitment to rebuilding French prestige in the decades after the country's defeat in 1815.

In this article, I analyze the tensions between Tristan's cosmopolitan and nationalist commitments as a way of exploring the possibilities for female political engagement in the nineteenth century. When women were defined as naturally unsuited for politics, as incapable of embodying the transparency, disinterestedness, and universality on which republican citizenship was based, how could they imagine themselves as political agents? In different ways, both cosmopolitanism and nationalism allowed Tristan to claim political agency by giving her sanctioned positions from which to speak about politics. By embracing cosmopolitanism, she imagined herself as a universal subject who was not bound by the limitations of patriotic loyalty and could thus speak for all humanity. She claimed that as a universal subject she best embodied the qualities of transparency and disinterestedness, and she thus challenged the idea that women were naturally unsuited for politics. Yet despite her attempts to imagine herself as a citizen of the world, Tristan never abandoned her deep commitment to France. Through nationalism, then, she identified with France's mission of spreading revolutionary ideals, which she believed justified her

right to evaluate the progress of liberal political movements in other nations.\(^6\)

While historians have largely accepted Tristan's status as an internationalist, most have tended to dismiss any suggestion that she was nationalist. Her scathing portrayal of the English, for example, has been explained as part of her socialist critique of the oppression of workers in all countries or as a reaction against English chauvinism and xenophobia rather than as indicative of any deeper Anglophobia.\(^7\) Such hesitancy to recognize Tristan's nationalist tendencies attests to her success in representing herself as a citizen of the world. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism – a commitment to the nation and to humanity – were not inherently incompatible. Indeed, the two were fundamentally linked in this period, as cosmopolitanism helped the French formulate an identity for themselves as disinterested humanitarians who had a unique mission to spread freedom in the world. Yet cosmopolitanism and nationalism also came into conflict for Tristan. On the one hand, she condemned national loyalties as a threat to the socialist project of breaking down national boundaries. Yet on the other hand, there were also limits to her cosmopolitanism, as she herself expressed chauvinistic views of other countries and was concerned about the dangers posed by foreigners in France. How did she negotiate between these cosmopolitan and nationalist commitments in her writing?

Tristan began to formulate a cosmopolitan strategy in her first work, a pamphlet titled The Necessity of Giving a Warm Welcome to Foreign Women, published in 1835. Here, she drew

\(^6\) By nationalism, I mean not only a belief in the superiority of French civilization and a commitment to strengthening French power. I also mean, as David Bell has recently put it, "a political program which has as its goal not merely to praise, or defend, or strengthen a nation, but actively to construct one." David A. Bell, The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

on cosmopolitanism in two related ways. First, she described a process of cross-cultural engagement and exchange that brought to light the contributions of different countries and thereby helped the spread of civilization in the world. She praised travel in particular for promoting peaceful relations between nations. As different peoples came to recognize their common interests, she insisted, chauvinism would give way to cosmopolitanism:

My brothers, recant all odious rivalry, all egoism of family or nation . . . The limits of our love must not be the bushes that surround our garden . . . Henceforth, our patrie (native country) must be the univers . . . Let the difference of our costumes, of our mores . . . instead of being a motive for continual dispute and hatred, become a mutual school where each will draw perfection.\(^8\)

Through this cosmopolitan understanding of civilization, Tristan sought to craft a new role for women as mediators of cross-cultural exchange and, hence, as agents of civilization. Since women represented "that part of humanity which has received a mission to carry peace and love into the midst of societies," they were ideally suited to further cosmopolitan exchanges.\(^9\) Yet Tristan also used cosmopolitanism in a second, potentially more destabilizing way: by grounding women's right to participate in politics in their status as outsiders. By defining herself in cosmopolitan terms as a citizen of the world, not just of France, she rejected the notion that universality, disinterestedness, and transparency were exclusively masculine qualities and instead claimed these qualities as distinctively feminine.

In this pamphlet, Tristan focused on the plight of foreign women in France and on the difficulties faced by women travelers. Having herself traveled alone in France in order to escape her estranged husband and later in Peru in order to reclaim a family inheritance, Tristan revealed how single women were victimized by the double standards of the domestic ideal. Greeted with suspicion by hotel managers, they were

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\(^8\) Tristan, *Nécessité*, 83.
\(^9\) Ibid., 55-6.
overcharged and given the shabbiest rooms. Paris, she observed, was full of poor girls who had been seduced and abandoned and sought refuge in the anonymity of the bustling metropolis. Tristan defined these itinerant women, both French and non-French, as étrangères, or foreigners, and her pamphlet proposed concrete ways to help these displaced women. At the same time the étrangère also served as a metaphor for the condition of all women. By defining all women as foreigners, Tristan sought to highlight the larger sense in which oppressive social norms made women into outsiders.

She expanded this notion of women's outsider status in Peregrinations of a Pariah. Here, the pariah, whose social marginalization led her to wander the world in search of acceptance, represented a kind of accidental cosmopolitan. Tristan, whose mother was French and father was Spanish and Peruvian, often wrote that she felt she did not belong anywhere. Rather than letting her exclusion define her as only a victim, Tristan sought ways to transform her status as a pariah into something politically productive. Toward this goal, she used cosmopolitanism to imagine herself as a universal subject whose own experience of oppression and marginalization endowed her with those qualities that most defined the ideal liberal citizen: universality, transparency, and disinterestedness.

Traveling in South America, Tristan recounted, she met other women like her who had had their ambitions stifled by oppressive social norms. In Chile she stayed at the hotel of Madame Aubrit, another pariah who had also fled an unhappy marriage and found herself with no means of support. Tristan concluded that "the story of Madame Aubrit is that of thousands of women, like her outside of society, and who similarly have all the horrors of poverty and abandonment to suffer." Discovering that the subjection of women was universal, Tristan suggested that as one woman who had suffered, she might speak for all women: "It is thus not to myself personally that I wanted to draw attention, but rather to all women who find themselves in

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10 Tristan, Pérégrinations, 1:109.
the same position. . . . They feel the same tribulations and sufferings as I do."\(^{11}\)

For Tristan this claim to speak with a universal voice was not limited to exposing the oppressed condition of women. Rather, as a pariah who had suffered and witnessed the myriad sufferings of others, Tristan imagined her own oppression as indicative of a universal phenomenon. In *London Promenades*, for example, she focused on the subjection of other pariah groups, including prostitutes, convicts, Jews, and the Irish. She also brought the cosmopolitan strategy to bear on political problems at home. In *The Workers’ Union*, she called on French workers to organize themselves in order to have their political and social demands recognized. Since the oppression of the working classes transcended national boundaries, cosmopolitanism had the potential to raise workers out of their misery. She thus proposed not only that the workers' union be international in scope but also that workers in one nation should borrow from the strategies employed by workers in other nations. While she used the English example to warn French workers of the dangers of failing to unionize, she also held up the Irish workers’ movement as a model for the French. \(^{12}\)

Tristan thus claimed her role as leader of the working class by defining herself as a universal subject who spoke for all oppressed peoples. In so doing, she also sought to undermine conventional assumptions that women were unsuited for political participation because they did not embody transparency and disinterestedness. In the logic of republican citizenship, the supposed duplicity and self-interestedness of women served as a foil to confirm men's capacity for transparency and disinterestedness. \(^{13}\) In order to demonstrate her own capacity for

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 1:14.


\(^{13}\) On the ways in which the discourse of transparency was bound up with revolutionaries’ ideas about sexual difference, see Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 96-8; and Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes*
citizenship, then, Tristan sought to endow herself with the virtue of transparency, which she managed by displacing the duplicity conventionally associated with women onto other individuals and groups. For example, she contrasted her extreme naïveté with the craftiness of her Peruvian relatives. After being outmaneuvered by her uncle in the dispute over her inheritance, Tristan confessed that she had been his "dupe." In her view, such naïveté suggested not foolishness but rather firmness of character: "My great frankness could not make me imagine any sympathy for people like my uncle . . . who, having no other motives than ambition and cupidity, molded their flexible character according to their interest. . . . Mine was not so easily contorted."14 Using Peruvians as a foil, Tristan also claimed her capacity for disinterestedness by contrasting her own struggles to find a political role and her fears of being corrupted by ambition with the greed displayed by Peruvian men who used politics only to further their own interests. Of the politicians she heard while visiting the congress in Lima, she noted, "Virtue colors the speeches, but the vilest egoism shows itself in acts."15

This Peruvian corruption was reflected for Tristan in the country's political turmoil. In January 1834, during her visit, civil war broke out. Since her family was wealthy and well connected, she had ample opportunity to observe the political maneuverings up close. As each side began to levy money from property owners, Tristan was surprised that the Peruvians put up with such extortion "without having the courage to free themselves."16 Having no genuine political principles, Peruvian men fought for their military leaders, who paid them by pillaging their countrymen. In Peregrinations, Tristan presented herself not

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14 Tristan, Pérégrinations, 2:18.
15 Ibid., 2:147.
16 Ibid., 2:44.
merely as a passive observer of the civil war but as an active participant in it. In the absence of any men led by true patriotism or liberal political principles, Tristan imagined the unique revolutionary expertise she, as a French woman, might bring to bear on Peru's political turmoil. As she noted, "I had witnessed the July Days in 1830, but then I was exalted by the heroism of the people and did not think of danger; in Aréquipa, I saw only the misfortunes with which the city was threatened."\textsuperscript{17} Throughout the war, her uncle Pio and her cousin Althaus, who had fought in Europe during the Napoleonic wars, provided her with information about the troops' movements. In turn, they recognized her political savvy and often came to her for advice. Even the generals, she claimed, valued her opinion. Armed with all this information and at the center of events, Tristan declared herself to be "the best informed [person] in the country."\textsuperscript{18}

In her eyes, the Peruvians should be measured against the patriotic, disinterested actions of French revolutionaries and could never quite measure up. As a French subject who had witnessed revolution, Tristan suggested, she could provide guidance for the Peruvians. Identifying with France and the revolutionary tradition thus gave her a new way to imagine herself as a political agent. Yet despite the supposedly universal underpinnings of revolutionary ideals, Tristan also used these ideals to define herself against those nations she felt did not yet embody liberal principles as fully as France did. In so doing, she sought to re-claim France's place as leader of liberal ideals in Europe, a place being challenged by France's oldest rival.

She presented her critique of England in \textit{London Promenades} as a disinterested, humanitarian attempt to reveal the dangers of industrialization. As the most industrialized state in the world, England could serve as a warning to workers in all nations, she argued. Since most travelers did not bother to venture into the poorer quarters and thus usually praised the country's wealth and liberal political institutions, she predicted

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 2:98-9.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 2:36.
that she would be accused of wanting to slander England out of national rivalry. In order to protect herself from the charge of chauvinism, Tristan made every effort to situate her critique in cosmopolitan terms as a condemnation of the rise of nationalism in Europe. In England, she suggested, this nationalist tendency was particularly marked: "In England, patriotism is only a spirit of rivalry; it consists not in love of fellow man, but in the pretension to prevail over all nations."¹⁹ Their competitiveness, she argued, led the English to collude in order to hide their faults and shortcomings. Through her own transparent, disinterested analysis, the truth of England would be revealed.

She made her critique through a series of Franco-English contrasts. While Parisians were "gay, communicative, frank, and brave," the English were "serious, unsociable, mistrustful, and timid."²⁰ She accused them of being slaves to custom and of expressing animosity toward those who thought for themselves. Such a critique of English conformity helped her highlight the French – and her own – respect for individuality and free will. It also worked to paint the English as dissemblers who concealed their true thoughts and motives behind the appearance of forthrightness and respectability. Just as she had contrasted her own capacity for transparency and disinterestedness against the duplicity and selfishness of Peruvians, here Tristan used England as a foil. In both cases, she detached the qualities of transparency and dissimulation from their association with men and women, respectively, and harnessed them to a contrast between France and Peru or England, thereby displacing a sexual binary with a national one.

The discrepancy between appearance and reality in England was nowhere more apparent for Tristan than in the oppression of the English working class. She argued that England's much vaunted industrial success had come on the backs of English workers, whose condition had worsened while the aristocracy and merchant class grew rich. Though the English had abolished

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¹⁹ Tristan, Promenades, 131.
²⁰ Ibid., 26.
slavery, Tristan contended that a new form had arisen in its place: that of the working class. She also applied this slavery analogy to critiquing the English custom of providing women with only a trivial education and giving married women no control over their property. Overlooking the fact that the same critique could be made of the condition of women in France, Tristan maintained that French women had a much more active and satisfying life than their English counterparts.

For Tristan, the oppression of workers and women revealed English liberalism to be a sham, an elaborate cover for England's pursuit of wealth and world dominance. The clearest example of English duplicity in this respect, she contended, was abolitionism. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in 1833 were designed merely to further English economic interests, she charged. By abolishing slavery and pursuing other countries that engaged in it, the English sought to impair the development of agriculture in the French West Indies while ensuring themselves a good price on products from their own colonies. Despite emancipation, the condition of former black slaves had not improved but had worsened, so that it was now equivalent to that of English proletarians. Given the hypocrisy of their abolitionism, Tristan asked, could the English really claim to embody liberal values?

As she astutely recognized, abolitionism helped the English define themselves as liberal and humanitarian, particularly in contrast to France, which had reintroduced slavery in 1802. Thus, while demonstrating that English liberalism was a sham, Tristan also sought to recuperate French prestige and to defend France's own liberal credentials. Toward this goal, she offered a reinterpretation of Waterloo. While the British held up that victory as a symbol of their power and of the decline of France, Waterloo had in fact, she declared, helped secure "the liberties of the peoples of Europe and of the entire world."\(^\text{21}\) By defeating Napoleon, the British and other European powers had actually guaranteed that revolutionary ideals would be able to flower in a

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 167.
Europe now free of a despotic emperor. She concluded that in 1814 and 1815 the peoples of Europe fought against despotism and not against France. In this attempted rehabilitation of French prestige, Tristan expressed the same nationalistic tendencies and desire for leadership in Europe of which she had accused Britain. Moreover, she seemed to recognize that the French Revolution she so admired had not only advanced cosmopolitanism but also introduced nationalism in Europe: "Under Napoleonic despotism, secret societies sought to revive ancient nationalities; for people aspired to separate themselves from that French Revolution that Napoleon had dishonored!" By viewing Napoleon as a complete aberration of the Revolution, Tristan sought to wipe away the Revolution's nationalistic excesses, which contradicted, or at least complicated, the notion of the Revolution as a cosmopolitan moment that ushered in liberty for all of Europe. If Waterloo had secured the triumph of liberty, even if it necessitated the defeat of France, 1830 represented the possibility for France to regain its position as leader of liberal ideals in Europe. After 1815, she recounted, nations such as Germany and Italy saw nationalism as the only means of gaining their freedom. But their animosity towards France vanished when they witnessed the Revolution of July 1830 for "in that revolution [they] saw the rehabilitation of the first, and from then on all these societies abandoned narrow parochialism and embraced union with enthusiasm."

For Tristan, the regeneration of French power required not only defense of France's liberal credentials against England; it also necessitated the emancipation of the French working class. Since workers were those who "feed and enrich the nation and constitute its true power," the project of organizing workers would also strengthen the nation. In turn, because she conceptualized French national identity in terms of the universal ideals of the Revolution, regenerating French power would result in the emancipation of workers not only in France but in all

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22 Ibid., 169.
23 Tristan, *Workers' Union*, 41.
nations. Yet as she traveled through the French provinces to promote workers' rights, she did not discover an enlightened working class worthy of its duty to lead this movement. Instead, she complained of finding an ignorant, backwards population, skeptical of her proposals and with little awareness of the interests binding all French workers together. Most of them took no interest in politics, were ignorant of the socialist movement, and cared little for what happened outside their town. Retreating into a petty provincialism, then, French workers had little sense of belonging to a larger, national entity.

The most potent symbol of this disunity, she suggested, was France's linguistic diversity. In Marseille, she complained that the people spoke such abominable French that foreigners there must have thought themselves in another country. The continued existence of regional tongues threatened not only workers' solidarity, she argued, but the entire revolutionary project of constructing the French nation. She praised the Convention's efforts to strengthen national unity by establishing schools that would teach students a common language and complained that no government since then had taken up this important task. This linguistic variation was ultimately damaging to the workers' cause, she suggested, for the path to emancipation lay in strengthening national unity. Conversely, the nation would be lost if it did not emancipate workers and give them a political education. If the project of workers' rights was abandoned, she argued, France "would fall even lower than England, which has external resources – lower than Spain [and] Italy, who have soil resources – lower than any other people – for the French nation can only keep itself grand, rich, beautiful, [and] imposing through the people."²⁴

Tristan expressed concern not only about threats to national unity from within – workers who spoke patois instead of French – but also those who endangered the coherence of French

national identity from outside. Of the cosmopolitan city of Marseille, composed of peoples from throughout the Mediterranean, Tristan declared, "this city is not French." She decried the presence of Jews and Oriental "pashas" who brought their harems and their debased morals with them. If it was up to her, she proclaimed, she would chase these "barbarians" from France.\(^\text{25}\) One might have expected Tristan to praise Marseille as a model cosmopolitan city and to hold up its multi-national population as an example of the kinds of cross-cultural exchanges she had earlier promoted as essential to civilization. Instead her visit to Marseille revealed the limits of her cosmopolitan tolerance.

Was cosmopolitanism then only an elaborate cover for Tristan's chauvinistic tendencies? Believing in the superiority of the French nation, did she profess cosmopolitan views merely to conceal her designs for French dominance in the world, much as she had accused Britain of doing? In an important sense, Tristan saw no contradiction between her commitments to France and to the world because she believed France's revolutionary legacy endowed it with the unique ability to speak for humanity. During the Revolution, she observed, "our victorious armies . . . established close relationships everywhere, and taught peoples to get to know each other, to no longer despise each other as in the past, and to profit from their mutual knowledge."\(^\text{26}\) By emphasizing France's cosmopolitan credentials, Tristan struggled to reclaim France's place as leader of liberal ideals in Europe, while also seeking to reduce the dangerous effects of emerging nationalisms that had so recently led to war. Yet she consistently displaced the threat nationalism posed to European peace from France to England. If she condemned England, she explained, it was only because that country's chauvinistic quest for world dominance threatened any possibility of peace. Her attempt to frame her condemnation of Britain in cosmopolitan terms was belied by her fierce defense of French interests. Indeed, she

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 2:60.

\(^{26}\) Tristan, Nécessité, 68.
rallied her cosmopolitanism to distinctly nationalist ends: by defining English patriotism as a "bad" form of nationalism, as narrow, chauvinistic, and self-serving, in contrast to the universal, cosmopolitan, and humanitarian ideals of France, she sought to regenerate French prestige. In the end, she was never able completely to reconcile her cosmopolitan and nationalist commitments. Although she attempted to see civilization in cosmopolitan terms, she always believed that France most embodied civilization and had a unique mission to spread civilization in the world. The liberal claims of other nations could only be self-interested and chauvinistic, for only France could truly blend cosmopolitan and national commitments.

Tristan's conflicting loyalties also suggest the difficulties women faced in their struggles for political agency. On the one hand, cosmopolitanism, particularly in the form of the pariah, allowed her to reveal the social marginalization of women and to define herself as a universal subject who could speak for all oppressed groups. Yet by highlighting the universality of oppression, this strategy risked defining women only as victims. Thus, in her attempts to define herself as an agent, Tristan often resorted to chauvinistic views of other countries. By using England and Peru as foils with which to define her own capacity for citizenship, she managed to displace a sexual binary, in which men's agency was defined against women's lack of it, with national binaries, in which transparency, disinterestedness, and universality were uniquely French qualities that Tristan possessed as a French subject. Cosmopolitanism and nationalism thus reveal both the possibilities and limitations women faced in their attempts to imagine themselves as political agents.