

“Calm, with a Grave and Serious Temperament, rather Male”: French Marxism, Gender and Feminism, 1882–1905

ROBERT STUART

Summary: This article argues that historians have underestimated the importance and complexity of Marxists' engagement with feminism during the introduction of their doctrine into the French socialist movement before the First World War. It examines the ideological discourse of the Parti Ouvrier Français, the embodiment of Marxism in France from 1882 to 1905, in order to reveal the ambiguities and contradictions of the French Marxists' approach to the “woman question” – seeking to explicate the puzzling coincidence in the movement's rhetoric of a firmly feminist commitment to women's rights with an equally intransigent hostility to organized feminism.

Aline Valette was not one of those all too common women who charge into the socialist fray accumulating notoriety with their eccentricities and vulgar violence. She was very level-headed, very calm, with a grave and serious temperament, rather *male*.

Anonymous, “Les Obsèques d'Aline Valette”,
Le Socialiste, 2 April 1899
(stress in the original)

Poor Valette! After years of dedicated service to the cause of French Marxism, her movement's official newspaper could find no better eulogy than to praise her as masculine. Yet the deceased Permanent Secretary of the Parti Ouvrier Français had achieved one of the most ambitious late nineteenth-century syntheses of socialism and “sexualism” (her term for feminism¹) – a synthesis demonstrating that the feminine enjoyed an elective affinity with the socialist, that women's labour as both maternal females and exploited workers entitled them to pride of place in the

¹ Our terminology of “feminist”, “socialist-feminist”, and “radical-feminist” is anachronistic for the period, but will be used in the same way that historians refer to Gracchus Babeuf as a socialist, although that neo-Jacobin revolutionary lived well before the term achieved currency.

Labour movement.² Respected, even loved,³ by her comrades, the long-time (and sole female) member of the POF's National Council none the less had obviously failed to make her point by the time she finally succumbed to tuberculosis in 1899. Valette's paternalist and patronizing memorial notice exposes a chronic ideological disability that has afflicted Marxism throughout the doctrine's history, and that has undoubtedly contributed to Marxist socialism's recent and possibly terminal agonies.⁴

Gender, the identity founded upon "modes of reproduction", cuts across and potentially contradicts the class identities founded upon "modes of production", thereby posing a fundamental challenge to the class-oriented Marxist project. Exemplifying this challenge, many feminists have asserted the priority of the "reproductive" order over the economic regime. Tracing the logic of this assertion, they have advocated a female solidarity uniting proletarian and propertied women in a common struggle for sexual liberation, a struggle waged against patriarchy in all its guises, whether capitalist or socialist, bourgeois or working-class. The ideological legacies of Marx and Wollstonecraft have none the less occasionally reinforced each other during those moments when the liberation of labour and women's liberation, socialism and feminism, have united in relative harmony. Yet the marriage of Marxism and feminism, however passionate its consummation, has usually ended unhappily, with neither partner willing to surrender theoretical priority or practical dominance. From the time of Marx (himself a typical Victorian

² For "sexualism", see A. Valette (with Dr Z), *Socialisme et Sexualisme* (Paris, 1893). "Dr Z" – Pierre Bonnier – may have played the predominant role in developing "sexualisme" as a coherent doctrine. See M. Boxer, "French Socialism, Feminism and the Family", *Third Republic/Troisième République*, 3–4 (1977), p. 139. For Valette's feminism, see also her *Cahier des Doléances Féminines* (Paris, 1893) and her short-lived (15 October 1892–8 July 1893) newspaper *L'Harmonie Sociale: Organe des Droits et des Intérêts Féminins*. For a vitriolic critique of "sexualisme", see L. Klejman and F. Rochefort, *L'Égalité en Marche: Le Féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1989), pp. 91–93. There are useful accounts of Valette's career and thought in Boxer, "French Socialism, Feminism and the Family", pp. 145–148; M. Boxer, "Socialism Faces Feminism: The Failure of Synthesis in France", in M. Boxer and J. Quataert (eds), *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1978), pp. 87–91; and, above all, in C. Sowerwine, *Les Femmes et le Socialisme* (Paris, 1978), pp. 52–64. None the less, Valette's tragically shortened career undoubtedly deserves more extended treatment.

³ Loved in every sense, perhaps. Claude Willard alleges that Valette became the mistress of Jules Guesde – the leader of her party, although Willard provides no evidence or reference to a source (police reports of the time often made this allegation, but are malicious and inaccurate on such personal gossip). C. Willard, *Jules Guesde: L'Apôtre et la Loi* (Paris, 1991), p. 75.

⁴ That feminism's assertion of gender difference has been the most subversive force in the current conceptual crisis of Marxism is well argued in S. Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Difference", in A. Phillips (ed.), *Feminism and Equality* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 163–164.

patriarch⁵) to the feminism of today's "new social movements" (supposed successors to the failed "old cause" of the proletariat⁶), "reproductive" identities have troubled Marxist theorists, distracted labour militants, and disrupted socialist solidarity.

Marxists have certainly not ignored the conceptual intersection linking theories of gender hierarchy to their theory of class conflict, nor have they disregarded the political antagonisms that have sundered feminists from socialists. The "woman question" has evoked an astonishing range of answers from within the Marxist tradition. At one extreme, Marxists, blind to all but class and class conflict, have reduced male and female identities to mere epiphenomena of the mode of production.⁷ Viewed from this reductionist perspective, feminism appears as a time-wasting diversion from the class war and feminists as treacherous guides leading workers up ideological blind-alleys. At the other extreme, Marxists, once having become self-critical of their ingrained class-reductionism, have recognized gender as an independent determinant of social hierarchy.⁸

⁵ Good criticisms of the neglect of reproductive issues in Marx's own thought and the consequences of this absence for Marxism may be found in H. Benenson, "Victorian Sexual Ideology and Marx's Theory of the Working Class", *International Labor and Working Class History*, 25 (1984), pp. 1-23 (see also the critiques of Benenson in this and subsequent issues, with Benenson's reply); L. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, 1983), chs 4-6; and R. McDonough and R. Harrison, "Patriarchy and Relations of Production", in A. Kuhn and A. Wolpe (eds), *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London, 1978), pp. 27-30.

⁶ For an influential instance of this "post-Marxism", see C. Mouffe and E. Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985), particularly pp. 22-23.

⁷ The unfortunate implications of this position were classically demonstrated by Juliet Mitchell in her path-breaking manifesto of second-wave socialist feminism, "Women: The Longest Revolution", *New Left Review*, 40 (1966), pp. 11-37. For more recent socialist-feminist analyses of this issue, see H. Hartmann and B. Robinson, "Women and Class Consciousness: A Proposal for the Dialectical Study of Class Consciousness", *Insurgent Sociologist*, 8 (1979), pp. 44-51; M. O'Brien, "Reproducing Marxist Man", in L. Clark and L. Lange (eds), *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 99-116; and W. Seccombe, "Domestic Labor and the Working-Class Household", in B. Fox (ed.), *Hidden in the Household: Women's Domestic Labor under Capitalism* (Toronto, 1980), p. 37.

⁸ H. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism", in L. Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston, 1981), pp. 1-41 (see also the other contributions to this collection) and A. Kuhn and A. Wolpe, "Feminism and Materialism", in Kuhn and Wolpe, *Feminism and Materialism*, p. 8. For a particularly sophisticated integration of class and gender, see L. Nicholson, "Feminism and Marxism: Integrating Kinship with the Economic", in S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (eds), *Feminism as Critique* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 25-26. This issue is illuminated with specific reference to French Marxism in P. Hilden's "Class and Gender: Conflicting Components of Women's Behaviour in the Textile Mills of Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing 1880-1914", *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), p. 361 and in her considerably more

Viewed from this more pluralist perspective, feminism's struggle for women's liberation complements socialism's battle for the liberation of labour, campaigns supposedly inseparable in their common assault upon exploitation and domination. Such pluralism, however, has rarely attracted Marxist ideologues. Recognition of the "relative autonomy" of gender dramatically reduces the polemical force of the Marxist paradigm. Once socialists have accepted patriarchy as a malignant power in its own right, once socialism has fully assimilated the feminist project, once gender equality has been accepted as a good in itself – then the property system loses its primacy as the sole origin of oppression, labour loses its legitimacy as the sole agent of liberation, and socialism loses its grandeur as the sole hope for a better future.⁹ Marxism – once conceived as merely another rhetoric of emancipation among many others, and not necessarily as the most compelling – loses its world-historical import and reluctantly retreats towards the insignificant margins of the modern political consciousness.

The Parti Ouvrier Français embodied a particularly intriguing instance of these Marxist quandaries. Between its founding in 1882 and its merger into the SFIO in 1905, the POF owned a self-defined monopoly on institutional Marxism in France, fanatically asserting its doctrine against the hostility of the liberal state, against the resistance of more traditional French radicals, and, frequently, against the incomprehension of the French working class.¹⁰ Guided by Jules Guesde, one of the greatest orators of nineteenth-century France (hence the term "Guesdist" applied to his party's militants), the Parti Ouvrier untiringly diffused its revolutionary catechism of capitalism's coming apocalyptic end, of the messianic mission of the working class, and of the proletariat's ultimate and inevitable entry into the heavenly city of socialism. As the POF soared from its original status as a minor sect to a starring role in the French political culture, the party encountered the "woman question" – an

problematic *Working Women and Socialist Politics in France 1880–1914: A Regional Study* (Oxford, 1986), p. 215. For a critique of this work, see D. Reid, "Histoire des Femmes ou Histoire de la Famille", *Mouvement Social*, 152 (1990), pp. 61–76.

⁹ For sophisticated examples of the interpenetration of Marxist and feminist theory which illustrate this blunting of socialist polemical force, see P. Connelly, "On Marxism and Feminism", *Studies in Political Economy*, 12 (1983), pp. 153–161; P. Armstrong and H. Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism", in R. Hamilton and M. Barrett (eds), *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism, and Nationalism* (London, 1986), pp. 208–237; A. Ferguson and N. Folbre, "The Unhappy Marriage of Patriarchy and Capitalism", in Sargent, *Women and Revolution*, pp. 311–329; and J. West, "Women, Sex, and Class", in Kuhn and Wolpe, *Feminism and Materialism*, pp. 220–253.

¹⁰ The definitive institutional history of the POF remains Claude Willard's magisterial *Le Mouvement Socialiste en France (1893–1905): Les Guesdistes* (Paris, 1965). For a detailed study of the Guesdists' ideological paradigm, see R. Stuart, *Marxism at Work: Ideology, Class, and French Socialism during the Third Republic* (Cambridge, 1992). Neither work devotes sufficient attention to issues of gender.

encounter that inevitably embroiled Guesdists in controversy with France's feminists.¹¹

Most studies of the relationship between socialism and feminism in France mention the Guesdists. Unfortunately, such studies usually understate the intricacy of the Parti Ouvrier's decades-long preoccupation with "la question de la femme", assuming that the movement simply subordinated women's liberation to the liberation of labour. In fact, the Guesdists' critique of gender hierarchy and their views on feminist militancy were far more intricate and interesting than the sterile dogmatism usually attributed to the Parti Ouvrier.¹² The Marxists¹³ of the POF have bequeathed to their historians a vast legacy of newspapers, pamphlets and more substantial works that richly reward "deconstruction" informed by recent feminist and "post-Marxist" critique. Such a dismantling of the Guesdists' rhetoric reveals contradictions and aporias of profound significance to both the Marxist ascendancy at the turn of the century and in our own post-Marxist era. Approached from this critical perspective, the Parti Ouvrier's encounter with "la question de la femme" is one of the most fascinating incidents in the history of ideological controversy.

Guesdists, at their sectarian extreme, would have preferred to ignore the "woman question" altogether, but could not. Biology may not have been destiny during the *Belle Époque*, but reproduction, in the seductive

¹¹ For this confrontation, see, above all, C. Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens? Women and Socialism in France Since 1876* (Cambridge, 1982 – the translation of *Les Femmes et le Socialisme*), pp. 54–66. See also Boxer, "Socialism Faces Feminism", p. 80 and P. Hilden, "Rewriting the History of Socialism: Working Women and the Parti Ouvrier Français", *European History Quarterly*, 17 (1987), pp. 285–306.

¹² The only significant attribution of diversity to the Parti Ouvrier's engagement with the women's question – Patricia Hilden's conviction in "Rewriting the History of Socialism" that the movement's feminist concerns of the 1880s virtually disappeared with the party's alleged conversion to electoralism in the 1890s – while plausible on the surface, is simply wrong. The electorate of the Third Republic may have been exclusively male, but the Parti Ouvrier believed that women exercised a decisive influence in electoral conflicts upon "their loved ones, fathers, husbands, and brothers". A. Valette, "Les Travailleuses et le Suffrage Administratif", *Le Socialiste*, 21 July 1895. The electoral fever of the 1890s, as the Parti Ouvrier revelled in its breakthrough into national prominence after the 1893 parliamentary elections, actually encouraged a Marxist interest in the female non-electorate. Certainly the Guesdists' national press during the mid-1890s was replete with references to women, many of them startlingly radical-feminist in tenor. Gender declined as an overt issue in *Le Socialiste*, not between 1893 and 1898, but during the Millerand Affair at the turn of the century, as the POF struggled for its ideological life against the electoralist "Ministerialism" associated with the great socialist tribune Jean Jaurès – an eclipse of the Marxist concern with gender which paradoxically coincided with the emergence of French feminism as a potent political presence in its own right, as described in C. Hause and A. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, 1984), ch. 2.

¹³ This usage should not be taken to imply that every member of the Parti Ouvrier was unequivocally Marxist, or that all French Marxists were Guesdists.

guise of sex roles or as the interminable imperatives of parenthood, determined the lives of French workers with a tyrannical rigour at least equivalent to that of capitalism. Women employees, in greater proportion than in any other capitalist society, swelled the ranks of the industrial working class, particularly in the textile centres of northern France where the POF recruited its big battalions. Unionists in the skilled trades of Paris and Lyon, determined to protect their (male) adherents from the influx of undoubtedly cheap and supposedly docile female labour that had already inundated textile towns such as Roubaix or Roanne, developed an acute allergy to female paid employment, adopting and adapting the potent bourgeois ideal of “la femme au foyer” (woman as homemaker).¹⁴ Restrictive reproductive practices within the proletarian family incited bourgeois paranoia about France’s declining birth-rate and supposed demographic decadence, thereby stimulating a contraceptive counter-attack by revolutionary syndicalists determined to restrict the availability of cannon-fodder to the French state and restrain the supply of factory-fodder to French capitalists. Finally, feminists, resolved to obtain equal rights for women within the “bourgeois” order, sharply questioned the Marxist ideal of universal liberation through socialist revolution, calling instead for working women to join their propertied sisters in a common struggle for civil rights. As for the proletarians who constituted the POF’s chosen constituency, they relied – whether as dependent children, as mothers and fathers, or as the incapacitated aged – upon fragile strategies of family survival whose internal contradictions and vulnerability to the capitalist labour market generated constant friction between children and their parents, between wives and husbands, and between the aged and their offspring – friction that wore away the proletarian solidarity necessary for socialist victory in the class war. Marxists, strategists in that war, necessarily detested this “permanent strife within the working-class family”.¹⁵ How did Guesdists comprehend this “permanent strife” – strife that divided worker from worker and occasionally united workers with bourgeois? How did Marxists of the POF answer this socialist version of “la question de la femme”?

Guesdist answers varied enormously, depending upon circumstances. At its least sectarian, the Parti Ouvrier adapted feminist rhetoric to its

¹⁴ For the Guesdists’ gendered understanding of the working class, see R. Stuart, “Gendered Labour in the Ideological Discourse of French Marxism: The Parti Ouvrier Français 1882–1905” (forthcoming in *Gender and History*), and for the movement’s contorted approach to reproduction, R. Stuart, “Sexuality, Maternity, and Socialism: French Marxism and the Family 1882–1905” (forthcoming).

¹⁵ P. Lafargue, “Les Révolutionnaires”, *Le Socialiste*, 20 May 1891. For the conflicts which engendered this concern, see L. Tilly, “Structure de l’Emploi, Travail des Femmes et Changement Démographique dans Deux Villes Industrielles: Anzin et Roubaix 1872–1906”, *Mouvement Social*, 105 (1978), pp. 33–58. There is a useful theoretical discussion of the ways in which capitalist development generates conflicts within working-class households in Armstrong and Armstrong, “Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex”, p. 218.

own purposes in a strategy which resembled that of August Bebel, whose vastly popular *Women under Socialism* ("profoundly conceptualized and documented", according to *Le Socialiste*¹⁶) undoubtedly influenced the party heavily, as the now unreadable book influenced socialists throughout the world in the decades before the First World War.¹⁷ Although frequently disoriented and dismayed by the endemic tensions that divided working men from proletarian women, Guesdists rarely forgot that an aspiration to gender egalitarianism had distinguished their movement ever since its origins in the 1870s. The devotion to female equality inscribed in the socialist historical record by Hubertine Auclert at the founding congress of the French political labour movement at Marseille in 1879 has been often remarked.¹⁸ As for the Guesdists' Party Programme, formulated by Guesde and Marx himself, it affirmed that "the emancipation of the producers is that of all human beings without distinctions of sex or race"¹⁹ – an affirmation repeatedly defended in the face of sometimes bewildered and occasionally hostile male audiences.²⁰ Women such as Louise Michel ("la grande citoyenne", as characterized by *Le Socialiste*²¹) and Paule Minck ("l'éloquente conférencière"²²) certainly played a prominent role in the early years of the Parti Ouvrier – regularly appearing with Guesde as full equals in their movement's rhetorical struggle to assert the workers' cause in the class war.²³

The Guesdists' overt commitment to gender equality sharply distinguished their movement from the reactionary "mutualists", champions of the patriarchal workshop. The POF explicitly disavowed the Proudhonian

¹⁶ "Bibliographie – *La Femme dans le Passé, le Présent et l'Avenir*", *Le Socialiste*, 20 May 1891.

¹⁷ For the impact of Bebel's book, see Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, pp. 96–103.

¹⁸ See the excellent discussion in M. Rebérioux *et al.*, "Hubertine Auclert et la Question des Femmes à l'Immortel Congrès (1879)", *Romantisme*, 13–14 (1976), pp. 123–142. There was, none the less, a fundamental incompatibility between Guesdist socialism and Auclert's feminism, as described in S. Hause, *Hubertine Auclert: The French Suffragette* (London, 1987), pp. 112–119.

¹⁹ For the programme as amended at the founding congress of the Marxist Parti Ouvrier at its Roanne Congress, see *L'Égalité*, 8 October 1882.

²⁰ See, for instance, the indomitable Paule Minck's rueful account of her difficulties, as described in "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Montpellier", *Le Socialiste*, 14 February 1892, although in this case she attributes her problems to the particularly chauvinist regional mentalities of the "méricidionaux".

²¹ "Mouvement Social – Limoges", *Le Socialiste*, 4 February 1888.

²² "Mouvement Social – Lormont", *Le Socialiste*, 4 February 1888 – among many other laudatory references to the two women in other issues of the 1887–1888 series of the newspaper.

²³ Minck's (often Mink in the literature on the period) role in the establishment of the POF is described in A. Dalotel, "Préface", to *Paule Minck: Communarde et Féministe 1839–1901* (Paris, 1981), pp. 25–29. The more general role of women is discussed in C. Sowerwine, "Women and the Origins of the French Socialist Party: A Neglected Contribution", *Third Republic/Troisième République*, 3–4 (1977), pp. 104–127.

misogyny traditionally characteristic of the French labour movement, scathingly denouncing Proudhon's notorious anti-feminist alternative of "housewife or harlot". "Nothing could be less valid than this famous option posed by [. . .] P.-J. Proudhon," Guesde angrily asserted. "If a woman is compelled to be a housewife, if she isn't able to survive outside the household, she has no alternative but harlotry."²⁴ The Parti Ouvrier prided itself on the women among its militants. Innumerable reports of socialist rallies in *L'Égalité* (the movement's first official newspaper) and *Le Socialiste* included self-congratulatory comments such as "something to emphasise: there were many women in attendance".²⁵ Guesde, in particular, championed female socialist militancy, maintaining that women "brought to the battle for liberty the enthusiasm, the passion [. . .] that have often been decisive".²⁶ He even equated women's subordination to men with workers' subordination to capitalists – the ultimate socialist concession to feminism.

Whatever superiority in strength one allows a man, and however well-paid his job may be, it's not possible to condemn a woman to be supported by him. Less than anyone, workers, whose civil and political liberation has allowed them to measure the myth of non-economic emancipation, may not desire the continuation of one sex's economic subordination to the other. That would be to make the woman the *proletarian* of the man, even without taking into account that all dignity would be thus stripped from such unfree sexual relations.²⁷

Paul Lafargue – co-leader of the Parti Ouvrier, Marx's son-in-law, and (allegedly) one of the least feminist Guesdists – himself maintained that

²⁴ J. Guesde, "La Femme et son Droit au Travail", *Le Socialiste*, 9 October 1898. The Guesdists explicitly denounced Proudhon's misogyny for "declaring that the woman is the eternal servant of man" – citing his "housewife or harlot" alternative as particularly damning. J. Guesde, untitled (page 3), *L'Égalité*, 19 February 1882. For the prevalence of Proudhonian misogyny within the non-Guesdist Left, see M.-H. Zylberberg-Hocquard, *Femmes et Féminisme dans le Mouvement Ouvrier Français* (Paris, 1981), pp. 170–174 and J. McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society 1870–1940* (New York, 1981), p. 13; while for the generally misogynist discursive regime of the period, see M. Angenot, "La Fin d'un Sexe: Le Discours sur les Femmes en 1889", *Romantisme*, 63 (1989), pp. 5–22.

²⁵ "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Amiens", *Le Socialiste*, 5 March 1893.

²⁶ Report of a speech by Guesde, "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Wattrelos", *Le Socialiste*, 12 March 1893. Charles Sowerwine, in his splendid *Sisters or Citizens?*, asserts (p. 56) that Guesde more or less abandoned these feminist commitments after his conversion to Marxist "economism". See also Sowerwine's linkage of this alleged abandonment of feminist commitment to Guesde's supposed Marxist rejection of any reformist strategy within capitalism. Sowerwine, "Women and the Origins of the French Socialist Party", p. 112. Guesde's references to the issue certainly declined during his later years, although this decline does not date from his "conversion to Marxism". Indeed, the movement as a whole devalued the issue in its final phase. There were twenty-seven major articles or women in *Le Socialiste* during 1893–1897, but only ten during 1898–1902.

²⁷ J. Guesde, "La Femme et son Droit au Travail", *Le Socialiste*, 9 October 1898 – one instance, among many, demonstrating that Guesde's feminist radicalism had not declined in intensity during the 1890s, whatever the decline in the frequency of its expression.

“women possess more energy and will than men do. It’s through women that we’ll attain Communism”.²⁸

For the POF in its most feminist mode, women, persevering and impassioned, made the best class warriors – a belief that exemplified a peculiar inverse sexism none the less firmly founded upon experience. Women militants could be militant indeed.²⁹ The Parti Ouvrier – refusing

²⁸ Report of a speech by Lafargue in *Le Courrier de Fourmies*, 19 April 1891, cited in J. Girault, “Une Opération de Diversion: L’Instruction du Procès Lafargue-Culine en 1891”, *Mouvement Social*, 66 (1969), p. 86. For the anti-feminist characterization of Lafargue, see Hilden, “Rewriting the History of Socialism”, pp. 285–306, and for a (rare) text which supports this interpretation, see P. Lafargue, “La Journée Légale de Travail Réduite à Huit Heures”, *L’Égalité*, 26 February 1882. In fact, Lafargue, like most Guesdists, never developed a stable approach to the women’s question – vacillating unpredictably between explicit feminism and implicit male chauvinism. His early feminism is emphasized in L. Derfler, *Paul Lafargue and the Founding of French Marxism* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 81. For his most emphatic statement of feminist commitment, however, see P. Lafargue, *La Question de la Femme* (Paris, 1904), where he actually argues for women’s physical and mental superiority to men, and derides his period’s common arguments for female inferiority, having particular fun with Lombroso’s argument that there were more male than female criminals! Hilden’s erroneous characterization of Lafargue is, unfortunately, being accepted into the historiography of Guesdism. See, for instance, Reid, “Histoire des Femmes ou Histoire de la Famille”, p. 65. It is worth noting that Lafargue’s attacks upon scientific misogyny were seconded by other Guesdists. See, for instance, Bonnier’s critique of Le Bon’s discussion of women’s smaller average brain size, where the Parti Ouvrier militant asserts that women’s brains are proportionally larger than those of men, given their smaller average body size. P.B., “La Revanche de la Fécondité”, *Le Socialiste*, 5 June 1886. The POF even sought scientific proof of women’s superiority over men, claiming that, “anatomically and physiologically, the female organic type is far more remote from inferior animality than is the masculine type”. Z., “À Propos de la Grève des Femmes”, *Le Socialiste*, 19 June 1892. For a critique of this trope, supposedly designed merely to shock males into greater militancy, see P. Hilden, “Women and the Labour Movement in France 1869–1914”, *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), p. 824.

²⁹ For intense female militancy during some strikes, see M. Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en Grève: France 1870–1890* (Paris, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 505–507. It has been suggested that women appeared more radical because they retained a certain “preindustrial” élan due to their exclusion from the political process and their lesser subjection to industrialism. For this argument in a French context, see R. Jonas, “Equality in Difference? Patterns of Feminine Labor Militancy in Nineteenth-Century France”, *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 15 (1988), pp. 291–299, particularly p. 297; M. Perrot, “La Femme Populaire Rebelle”, in C. Dufrancatel et al., *L’Histoire sans Qualités* (Paris, 1979), p. 129; and for a more general statement, G. Beck and B. Duden, “Labor of Love – Love as Labor: On the Genesis of Housework in Capitalism”, in E. Altbach (ed.), *From Feminism to Liberation* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), pp. 161–162. There was nothing new about revolutionary ferment among French women, of course. For a Guesdist description of the French tradition of female popular revolt, with particular reference to 1789 and 1871, see H. Ghesquière, *La Femme et le Socialisme* (Lille, 1898), pp. 13–14. Perrot and Jonas’s argument about the “preindustrial” and “prepolitical” nature of female militancy is unconvincing, however, as industrialized and enfranchised male workers actually used all the supposedly “preindustrial” modes of protest allegedly specific to women, while women workers’ industrial militancy usually paralleled that of their male relatives,

to discriminate against potential socialists on any ground, whether of religion, race, nationality, or gender – enthusiastically recruited both men and women to its revolutionary crusade, in which “women would cease to be babes and dollies, instead becoming true companions of their men, sharing their labours, enduring their fatigue, and braving their dangers”.³⁰ Guesdists even concluded that the long-awaited revolution would never arrive without women’s involvement in the struggle for its attainment. According to the POF, “so long as the socialist movement is not supported by female workers, it will lack one of its arms, it will lack what it needs to achieve its definitive triumph”.³¹ At the party’s most feminist extreme, Guesdists sometimes described socialism itself as the victory of the fertile feminine principle over sterile masculinity.³² No wonder embodied socialism so frequently appeared as a woman in Guesdist iconography.³³

Yet this apparently feminist vision concealed troubling ambiguities. When *Le Socialiste* reported that “the delegates from the POF at the Congress [. . .] numbered 276, including 14 women”,³⁴ which aspect of the assertion should claim the historian’s attention: the newspaper’s proud enumeration of female delegates, or the admission that men outnumbered women twenty to one? Conceivably, the Guesdists’ singling out of women militants itself belied the Parti Ouvrier’s self-proclaimed blindness to gender differentiation. The sex of male Guesdists mentioned in *Le Socialiste* must be deduced from their names; *female* Guesdists, by contrast, are usually identified as such, their sex highlighted in ways never deemed appropriate for men. Worse yet, an unconscious but all-pervasive “sexism” recurred in the Guesdists’ discourse, however well-intentioned its overt conception of gender hierarchy. Although women’s presence at rallies was repeatedly and proudly recounted in the Parti Ouvrier press, they none the less usually featured in auxiliary roles, being urged to “support their husbands and fathers in their just

according to Zylberberg-Hocquard, *Femmes et Féminisme dans le Mouvement Ouvrier Français*, p. 116.

³⁰ Anonymous, “La Question de la Femme”, *Le Socialiste*, 30 October 1886.

³¹ B., “Mouvement Féminin”, *Le Socialiste*, 20 August 1893.

³² Dr Z., “À Près la Question Sociale”, *Le Socialiste*, 3 June 1891. The metaphor of sterility was repeatedly used by Bonnier, to considerable effect: “For centuries, men have lived only for themselves [. . .] What could be more sterile than our masculine past? What could be more repugnant, less truly human than the ‘masculinity’ which pervades our time, the infertility, the casuistry in art and thought, the unbelievable smugness of that half of humanity which claims so much and declaims so loudly, yet produces so little!” Dr Z., “Sexualisme”, *Le Socialiste*, 17 June 1891.

³³ Workers, however, were almost always portrayed as male. For the power of female imagery in nineteenth-century iconography, see M. Perrot, “Women, Power and History”, in M. Perrot (ed.), *Writing Women’s History* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 170–171.

³⁴ Anonymous, “Le Parti Ouvrier au Congrès Général des Organisations Socialistes”, *Le Socialiste*, 24–31 December 1899. Only 2 or 3 per cent of the Party’s membership was female, according to Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 362.

demands".³⁵ Indeed, women quite explicitly performed supporting parts during the POF's incessant political meetings, frequently appearing as entertainers, like the Charlet sisters of Beauvois, reported as having sung *Le Premier Mai* "with grace and exquisite charm"³⁶ at a gathering in June 1891.

As with Valette's unfortunate memorial notice, obituaries provide particularly damning instances of Guesdist paternalism. Commenting upon the funeral of "citizeness Guesde", for instance, *Le Socialiste* praised its editor's deceased wife with classic "separate spheres" rhetoric: "unlike so many other women, far from being an obstacle to the mission that [Jules Guesde] had imposed upon himself, far from attempting to turn him towards closer and more tangible goals, she always supported him with her sympathy and her encouragement. The devotion of the woman served the devotion of the man".³⁷ *Le Socialiste's* obituary-writers reduced even Louise Michel, the turbulent "red virgin" of the Commune, to feminine inconsequence:

The first renovators of the proletarian movement in France found her constantly at their sides as an assiduous and devoted collaborator [. . .] Is it necessary to again list her spirit of sacrifice, her always-ready charity, her zeal in caring for the suffering, in consoling misery, since her very name has become synonymous with such bounty?³⁸

Michel – as Guesdists, more than anyone, should have known – was herself one of the greatest "renovators" of modern socialism, no mere Lady Bountiful binding up the wounds of the class war.

When the Parti Ouvrier shifted its attention from the private domain to the world order, one of its few criticisms of French colonialism, otherwise rarely mentioned in *Le Socialiste*, included a horrified response to the killing of female warriors during the invasion of Dahomey, in sharp contrast to the POF's indifference to so many other "colonial atrocities [. . .] against men".³⁹ This kind-hearted but paternalist double-standard recurred monotonously in Guesdist polemic, with violence against women highlighted as a particularly atrocious instance of bourgeois oppression. Reporting a police assault upon a workers' gathering, for instance, the POF militant Bousquet furiously denounced the way in which the police had "brutalised women, lashing out without distinguishing between the sexes".⁴⁰ Such protective paternalism equated women with children in their dependency and need of protection, an equation of femininity and infancy that recurred with depressing

³⁵ "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Nantes", *Le Socialiste*, 26 March 1893.

³⁶ "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Beauvois", *Le Socialiste*, 3 June 1891.

³⁷ Anonymous, untitled obituary, *Le Socialiste*, 8 July 1900.

³⁸ "La Semaine – Louise Michel", *Le Socialiste*, 22–29 January 1905.

³⁹ "La Semaine", *Le Socialiste*, 16 October 1892.

⁴⁰ A. Bousquet, untitled, *Le Socialiste*, 9–16 March 1902.

frequency in Guesdist rhetoric. The Party reminded itself, for instance, to appeal to “women and children by amusing them”,⁴¹ while the organizers of a POF festival in Paris concluded that, although socialist propagandists had to address themselves to “the reason and consciousness of men”, they had to remember “that women [like children] responded to sentiment”⁴² – rhetorical advice that embodied the age-old equations of masculinity with rationality and femininity with emotion. In so far as Guesdists, impassioned advocates of dispassionate “scientific” socialism, valued reason and despised sentiment (supposedly characteristic of the superseded “utopian socialists”), this equation could only devalue the movement’s women. At the most fundamental level, Guesdist language was itself “male” – rationalistically crafted for a literate and knowledgeable audience at a time when working women received only the most rudimentary education; suffused with militarist metaphor when women lacked the French male’s conscript experience of organized violence; hymning the masculine code of justice rather than the feminine ethic of nurturance. All too frequently, Guesdist rhetoric implicitly identified the militant virtues with masculinity, and shameful passivity with femininity, as in the POF’s ironic characterization of the Duchess d’Uzès – the dynamo of virtually every anti-Republican cause during the *Fin de Siècle* – as “the only man of her Party”.⁴³

Despite their best intentions, most Guesdists manifested the ingrained patriarchal sentiments of their *époque*. Overtly paternalist rhetoric in their discourse ranged from apparently trivial “compliments”, such as the description of a meeting hall as “coquettishly ornamented by gracious and charming citoyennes”,⁴⁴ to the allegation that females, ignorant and irrational, were generally unaware of their own interests, so that Guesdists would have to “protect women against themselves”,⁴⁵ an instance of the most sinister and unanswerable rationale for male authority over females. Overall, Guesdist discourse, studied from the perspective of today’s feminist sensibility, conveys the overwhelming impression of well-intentioned men (and occasionally women) struggling, usually unsuccessfully, against an all-pervasive and inadequately understood mentality of hierarchical sexual difference.⁴⁶

Just as Marxist incomprehension of the conceptual intricacies and practical potency of religious faith and ethnic identity appears most

⁴¹ “Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Lille”, *Le Socialiste*, 30 December 1893.

⁴² “Le Parti Ouvrier – Paris”, *Le Socialiste*, 3 January 1897.

⁴³ B., “La Mère des Compagnons”, *Le Socialiste*, 18 March 1894.

⁴⁴ “Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Dordogne”, *Le Socialiste*, 5–12 November 1899.

⁴⁵ C. Bonnier, “Referendum”, *Le Socialiste*, 18 February 1900.

⁴⁶ There is the danger of anachronistic critique – and of self-satisfied contemporary arrogance – when assessing nineteenth-century gender mentalities. For a superb statement of the inevitable limitations which inhibited early socialists from perceiving reproductive relations as a potential realm of freedom equivalent to productive relations, see

starkly in the Parti Ouvrier's bemused response to Social Catholicism and National Socialism, so the Guesdists' vexed relationship with France's feminist movement most clearly illustrates the POF's profound discomfort with questions of gender.⁴⁷ In theory, Guesdists might have unconditionally seconded the French feminists, whose intense hostility to the Third Republic's exclusion of women from the polity apparently reinforced the POF's onslaught upon the regime's class exclusivity. From such a hypothetical "socialist-feminist" viewpoint, the bourgeois system would have been viewed as an amalgam of both patriarchal domination and economic exploitation – twin evils that strengthened each other and that would perish together on the day of liberation.⁴⁸ In practice, however, the Parti Ouvrier denounced the feminists, portraying them (in thoroughly sexist terms) as "complicating the class war" with "cat fights between women".⁴⁹ From this uncompromising perspective, feminists, rather than reinforcing the revolutionary cause, disrupted proletarian mobilization against capitalism. From the origins of the POF until its demise, the increasing importance of feminism in the French political culture profoundly disturbed Guesdists. Marxist hostility towards the hated Paul Brousse's feminist ideals, derided as "a fantasy" based upon "a fit of gallantry",⁵⁰ triggered, for instance, one of the lesser conflicts that defined the nascent POF, while the Parti Ouvrier, during its last years, ostentatiously distanced itself from the feminist renaissance of the early twentieth century. Throughout its turbulent history, the POF reviled feminism as a bourgeois concoction unfit for proletarian consumption.

None the less, however hostile they may have been to feminism as a distinct ideological alternative to socialism, Guesdists shared most of the aspirations characteristic of the French feminists. Assuming that the generalization of "bourgeois" rights served as a necessary precondition

M. O'Brien, "The Dialectic of Reproduction", *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3 (1978), p. 235.

⁴⁷ That Marxism cannot be excused from gender-awareness, given its coincidence with the rise of feminism, is argued in M. Barrett, "Marxist Feminism and the Work of Karl Marx", in A. Phillips, *Feminism and Equality* (Oxford, 1987), p. 44.

⁴⁸ For an argument that such a synthesis was the only way forward for French feminism of the period, see M. Albistur and D. Armogathe, *Histoire des Féminismes Français du Moyen Âge à Nos Jours* (Paris, 1978), p. 341, and, for the opposite perspective denouncing the socialist-feminist strand in France, see C. Fauré, *Le Démocratie sans les Femmes: Essai sur le Libéralisme en France* (Paris, 1985), pp. 10–21. There is a less vociferous discussion of this fraught relationship in Klejman and Rochefort, *L'Égalité en Marche*, pp. 210–211.

⁴⁹ "Le Parti Ouvrier en France", *Le Socialiste*, 10–17 November 1901.

⁵⁰ Unsigned and untitled (column 2, page 3), *L'Égalité*, 14 May 1882. For an incisive discussion of this conflict, see Charles Sowerwine's *Sisters or Citizens?*, pp. 36–41, as well as his "The Organisation of French Socialist Women 1880–1914: A European Perspective for Women's Movements", *Historical Reflections*, 3 (1976), p. 7 and "Women and the Origins of the French Socialist Party", pp. 117–127.

of successful socialist militancy, the Marxists of the POF logically endorsed full civic and political equality for women. When the Second International in 1891 ordered its constituent parties “energetically to affirm [. . .] the complete equality of both sexes and to demand for women the same civil and political rights as men, the abrogation of every law that includes her subordination, and equal pay for equal work”, the Parti Ouvrier proudly emphasized that its precocious 1880 Programme had already included a pledge to eliminate every law “establishing [. . .] *the inferiority of women vis-à-vis men*”.⁵¹ Obeying this founding precept, the Parti Ouvrier vociferously criticized the French legal system, not least in its institutionalization of extreme gender inequality. The Napoleonic Code, according to the POF, was a “monument to [misogynist] casuistry and male vanity”.⁵² Women would be liberated “not by its amendment” [as advocated by the predominantly moderate feminist movement], “but by its destruction”.⁵³ Guesdists even criticized such apparently minor (although in practice fundamental) aspects of gender inequality as the ordinance that wives take their husbands’ surname and that children take the name of their father.⁵⁴ Paul Lafargue – in his feminist guise – resembled Fourier (rather than the more restrained Marx and Engels) in maintaining that social backwardness was *caused* by (rather than being merely reflected in) female exclusion from civic life.⁵⁵ At their most radical, the Guesdists even presented women’s liberation as fully analogous to the liberation of labour. Women, Valette contended in fine radical-feminist style, “would have to assume responsibility for the necessary revolution, without depending upon men to resolve the sexual question, just as proletarians must count solely upon the proletariat to resolve the social question”.⁵⁶ She actually foreshadowed today’s radical-feminist assertion that women, all women, because of their gender oppression, constitute a distinct social class fully equivalent to the proletariat. “The word ‘proletarian’ [. . .] applied to women”, Valette declared, “is a synonym for double labour, double suffering, without even that demarcation that, for men, exists between proletarians and men of other classes. Women, all women, are proletarians”.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Anonymous, untitled (column 3, page 2), *Le Socialiste*, 26 August 1891 (stress in original).

⁵² Dr Z., “Le Juif et la Femme”, *Le Socialiste*, 10 July 1892.

⁵³ Bracke, “La Semaine”, *Le Socialiste*, 19–26 March 1905.

⁵⁴ Dr Z., “L’Adoption Nationale”, *Le Socialiste*, 8 September 1895.

⁵⁵ Lafargue, *La Question de la Femme*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Valette, *Socialisme et Sexualisme*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ A. Valette, “La Réunion de l’Hippodrome à Lille”, *Le Travailleur*, 16 May 1894, cited in Hilden, *Working Women and Socialist Politics in France*, p. 199. The classic statement of “women as exploited class” is C. Delphy, *The Main Enemy: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* (London, 1977). See the discussion in M. Barrett and M. McIntosh,

Guesdists, in common with other socialists and democrats, undoubtedly did worry that women – if enfranchised while still retaining their traditional religious faith and their “maternal” dread of social conflict – would deploy their newly-acquired civic equality against egalitarianism, reflexively voting for reaction rather than for revolution.⁵⁸ Women’s decorative irrelevancy in the bourgeois public sphere apparently inculcated a feminine mentality liable to exploitation by the ultra-conservative Church. “A woman, all too often abandoned to herself by her husband, seeks in the Church satisfactions that aren’t offered elsewhere”, reflected *Le Socialiste*. “Religious ceremony, the singing, the music are so many things that attract her and charm her. Beyond which, [religious occasions] are a chance for her to adorn herself, to achieve something”.⁵⁹ Guesdists, none the less, consistently championed female enfranchisement, arguing that, “in order to teach responsibility, to women as to men, it’s necessary to make them responsible for themselves and to others”.⁶⁰ Better yet (from a socialist perspective), Guesdists convinced themselves that political participation would, in the end, mobilize hitherto quiescent working-class women into the class war. Militants of the POF came to believe that “political action, to which [working women] will be drawn by [their] right to vote, will make [them] soldiers for our cause”.⁶¹ “We are not”, Guesdists repeatedly affirmed,

opposed to political rights for women, who couldn’t possibly in any case make worse use of such rights than most men have. Worker, employee, victim even more than the male worker himself of capitalist exploitation and oppression, woman will bring to militant socialism, at the same time as her vote, the enthusiasm, the passion that she puts into everything. If it depended upon the Parti Ouvrier, women would be *electors* tomorrow.⁶²

Nor did Guesdists limit their socialist suffragism to campaigning for inclusion of women in national electoral politics. The Parti Ouvrier also favoured, as a preliminary to reform of the national electorate, enfranchisement of women in municipal elections – always the POF’s most successfully contested political terrain – and in elections to the

“Christine Delphy: Towards a Materialist Feminism?”, *Feminist Review*, 1 (1979), pp. 95–106.

⁵⁸ Even as committed a socialist-feminist as Paule Minck initially opposed votes for women on such tactical grounds, although she later changed her mind. See A. Dalotel, “Préface”, pp. 23–24 and 30–31.

⁵⁹ Anonymous, “Le Congrès de Bernon”, *Le Socialiste*, 15 August 1894.

⁶⁰ A. Valette, “Dans l’Intérêt Général”, *Le Socialiste*, 22 September 1895.

⁶¹ P.-M. André, “Le Vote des Femmes”, *Le Socialiste*, 14–21 July 1901.

⁶² Anonymous, untitled (column 4, page 2), *Le Socialiste*, 15 February 1893 (stress in original). The piece continues, however, with an attack on the suffragette tactics of some Parisian feminists, with an explicit critique of Maria Deraisme (sic) – the period’s embodiment of French “bourgeois” feminism.

Conseils de Prud'hommes – the arbitration councils of such importance in the day-to-day working life of French proletarians.⁶³ Once politicized by the ballot box, working women, no longer enticed by suffragist red herrings, would supposedly redouble their socialist militancy.

Guesdists realized full well that extension of the vote to Frenchwomen was not likely any time soon. Pending *ouvrières'* inclusion in the electoral register, the Parti Ouvrier urged them to agitate unceasingly and vociferously in every election.⁶⁴ POF militants were acutely aware that even non-voting women could be electorally decisive – influencing their menfolk behind the scenes, intervening directly and tellingly during election campaigns, embodying the workers' cause even when unable to vote for it. Given this awareness, it should not surprise that attention to women's grievances actually increased in the POF's national press at the peak of the movement's electoral enthusiasm during the first half of the 1890s. "I call upon you," Lafargue pleaded, "you women citizens who suffer from the laws made by deputies chosen by your men, to teach them to vote intelligently. You have to concern yourselves with politics; you have to [. . .] make your husbands vote for workers and socialists."⁶⁵ The Gironde Federation of the Parti Ouvrier – a powerhouse of organizational innovation – even established an "Electoral League of Socialist Women" intended to enrol all women who "were aware of the class interest that they were above all and triply interested in defending: first as female proletarians, then as the wives and mothers of proletarians".⁶⁶ Guesdist mobilization of women behind the POF's electoral politics was sometimes surprisingly successful. In the Nord, for instance, the Party's *Comité des Femmes de Lille* served as a formidable socialist weapon against the conservative municipal government of that metropolis. The Committee vociferously denounced "bourgeois" councillors for spending tax money on diversions for the wealthy such as theatre subsidies while Lille refused to emulate Guesdist municipalities by furnishing services such as subsidized school meals for poor children⁶⁷ – a campaign that

⁶³ For the municipal electorate, see the argument in A. Valette, "Les Travailleuses et le Suffrage Administratif", *Le Socialiste*, 21 July 1895 – which contrasts France unfavourably to other nations which had already conferred the municipal vote upon women. And, for the Conseils de Prud'hommes, see Anonymous, "L'Ouvrière à la Chambre", *Le Socialiste*, 20 March 1892, which welcomes the belated granting of the vote to women for these bodies, but denounces their continued exclusion from the right to stand for office in the tribunals.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, the report of a speech by the Guesdist leader Delory on "l'émancipation de la femme" in "Parti Ouvrier en France – Wattrelos", *Le Socialiste*, 3 June 1893.

⁶⁵ "Discours de Citoyen Lafargue – Le Congrès des Ouvrières et Ouvriers des Manufactures de Tabac", *Le Socialiste*, 18 December 1892.

⁶⁶ "Fédération Girondine – XIVe Congrès Départemental à Bordeaux, le 9 mars 1902", *Le Socialiste*, 23–30 March 1902.

⁶⁷ "Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Lille", *Le Socialiste*, 9 January 1893.

surely contributed to the eventual Parti Ouvrier electoral victory in the great textile city.

The POF, none the less, identified itself as a working-class socialist movement dedicated to the liberation of labour. This dedication inevitably devalued feminist themes in the party's electoral discourse. The Parti Ouvrier, for instance, devoted far more effort to obtaining a securely secret ballot in parliamentary elections – a reform of immediate utility to the movement's working-class male constituency, subjected as workers were to their employers' political coercion – than to campaigning for women's suffrage. At their most oblivious, Guesdists all too often wrote as if France actually *had* enjoyed universal suffrage since 1848, as if universal *male* suffrage actually was universal.⁶⁸ When POF parliamentarians introduced a law into the Chamber of Deputies designed to “ensure the universality of our so-called universal suffrage”, they actually intended to eliminate residency requirements for the already enfranchised male electorate!⁶⁹ Nor was this Guesdist indifference to women's enfranchisement mere thoughtlessness. Guesdists explicitly attacked France's suffragette movement, and intensely disliked the feminists who articulated its militancy. Why did the Parti Ouvrier scorn the feminists and deride the suffragettes – activists the triumph of whose cause promised a redoubling of the proletarian electoral army?

At the most basic level, the POF's rather simplistic economic determinism convinced Guesdists that political reforms such as extension of the suffrage to women were necessarily secondary to social revolution, and that the condition of women could not be significantly improved prior to socialist transformation of the economic order. The Parti Ouvrier depicted feminism itself as the ineluctable outcome of socio-economic mutation. “It's not through some transformation of minds that women have embarked upon new roads,” *Le Socialiste* contended, “but rather it's the new roads that economic conditions have forced women to take that have transformed accepted notions of [women's] supposed natural vocation.”⁷⁰ For working women, “economic emancipation inevitably had to precede [their] emancipation as women”.⁷¹ Even the most devoted socialist-feminists in the party – including ultra-radicals such as Pierre Bonnier, philosopher of “sexualisme” – held that “women cannot be emancipated as [woman] until the revolution has liberated her as worker. After socialism, sexualisme will do its work”.⁷² Less feminist Guesdists

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Anonymous, “Le Suffrage Universel”, *Le Socialiste*, 17 October 1885. There is an excellent discussion of this tendency to equate universal male suffrage with real universal suffrage in S. Reynolds, “Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France”, in S. Reynolds (ed.), *Women, State and Revolution: Essays on Power and Gender in Europe since 1789* (Amherst, 1987), p. 104.

⁶⁹ “Proposition de Loi”, *Le Socialiste*, 8 February 1894.

⁷⁰ Clara, “Les Femmes en Marche”, *Le Socialiste*, 9 July 1887.

⁷¹ B., “Le Travail des Femmes”, *Le Socialiste*, 10 January 1897.

⁷² Z., “À Propos de la Grève des Femmes”, *Le Socialiste*, 19 June 1892.

than Bonnier simply denied that there was a “woman question” separate from the social question. Guesde himself, for instance, asserted that

women’s liberation can only emerge from the liberation of labour. There is no such thing as a woman question that one can resolve on its own, separately. There is only a social question that, once triumphantly resolved by socialism, will liberate both halves of humanity.⁷³

The Parti Ouvrier pointedly drew feminists’ attention to a resolution adopted by women of the German Social Democratic Party – for Guesdists, the very model of a modern socialist movement – that concluded:

Since the woman question, being simply a part of the social question, cannot be resolved apart from and beyond it; that, as a consequence, the women’s cause cannot be separated from the broader workers’ cause, the Congress has decided that there is no need to formulate any specific demands [for women]. It rejects as sterile and without consequence any of the efforts that the bourgeoisie may appear to make in favour of women’s emancipation and declares that it’s necessary to attach the women’s movement to the workers’ movement [. . .] whose final objective is the defeat of capital and the triumph of labour.⁷⁴

In the Guesdists’ most dogmatic moments, feminism was portrayed as worse than useless; it was actively malignant. Its success would “impede the proletarian advance and put off its final triumph for perhaps a couple of decades”.⁷⁵ Why did the POF portray feminism not only as irrelevant to socialism, but as dangerous?

First, the Parti Ouvrier – forgetting its assumption that eventual socialist triumph presupposed the prior consolidation of “bourgeois democracy” – furiously attacked feminists for diverting the female proletariat from its class obligations. Feminist campaigns for women’s suffrage, property rights, and civic equality, according to Guesdists, (mis)directed women’s grievances against patriarchal domination rather than against capitalist exploitation, thereby begetting, on the one hand, conflict between working-class women and working-class men and, on the other hand, encouraging comradeship between cozened *ouvrières* and manipulative *bourgeoises*. The POF despised patriarchal labour leaders who hoped to exclude “the weaker sex” from the workplace and from politics. None the less, Guesdists refused to aggravate or even recognize the latent conflict between proletarian paternalists and working-class feminists, a conflict that (from a Marxist perspective) inevitably consumed energies better devoted to the class war. Worse yet (again from a Marxist perspective), the struggle against patriarchy tied the female proletariat to her bourgeois “sister”, both of them victims of France’s deeply

⁷³ Report of a speech by Guesde, “Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Roubaix”, *Le Socialiste*, 20 October 1894.

⁷⁴ “Au Hasard de la Semaine”, *Le Socialiste*, 26 June 1892.

⁷⁵ B., “Le Mouvement Féminin”, *Le Socialiste*, 20 August 1893.

entrenched gender hierarchy. For anxious Guesdists, class collaboration; the demonic adversary of every Marxist project, lurked behind the feminists' skirts, poised to pounce upon unwary proletarian women. Feminists reinforced these Guesdist anxieties by attacking socialism for splitting the women's movement. According to Hubertine Auclert, doyenne of French feminists, "there cannot be a bourgeois feminism and socialist feminism because there are not two female sexes".⁷⁶ French feminists fashioned a mirror image of the Guesdist critique of feminism, denouncing Marxists for setting *ouvrières* against *bourgeoises*, just as Marxists denounced feminists for setting *ouvrières* against *ouvriers*.⁷⁷

Second, feminists, according to the Parti Ouvrier, advanced an essentially bourgeois programme. As "bourgeois feminists",⁷⁸ their success would advantage propertied women alone. Guesdists scathingly contrasted "the woman – the woman of the people, that is to say she who suffers, she who waits, she who is exploited – rising up and throwing herself into battle" with "the female bourgeois demanding, from parliament, her rights".⁷⁹ Of the latter women, the Parti Ouvrier interested itself only in "those who will commit themselves to the workers' struggle. As for the others, they can go to hell with the rest of their class".⁸⁰ Always convinced that reforms accomplished under the aegis of capital benefited only the bourgeoisie, Guesdists indicted feminists as merely assertive *bourgeoises* craving privileges enjoyed by their exploitative menfolk – an indictment with some force, given the overwhelmingly bourgeois and socially conservative tenor of the French feminist movement, the leadership of which included between forty and fifty millionaires.⁸¹ The Parti Ouvrier, understandably, did not cheer when feminists,

⁷⁶ H. Auclert, in *Le Radical*, 3 September 1907, quoted in Hause and Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics*, p. 70, and see the discussion of this issue in *ibid.*, p. 31. Auclert's attempt to subsume the struggle against class exploitation into the feminist struggle against gender inequality – a complete reversal of the Guesdist strategy – is described in Hause, *Hubertine Auclert*, pp. 53–54.

⁷⁷ For feminist hostility towards the Guesdists because of their instrumental view of the suffrage issue, see S. Hause, "Citizenship of the Republic: Class and Sex Identity in the Feminist Career of Hubertine Auclert 1848–1914", *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, 12 (1984), pp. 235–242.

⁷⁸ For a feminist critique of this Marxist term, a critique that claims that the term necessarily identifies all workers as male and thus implicitly identifies all women as bourgeois, see F. Picq, "'Le Féminisme Bourgeois': Une Théorie Élaborée par les Femmes Socialistes avant la Guerre de '14'", in M.-C. Pasquier *et al.* (eds), *Stratégies des Femmes* (Paris, 1984), pp. 391–406.

⁷⁹ A. Valette, "Autour de la Grève", *Le Socialiste*, 14 July 1895.

⁸⁰ B., "Le Mouvement Féminin", *Le Socialiste*, 20 August 1893.

⁸¹ H. Mirtel, "Féminisme Mondial", *Documents du Progrès*, May 1910, p. 436, cited in S. Hause and A. Kenney, "The Limits of Suffragist Behaviour: Legalism and Militancy in France 1876–1922", *American Historical Review*, 76 (1981), p. 786. For the bourgeois conservatism of the dominant French feminism, and the resultant obstacles to its penetration into the popular milieu, see S. Hause, "The Failure of Feminism in Provincial France

led by the *haute-bourgeoise* Maria Deraismes, achieved votes for businesswomen in elections to commercial tribunals! Proletarian women, the POF advised, should ignore the liberal politics of such propertied ladies, liberal politics the triumph of which would leave the domineering relationship between ladies and lady's-maids totally unchanged. Only the socialist revolution, not equal rights under the bourgeois French Republic, would dispel the exploitation and oppression suffered by *ouvrières*. Once again, feminists reinforced Guesdist prejudices by arguing a mirror-image case: that "the woman question is the Gordian knot which, once cut, will permit resolution of the social question", and that "so long as women have their hands tied by their civil status, the economic transformation advocated by the collectivists [the *fin-de-siècle* term for Marxist socialism] will work only to men's profit".⁸²

Working-class mentalities reinforced this Guesdist hostility towards "bourgeois" suffragettes. Thoroughly alienated from a male political culture that rarely impinged upon their laborious lives, proletarian women by and large ignored the feminists' "sentimental propaganda",⁸³ as the POF scathingly characterized it.⁸⁴ Women of the working class hardly communicated, hardly *could* communicate, with the highly-cultivated, highly-educated *bourgeoises* who supposedly struggled for their rights – not least because many "bourgeois feminists" were free of family constraints, and frequently endorsed such freedom as the condition of women's liberation, a condition virtually inconceivable to working-class women, tied as they were to family survival-strategies.⁸⁵ Even a feminist as deeply sympathetic to working-class grievances as Hubertine Auclert found it impossible to cooperate with real proletarian women when she allied herself to laundresses organizing a cooperative workshop, an alliance that ended badly in mutual incomprehension and bitter recriminations.⁸⁶ Finally, the notorious incident at the 1900 Women's Rights Congress in Paris, where bourgeois and working-class women nearly came to blows over the extension of workers' rights to

1890–1920", *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 8 (1980), pp. 431–433 and McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot*, pp. 84–86.

⁸² H. Auclert, "Lutte de Classes, Lutte de Sexes", *La Citoyenne*, May 1885, in E. Taiieb (ed.), *Hubertine Auclert – La Citoyenne: Articles de 1881 à 1891* (Paris, 1968), p. 101.

⁸³ B., "Mouvement Féminin", *Le Socialiste*, 20 August 1893.

⁸⁴ For the irrelevancy of "bourgeois" feminism to working-class women in the nineteenth century, see A. Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man* (London, 1988), pp. 31–32 and, for the same point in the Guesdists' context, L. Tilly, "Women's Collective Action and Feminism in France 1870–1914", in L. Tilly and C. Tilly (eds), *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (London, 1981), pp. 216 and 226–228; Hilden, "Class and Gender", p. 366; and M. Rebérioux, "Demain: Les Ouvrières et l'Avenir au Tournant du Siècle", *Revue du Nord*, 63 (1981), p. 673.

⁸⁵ M. Boxer, "'First Wave' Feminism in Nineteenth-Century France: Class, Family and Religion", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5 (1982), p. 557.

⁸⁶ Hause, *Hubertine Auclert*, pp. 52–53.

servants, has entered the historiography as emblematic of the irreconcilable class conflict dividing militant French women.⁸⁷ The Parti Ouvrier, sensitive to its constituency's priorities, fought above all for school meal programmes rather than votes for women, demanded a minimum wage rather than female property rights, and promised women a utopia of unconstrained and rewarding labour rather than integration into the bourgeois order – an order that, after all, systematically exploited and oppressed the *ouvrière's* father, brothers, husband and sons, despite their enfranchisement and formal civic equality.⁸⁸ As *Le Socialiste* editorialized, “civil equality, political equality, will no more emancipate [women] than they have emancipated the workers. Freed from her present inferiority, woman may become no more, in the present bourgeois order, than man's equal in servitude.”⁸⁹ Drawing a reductionist Marxist conclusion from the intersection of class and gender, the Parti Ouvrier affirmed that “there is no women's cause, but rather a separation of classes between bourgeois and workers. It's the capitalist system [. . .] that has divided women into two camps.”⁹⁰

Viewing feminism from this disdainful perspective, *Le Socialiste* decided that “socialists have no interest in these bourgeois intrigues”. Guesdists “should oppose [feminists] wherever we meet them: first because they impede the socialist movement, and then because they would force [socialism] to drop its class character”.⁹¹ Perennially prone to amalgamating its enemies into “one reactionary mass”, the Parti Ouvrier disdained feminism as merely a subspecies of democratic Radicalism (despite the Radical Party's sometimes virulent misogyny).⁹² Reducing feminism to a ladies' auxiliary in the battle for “bourgeois democracy”, Guesdists criticized feminists on the same grounds on which the Parti Ouvrier criticized democrats, alleging that the struggle for formal democratic equality as an end in itself both precluded the class militancy advanced by proletarian socialists and legitimated the class collaboration

⁸⁷ Sowerwine, “The Organisation of French Socialist Women”, pp. 9–10. Proletarian women who attended feminist congresses were heard identifying their bourgeois “sisters” as “domestic servants of capital”, perhaps as an ironic comment on the wealthy women's refusal to contemplate improved rights for their actual servants. Albistur and Armogathe, *Histoire du Féminisme Français*, p. 358.

⁸⁸ Some of the Parti Ouvrier's attempts to separate proletarian and bourgeois demands went astray, as with Valette's criticism of feminist demands for married women's control over their own incomes, a reform criticized with the total *non sequitur* that differences in income between bourgeois and worker and between men and women were grotesquely unfair. A. Valette, “Salaires de Famine”, *Le Socialiste*, 9 June 1895.

⁸⁹ Report of a letter to a feminist organization by the Guesdist militant Duc-Quercy, “La Semaine”, *Le Socialiste*, 5 February 1893.

⁹⁰ B., “Mouvement Féminin”, *Le Socialiste*, 20 August 1893.

⁹¹ Bernard, “L'Égalité pour la Femme”, *Le Socialiste*, 16 January 1892.

⁹² That the dominant strand in French feminism was indeed firmly tied to the Republican camp, and above all to its Radical variant, is demonstrated in McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot*, ch. 4.

preached by “bourgeois Republicans”.⁹³ The Parti Ouvrier, entrapped by its own reductionism, promoted women’s rights, but opposed the struggle for their attainment, just as Guesdists consistently advocated political democracy, but fiercely attacked the French democrats. The Parti Ouvrier thereby sometimes achieved the worst of both worlds, alienating feminists by subjecting the struggle against patriarchy to the imperatives of the class war, while antagonizing paternalist workers by denouncing gender hierarchy.

The predominant Guesdist response to “the woman question” ruthlessly subordinated relations of reproduction to relations of production: working-class women, according to the Parti Ouvrier, should not, even *could* not, desert the class war to find refuge in feminist solidarity. Both Proudhonian patriarchs and feminist militants, in the Guesdists’ view, mistakenly identified women proletarians as primarily women rather than as primarily proletarians. Nevertheless, although the Parti Ouvrier’s ideological paradigm clearly identified working-class women as clearly working class, Guesdists decided that *ouvrières* deserved a privileged status within the proletariat – both as workers and as women. The Parti Ouvrier even conceded that, so long as working women eschewed contaminating contact with their bourgeois “sisters”, *ouvrières* had an independent cause to assert, and would have to assert it independently. The party made an analogy between the liberation of workers by the workers themselves – that absolute bedrock of labour politics – and the liberation of women by women alone. “In the same way that socialism didn’t exist as a reality and a threat until the day when workers’ demands had been formulated by workers themselves”, Pierre Bonnier pointed out, “sexualism [feminism] will not burst forth as a doctrine and as a solution [to the woman question] until the day when women will, in their turn, take that question – the most important ever addressed by humanity – in hand”.⁹⁴ Thus the Parti Ouvrier accepted, even encouraged, the independent mobilization of its women, organizing meetings “strictly reserved to ladies [dames]”⁹⁵ and establishing a plethora of party groups with intriguing titles such as “the committee of socialist women of Deville-les-Rouen”⁹⁶ – groups that have sadly left little trace apart from names recorded in *Le Socialiste*’s weekly chronicle of party activities.

⁹³ For the Guesdists’ long campaign against the Radicals and their Republican ideology, see Stuart, *Marxism at Work*, pp. 286–293.

⁹⁴ Z., “Liberté du Travail”, *Le Socialiste*, 12 August 1891.

⁹⁵ See, for instance, “Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Calais”, *Le Socialiste*, 14 April 1894.

⁹⁶ “Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Deville-les-Rouen”, *Le Socialiste*, 7 April 1895. The weekly chronicle of party activities in the newspaper, “Le Parti Ouvrier en France”, is studded with such references, not least in the 1890s, despite Patricia Hilden’s assertion that the Guesdists discouraged such independent women’s organization after the 1880s – a central point in her *Working Women and Socialist Politics in France*.

How did the POF justify this glorification of working women? Why did the party award them occasional ideological priority? The answer is twofold. First, as labouring workers, women suffered most from the impoverishment and brutalization that capitalism inflicted upon all proletarians: Guesdists early discovered what has since come to be called “the feminization of poverty”.⁹⁷ Second, as maternal women, *ouvrières* endured a further and unique exploitation. “As the producer par excellence”, as the producer of humanity, women’s “subjugation was infinitely greater than that of any other”.⁹⁸ In Valette’s impassioned words:

she labours, she who bears and brings forth the humanity of tomorrow; she who, at the price of her suffering, even at the price of her life, guarantees the life of the species. Always producer of humanity, and [. . .] producer of material wealth as well, the [working] women of our society are ceaselessly labouring. Of all the members of society, her labour costs her the most, and brings her the least.⁹⁹

In other words, working women laboured both in the factory and in childbirth, thereby suffering capitalist exploitation both as producers of commodities and as bearers of children. *Ouvrières* sold their labour power to fructify capital, while their fertility yielded future proletarians for capitalists to exploit – the “expanded reproduction of capital” in the most elemental and organic sense of that Marxist concept.¹⁰⁰ For the Parti Ouvrier, “the social revolution, in liberating production, will at the same time constitute the first sexual revolution, for it will have to include maternity as the first of productions”.¹⁰¹

Valette, who had arrived at Marxist militancy through charitable good works, systematically elaborated a theory of women’s liberation that equated maternity with productivity, an equation that identified working women as the archetypical proletarians, potentially the workers most

⁹⁷ J.P., “La Misère à Paris”, *Le Socialiste*, 15 January 1899.

⁹⁸ Dr Z., “À Près la Question Sociale”, *Le Socialiste*, 3 June 1891.

⁹⁹ H. Ghesquière (quoting Aline Valette), “La Distribution Annuelle des Récompenses aux Indigents à Lille”, *Bulletin Mensuel de la Fédération Nationale des Élus du Parti Ouvrier Français*, Première Année, no. 9, 1 August 1900, p. 5. Louise Tilly argues that female workers during the *Belle Époque* were indeed subjected to greater proletarianization than their male counterparts. L. Tilly, “Three Faces of Capitalism: Women and Work in French Cities”, in J. Merriman (ed.), *French Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1982), p. 192. For the same point from a theoretical perspective, see B. Shelton and B. Agger, “Shotgun Wedding, Unhappy Marriage, No-Fault Divorce? Rethinking the Feminism-Marxism Relationship”, in P. England (ed.), *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory* (New York, 1993), pp. 25–41, particularly p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ The Guesdists, at least, are not vulnerable to the common accusation that Marxism ignores what Marx himself described as “the production of life [. . .] of fresh life in procreation” (*The German Ideology*) in favour of the production of goods. For this accusation, see, for instance, Nicholson, “Feminism and Marxism”, pp. 16–30. Labour, the central Marxist category, for the Parti Ouvrier included “le travail de la maternité”. Valette, *Socialisme et Sexualisme*, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

devoted to socialism because most exploited by the bourgeoisie. Every worker gave up surplus value to capital, Valette admitted, but a woman worker also surrendered her children. Guesdists, entranced by this multi-purpose refutation of both working-class Proudhonians and bourgeois feminists (and unaware of its sexist implication that mothers alone surrendered “their” children to the capitalist Moloch), hailed Valette’s work as the first labour theory of gender (thereby ignoring France’s rich history of socialist feminism).¹⁰² Her ingenious combination of *socialisme* and *sexualisme* [feminism] – a classic “dual systems theory” combining “the class war and the sex war, the social question and the sexual question, socialist doctrine and sexualist [feminist] doctrine”¹⁰³ – purported to prove that the socialist revolution alone would liberate working women as both workers *and* as women, and that proletarian women in turn held the key to socialist revolution. Better yet, Valette’s ideological manoeuvre mobilized the cult of maternity that permeated both working-class and bourgeois milieux during the *Belle Époque*¹⁰⁴ – vividly portraying capitalism’s vicious intrusion into the maternal haven, quite literally transforming the quest for socialism into a “motherhood issue”. No wonder Guesdist iconography favoured a mother and child imagery that centred the workers’ visual imagination upon the *ouvrière* – worker, woman and socialist heroine.

Guesdist discourse contained three quite distinct answers to the “woman question”. At times, the Parti Ouvrier deployed a rhetoric virtually indistinguishable from that of the most radical French feminists and suffragettes, a rhetoric that not only affirmed the absolute equality of women, but, occasionally, even their superiority over the men who oppressed them. In this mode, the POF demanded full civic equality for female citizens, denounced the paternalist institutions of the Third Republic, and promoted the advantages of including women in the polity. Guesdists most often advanced this feminist, even radical-feminist, Marxism against the misogynist mentalities common in the traditional labour movement that the Guesdists sought to supplant – the Parti Ouvrier thereby perpetuating Marx and Engels’ own long campaign against Proudhon and his patriarchal adherents. Even today’s most radical feminist critics of Marxism must surely cherish this strand in the socialist legacy.

¹⁰² *Le Socialiste* (23 October 1892) welcomed Valette’s fascinating *L’Harmonie Sociale* as the first effort to separate women’s liberation from the cause of the bourgeoisie. For a superb description of the legacy potentially available to the POF, see S. Grogan, *French Socialism and Sexual Difference: Women and the New Society 1803–1844* (Basingstoke, 1992).

¹⁰³ Valette, *Socialisme et Sexualisme*, p. 15. For a critique of such approaches, see I. Young, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of Dual Systems Theory”, in L. Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution* (Boston, 1981), pp. 48–60.

¹⁰⁴ For this cult, see McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot*, p. 11.

When confronted by “bourgeois feminists”, however, Guesdists deployed a very different, even contradictory, rhetoric. Identifying Maria Deraismes and her feminist associates as the women’s auxiliary of capitalism, the Parti Ouvrier spared no polemical resource in discrediting the French women’s movement, at times resorting to rhetorical manoeuvres that aligned Guesdists uncomfortably with the Proudhonian misogynists Marxists otherwise detested. This Guesdist anti-feminism tapped both deep wellsprings of traditional gender ideology and extensive reservoirs of working-class resentment against the bourgeois ladies who articulated the campaign for women’s rights in *fin-de-siècle* France. Here emerges the Marxist gender strategy which most clearly validates feminist critique.

Finally, when not criticizing Proudhonians or suffragettes, Guesdists advanced a promising “maternalist” feminism that equated the production of human life with the production of material goods, thereby delineating the myriad ways in which capitalism exploited and oppressed working women both as mothers and as proletarians – a synthesis that preserved the Parti Ouvrier’s socialist integrity against bourgeois contamination while insulating its feminist ideals against misogynist temptation. Yet this “sexualism” – surely the formulation most congruent with feminist commitment to both “difference” and equality¹⁰⁵ – never prevailed unchallenged in Guesdist rhetoric, as the Parti Ouvrier lurched from vociferous feminist critique of Proudhonians to equally vociferous denunciation of “bourgeois” feminists. Guesdists failed to synthesize the “woman question” with the “social question”, and the resulting ideological contradictions characterized the movement from its inception until its extinction. Nor should these systematic instabilities surprise us. They derived both from inherent aporias in the Marxist conception of the “mode of production”, a conception that systematically obfuscates the dynamics of reproduction and neglects representations of gender, and from contradictions in the working-class life-experience of capitalism, which liberates working women from some traditional womanly constraints while binding them as both workers and women to profoundly gendered family-strategies. Only one conviction integrated the otherwise fatally confused and confusing gender discourse of Guesdism: the passionate belief that socialist revolution alone ensured “both social and sexual liberation”¹⁰⁶ and that the socialist millennium, by eliminating capitalism, would “allow the so-called weaker sex to free itself from the so-called stronger, since [women] will become self-supporting and self-sufficient”.¹⁰⁷ Stripped of this faith in the future, Marxists of the *fin*

¹⁰⁵ For the intricacies of this necessary but tortuous combination, see J. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), particularly ch. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Valette, *Socialisme et Sexualisme*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ J. Guesde, “Ignorance Bourgeoise et Science Ouvrière”, *Le Cri du Peuple*, 18 October 1884.

de siècle would have been as helpless against working-class paternalists and “bourgeois feminists” as are their Communist and socialist successors in today’s post-Marxist era.