

Women in Uruguayan Communism: Contradictions and Ambiguities, 1920s–1960s

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Abstract. This article examines the dynamics of women's participation in the Communist Party of Uruguay (PCU) from the 1920s to the 1960s. Despite its commitment to women's emancipation and to equality between men and women, the PCU's attitudes towards gender equality were often contradictory and its messages were ambiguous. Though it promoted women's participation, the Party oscillated between seeking to overcome social prejudices, upholding principled and dogmatic positions, and accommodating the conservative habits prevalent among the working class. Women were encouraged to take part in activities but not to assume leadership positions. The 1960s, ironically a period characterised by openness and political success, was a decade of regression in gender equality that stood in contrast to the Uruguayan Communists' long trajectory concerning women's rights.

Keywords: Latin America women's politics, Uruguayan communism, women and communism, women's political activism, gender and grassroots politics

We the women, the mothers, creators of life, have the responsibility to protect the present and the future of the children. On 1 June, the whole world celebrates Children's Day. As always, this brings together all women in their desires and longings.

With these words Sonia Bialous de Dutrenit, the most prominent Uruguayan Communist official in charge of women's organisations in the 1960s, opened her article in the Communist organ *El Popular* in June 1967. Bialous belonged to the third generation of Communist female activists in Uruguay and, as a professional, represented also the increasing presence of highly-educated

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women in public life. In her article, however, written at a time of worldwide change and vigorous debates on women's rights and as traditional gender models were being challenged, she considered women primarily as mothers and, rather than challenging men to participate in taking care of children, reinforced maternalist images. This was an expression of a deep contradiction and a persistent ambiguity rooted in the history of Communist women's activism in Uruguay. It also signalled a clear regression from earlier challenges to gender ideologies posed by Uruguayan Communists. Current research often tends to assume a slow linear development of gender ideologies and women's involvement in politics until the 1980s and more significant changes later. The reconstruction of a longer, more winding trajectory might shed some light on the broader phenomenon of the Latin American Left's adoption of more conservative attitudes to women's right in the 1960s, noted by a few scholars but still poorly understood.

In the early 1990s, Silvia Arrom noted the growing interest in biographies of women from popular strata, and in their views and activism. At the time, little attention was paid to the history of women's involvement in Latin American politics; what she termed 'old heroic biographies' of outstanding elite women was all that was available.¹ This growing interest was fuelled by the development of women's history and gender studies in the hegemonic North, as well as by the interest of sociologists and political scientists in the role of Latin American women in the 'New Social Movements' of the preceding decade.² Helen Safa, meanwhile, argued that Latin American women activists in the 1980s 'think that their roles as wives and mothers legitimize their sense of injustice and outrage, since they are protesting their inability to effectively carry out these roles'.³ Safa noted that the new movements tended to confront primarily the state and not capital, highlighting women's reproductive roles as wives, mothers and consumers of state services. In her view, they challenged the traditional Marxist emphasis on labour unions as the main arena of social mobilisation. From a different perspective, Norma Stoltz Chinchilla observed a convergence between contemporary Marxist and feminist theory and practice in the same social movements. The emergence of 'second-wave feminism' in Latin America was thwarted, she argued, by 'the loss of a collective memory

¹ Silvia Arrom, 'Historia de la mujer y de la familia latinoamericanas', *Historia Mexicana*, 42: 2 (1992), pp. 379–418. Historiography on Brazilian women developed first. June Hahner, 'Recent Research on Women in Brazil', *Latin American Research Review*, 20: 3 (1985), pp. 163–79.

² To mention a few: Elizabeth Jelin (ed.), *Ciudadanía e identidad: las mujeres en los movimientos sociales latino-americanos* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1987); Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, 'Marxism, Feminism, and the Struggle for Democracy in Latin America', *Gender and Society*, 5: 3 (1991), pp. 291–310.

³ Helen Safa, 'Women's Social Movements in Latin America', *Gender and Society*, 4: 3 (1990), pp. 354–69.

of the earlier period of Latin American feminism, particularly the ideas and organizing experiences of radical, Socialist, and Anarchist women'.⁴ This loss, I would argue, sprang from a regression in the attitudes and sensitivities of the Latin American Left towards women during the 1950s and 1960s, in contrast to the stronger commitment manifested with regard to the advancement of women, and women's rights and demands, in the previous two decades. While most research still ignores the 'regression period', during the last decades some scholars have drawn attention to the lack of progressive gender politics in a period marked by the growth of Left revolutionary politics. However, these case studies have not been interpreted in the broader context of women's participation in Latin American Left politics in the twentieth century.⁵

The historiography of the 1990s first sought to fill this gap. Karin Roseblat's research made a significant contribution to our understanding of men and women in the Left and in society at large during Chile's Popular Front government (1937–41).⁶ For her part, Sandra McGee Deutsch offered an overview of gender and socio-political change in twentieth-century Latin America, focusing on women's participation in right-wing politics.⁷ Asunción Lavrin's work became a key point of reference for studies on first-wave feminism in the Southern Cone.⁸ However, much research focused mainly on women in Latin American politics in the first half of the twentieth century or even on early cases of nineteenth-century

⁴ Stoltz Chinchilla, 'Marxism, Feminism, and the Struggle for Democracy in Latin America', p. 295.

⁵ For example, Isabella Cosse, 'Infidelities: Morality, Revolution, and Sexuality in Left-Wing Guerrilla Organizations in 1960s and 1970s Argentina', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 23: 3 (2014), pp. 415–50; Marina Cardozo, "'Su lugar en la lucha": Reflexiones en torno a las militantes en el Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Tupamaros entre comienzos de los 60 y fines de los 70 en Uruguay', *Actas de las III Jornadas de Historia Género y Política en los '70*, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 22–24 Sept. 2010; Karin Grammatico, 'Las mujeres políticas y las feministas en los tempranos setenta: ¿Un diálogo (im)posible?', in Andrea Andújar et al. (eds.), *Historia, género y política en los '70* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires/Feminaria, 2005), pp. 19–38; Alfonso Salgado, "'A Small Revolution": Family, Sex, and the Communist Youth of Chile during the Allende Years (1970–1973)', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 8: 8 (2015), pp. 62–88.

⁶ Karin Alejandra Roseblat, 'Domesticating Men: State Building and Class Compromise in Popular-Front Chile', in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (eds.), *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 262–90.

⁷ Sandra McGee Deutsch, 'Gender and Socio-Political Change in Twentieth-Century Latin America', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 71: 2 (1991), pp. 259–306.

⁸ Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

anarchist feminism⁹ and, to a much lesser extent, on later periods.¹⁰ This applies also to studies devoted to women and Communist politics outside Latin America, which tend to focus on the period before World War Two.¹¹ In the case of Uruguay, some pioneering work has been done by Christine Ehrick on the relationship between first-wave feminism and the Uruguayan state,¹² and by Graciela Sapriza.¹³ Adriana Valobra's recent publications have advanced our understanding of women's political participation and their prominence in Argentine political parties.¹⁴ Her article on Argentine Communist women, whilst focusing on a shorter period, explores some of the questions I approach here.¹⁵

Only a few studies have attempted to explain the apparent 'regression period' of the 1950s and 1960s. María del Carmen Feijoó and Marcela Nari offer interesting interpretations of gender issues in the radicalised Argentine Left of the 1960s. Challenging structures of everyday life, they argue, was considered a deviation from the 'correct' course, an offshoot of the transformations introduced by the dominant class under the influence of decadent imperialist societies. However,

neither the traditional left nor the new left was opposed to feminism. It was conceived as one of the many contradictions within a class society that only the triumph of a socialist revolution and the abolition of social exploitation and inequality could resolve. [...] Marxist feminist theory was not connected to the daily life of these political groups or to the couple relationships between their militants. [...] a sexual division of labor that relegated women to second-class positions at the same time that it encumbered them with all the chores of the domestic organisation and

⁹ Such as the studies on the anarcho-feminist newspaper *La Voz de la Mujer*; the first was Maxine Molyneux, 'No God, No Boss, No Husband. Anarchist Feminism in Nineteenth Century Argentina', *Latin American Perspectives*, 13: 1 (1986), pp. 119–45.

¹⁰ Chile is an exception, since prominent women's participation in protests against both the left-wing Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, UP) and the Pinochet governments have been the subject of serious study. Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest. Women's Movements in Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Margaret Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle against Allende, 1964–1973* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

¹¹ One exception: Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Weigand underlines the bridging role of American Communists between the two waves of feminism.

¹² Christine Ehrick, *The Shield of the Weak: Feminism and the State in Uruguay, 1903–1933* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

¹³ Graciela Sapriza, *Memorias de rebeldía* (Montevideo, PuntoSur-Grecmu, 1988) and *Hilamos una historia. La memoria sindical desde las mujeres* (Montevideo: Grecmu-Fesur, 1989).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Adriana Valobra, 'Feminismo, sufragismo y mujeres en los partidos políticos en la Argentina de la primera mitad del siglo XX', *Amnis*, 8 (2008) (online at <https://amnis.revues.org/666>; last access 23 Sept. 2017).

¹⁵ Adriana Valobra, 'Formación de cuadros y frentes populares: relaciones de clase y género en el Partido Comunista de Argentina, 1935–1951', *Izquierdas*, 23 (2015), pp. 127–56.

maternity. [...] women were asked to give social and national goals priority over gender concerns.¹⁶

When referring to the 1968 mobilisations in Latin America, Jeffrey Gould affirms that despite young women's massive participation, 'male youths with previous political experience predominated'.¹⁷ This is true of the Uruguayan Left throughout the 1960s, although it does not explain the changing position of women in leftist parties. However, the existing literature does not approach those cases as a 'regression' from previous leftist attitudes.

The historiography of the Communist Party of Uruguay (PCU) in the 1960s has only recently begun to address gender issues. Thus, Marisa Silva's research puts emphasis on describing Communist culture and its ceremonial practices, including women's participation, but not from a gender perspective.¹⁸ In her important research about 'the Uruguayan 1968', Vania Markarian does make a few references to gender, primarily in her discussion of the gradual liberalisation of sex relations.¹⁹ In my previous work, I dealt with the 'masculinisation' of the PCU during the 1960s and the activities of Communist women in the late 1940s, but without offering a coherent explanation linking my findings for the two periods.²⁰ Lastly, Ana Laura de Giorgi tackles women's militancy in the PCU during the 1960s,²¹ contributing to the literature vindicating the often belittled role of women in Latin American left-wing organisations. Most critical historians would agree that the invisibility of Latin American women and their demands during the 1960s was due to a power-centred vision of revolution, reproducing a

¹⁶ María del Carmen Feijoó and Marcela Nari, 'Women in Argentina during the 1960s', *Latin American Perspectives*, 23: 1 (1996), pp. 7–27.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Gould, 'Solidarity under Siege: The Latin American Left, 1968', *American Historical Review*, 114: 2 (2009), pp. 364–5.

¹⁸ Marisa Silva Schultze, *Aquellos comunistas, 1955–1973* (Montevideo: Taurus, 2009).

¹⁹ Vania Markarian, *El 68 uruguayo. El movimiento estudiantil, entre molotovs y música beat* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2012); 'To the Beat of "The Walrus": Uruguayan Communists and Youth Culture in the Global Sixties', *The Americas*, 70: 3 (2014), pp. 363–92.

²⁰ Gerardo Leibner, 'Las ideologías sociales de los revolucionarios uruguayos de los 60', *Nuevo Mundo – Mundos Nuevos* (2007), available at <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/11682>, last access 14 Oct. 2017; *Camaradas y compañeros. Una historia política y social de los comunistas del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Trilce, 2011); 'Nosotras (Uruguay, 1945–1953): las contradicciones de la escritura femenina comunista y sus significados sociales', in Roland Forgues and Jean-Marie Flores (eds.), *Escritura femenina y reivindicación de género en América Latina* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2005), pp. 507–21; 'Parti de masses, parti masculinisé? Les femmes dans le Parti communiste uruguayen (1946–1968)', in Karine Bergès, Diana Burgos-Vigna, Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo and Nathalie Ludec (eds.), *Résistantes, militantes, citoyennes: L'Engagement politique des femmes aux XXe et XXIe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), pp. 139–52.

²¹ Ana Laura de Giorgi, 'La otra nueva ola. Jóvenes mujeres comunistas en el Uruguay de los 60', *Revista Izquierdas*, 22 (2015), pp. 204–26.

patriarchal division of roles inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution. In this article, however, I intend to go beyond de Giorgi's and my own previous interpretations by expanding the temporal framework and analysing the inherent contradictions of women's militancy in a male-dominated political organisation based on an egalitarian ideology. Any attempt to formulate a broad theoretical framework for understanding these contradictions has to rely on a body of empirical research on specific cases in Latin American countries. Alfonso Salgado's fascinating dissertation on the public and private life of Chilean Communist men is a welcome contribution in this direction.²² The aforementioned works by Valobra convincingly point out both the efforts by the Argentine Communist Party (PCA) to promote women cadres and the sociological limitations of those efforts between 1935 and 1951. Structures of gendered domestic division of labour did not radically change during the 1950s and 1960s, certainly not for working-class families.

Gender perspectives challenge the tendency to homogenise simultaneous and intertwined historical processes into one simplified account. In this regard, the history of the PCU is no exception. During the 1960s and the early 1970s it successfully mutated into a mass party. In comparison with other Communist parties of the region, it became very flexible in its practices, combining a revolutionary and humanist attitude while bringing numerous women into its ranks. Ironically, during that same period, women's specific claims lost ground and visibility in the midst of a process of 'masculinisation' that affected the language and representation of the PCU, its concept of revolutionary politics and its practices. Furthermore, women's growing participation was couched by the Communist press in culturally conservative terms.

For the sake of clarity, I shall use the term 'women's participation' to refer to women's affiliation to the Party, their presence and their activism in a range of activities not necessarily labelled 'feminine' or connected to an agenda specifically related to women's interests. Likewise, I shall use the terms 'women-related agenda' and 'women's prominence' as shorthand for activities, positions, forms of organisation and visibility geared towards empowering women and in response to their demands.

A long historical perspective is needed to understand the fluctuations and contradictions between women's participation, on the one hand, and women's prominence and the articulation of women-related agenda, on the other. If during the 1920s the PCU displayed a strong interest in promoting women's participation through a 'maternalist' agenda, but without according women a prominent role, from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s the PCU evolved by increasing women's participation, adopting a strong progressive (almost feminist) agenda – at once ambiguous and contradictory – and

²² Alfonso Salgado, 'Exemplary Comrades: The Public and Private Life of Communists in Twentieth-Century Chile', unpubl. PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016.

vigorously promoting women's prominence. Then, during the return to a period of sectarian introspection from the late 1940s to 1955, women's participation in the PCU decreased; despite the Party's symbolic commitment to a women-related agenda, a clear regression in its practical implementation can be observed and a first step back was also taken with regard to women's representation. The dramatic turn that took place in 1955, ignited by a moral reaction against a case of sexual abuse committed by one of the Party's leaders, led to an impressive recovery in the 1960s, which paradoxically brought about increased women's participation in the ranks of the PCU, accompanied by a further retreat in both the agenda and the level of women's prominence.

A Workers' Vanguard Party for both Men and Women

From its founding in 1920 and until the late 1930s, the PCU was one of the few Uruguayan political organisations that included women in its ranks and fostered women's participation and visibility in the public sphere. Equality between the sexes was part of the ideology of the Communists and of the message of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet process of 'building socialism', enthusiastically propagated by the Comintern and embraced by Communist parties.²³ To build the political power required for leading the proletariat in its revolutionary struggle, the PCU enlisted the most politically conscious, active and determined young workers – men and women alike. The fact that working women did not have the right to vote was irrelevant to a revolutionary party that did not regard its integration into the bourgeois parliamentary system as important, but hoped for its future supersession.

Women were excluded from formal Uruguayan politics until the election of 1938, when they were first granted voting rights; however, the decisive steps towards women's suffrage had already been made in 1932 and inscribed into the Constitution of 1934. Curiously, it was under Gabriel Terra's authoritarian government (1931–8) that women began to be considered political subjects and enlisted as members of all political parties. Previously, only the two small left-wing parties, the PCU and the Socialist Party, had favoured the rise of women activists. Yet during their formative decades both parties remained under male leadership and were predominantly 'masculine' in their cultural perceptions, replicating gendered values and patriarchal power relations in their everyday practices.²⁴

The first generations of women who joined the PCU were mainly of two distinctive social origins: 1) creole workers involved in trade union activism

²³ Ehrick argues that during the 1920s paternalistic attitudes ('family wage socialism') were predominant in the Uruguayan Left, coexisting with an egalitarian attitude that viewed gender inequality as a manifestation of class society. *The Shield of the Weak*, pp. 182–4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

in the factories of Montevideo – mostly young, single women, many of whom came from the countryside or from the capital's poorest neighbourhoods;²⁵ 2) European immigrants with prior experience in workers' organisations or exposure to Socialist ideas in their countries of origin or in mutual-aid ethno-cultural migrants' associations.²⁶ Communist women featured in few daily press reports during the early 1930s. For instance, while showing sympathy for a women's protest against the Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia, *El Plata* – a relatively liberal newspaper – described Communist intervention in the event as the work of 'Dangerous Infiltrations':

... a few frantic women, driven by their desire to disrupt the 'bourgeois' demonstration, sought to break it up, provoking disorderly outbreaks, distributing Soviet pamphlets, trying to display red banners, and declaring class warfare while screaming their devotion to the Communist cause. There were dreadful immigrant women and a tiny undertow of black and white creole women surrounded by small children whom they hid behind in their miserable, disruptive attempt.²⁷

The reporter was expressing his disgust at a phenomenon that doubly subverted social conventions. Through such descriptions the daily press presented Communists as marginal, erecting a psychological barrier around them. The description above has a deeper dimension. Communist women were depicted with attributes associated with plebeian women: 'frantic', 'screaming', 'surrounded by small children', with blacks and whites mingling together. They were contrasted with the dignified behaviour of respectable, upper-class female protesters who, aware that a women's demonstration in a public space was an unusual event, conformed to the rules of bourgeois urbanity, radiating an image of serene respectability. The headline 'Dangerous Infiltrations' had a triple meaning: radicalised Communist women disrupting a liberal-pacifist event; belligerent foreigners introducing 'foreign' ideas of class conflict into supposedly cohesive Uruguay; and lastly, poor women flaunting their plebeian femininity in central public spaces with no respect for standards of bourgeois 'decency'.

²⁵ During the first half of the twentieth century, 'creole' in Uruguay meant a long-established native Uruguayan, in contrast with first generations of immigrants. It had no race connotation since Uruguayans labelled 'whites', *aindiados* or *chinas* (terms used for persons with indigenous traces: the former for men, the latter for women), *mulatos* and 'blacks' were all considered 'creoles'.

²⁶ Ehrick refers to the entry of Jewish immigrants into the Communist Party in 1929 and the founding of the Clara Zetkin Women's Centre: *The Shield of the Weak*, p. 197.

²⁷ 'Infiltraciones peligrosas', *El Plata*, 28 Aug. 1932; cited by Sapriza, *Memorias de rebeldía*, p. 148. The original demonstration was called by women identified with various opposition factions. Under the conservative-authoritarian rule of Gabriel Terra, it was easier to express progressive positions on foreign issues. A peaceful women's demonstration was better tolerated than any demonstration by men.

Communist marginality was more than just a representation created by hostile press; it was an image projected by the Communists themselves through their provocative attitudes during their extremist period, labelled 'class against class' by the Comintern.²⁸ Some Communist expressions of scorn toward the elites were charged with *machista* and sexist overtones. One example is the anecdote told about the first reception attended by the recently-elected Communist representative, José Lazarraga, at the Legislative Palace. Dressed in dirty overalls and observing the elegant wives of his fellow representatives, he is said to have exclaimed loudly: 'What a lot of powdered whores!'²⁹

The Rise of Women's Prominence in Uruguayan Communism, 1935–50

The Comintern's adoption of the Popular Front line in 1935 and its implementation in Uruguay ushered in a period of rapprochement between Uruguayan Communists and other opponents of Terra's regime. The new political line, the impasse in traditional politics and the wave of solidarity towards the struggle of the Spanish Republic against the nationalist military rebellion and later towards the Allies brought about a considerable influx of members into the PCU, among them women from diverse social backgrounds. Solidarity activities included collecting money, clothes and blankets; recycling raw materials for the Allies' war industries; and running volunteer workshops where shoes were made and garments knitted, sewn and repaired for despatch to Spain (later to refugee camps in France, and after July 1941 to the Soviet Union). These activities required abilities not usually valued in mainstream politics, a realm charged with rhetoric, symbolic gestures and assertive physical presence. In contrast, the solidarity activities that were called '*ayudismo*' (giving help) relied on networks of women's sociability and on women's practical abilities. Domestic skills and women's networks acquired unprecedented political significance.³⁰

²⁸ The Communists rejected national symbols: 'Bourgeois women at the service of the government and diplomats preparing for war organised a "pacifist" demonstration to deceive the masses. [...] The event was carried out under the shadow of the bourgeois nation and all expressed patriotic sentiments, precisely the sentiments that the bourgeoisie develops to initiate war and maintain their irritating privileges': *Justicia*, 30 Aug. 1932. Only in 1937 the PCU declared: 'The Party supports great national progressive traditions [...] the National Anthem, the flag ...': Eugenio Gómez, *Historia del Partido Comunista del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Elite, 1961), p. 117.

²⁹ An account given by two Communist veterans (with minor variations), interviewed separately in 2000. Neither was old enough to have witnessed or heard about the incident when it allegedly took place. The story circulated for many years as a didactic tale to distinguish their own sophisticated attitudes from previous, 'primitive' partisan 'prehistory'.

³⁰ Even in Trinidad, a small conservative town, two young women succeeded in involving many women in the 'Aid Committee for Spanish Children'. Interview with Alcira Legaspi, Montevideo, Oct. 2000.

While a small nucleus of women leaders arranged events, made public statements, produced flyers and leaflets and coordinated the volunteers' work, most *ayudista* activities allowed women framed as 'housewives' to participate in political action in a manner that was more in line with prevalent social norms, so that they could avoid family conflicts. *Ayudismo* incorporated parts of domestic life into political activity. Volunteering for a couple of hours in a more relaxed and creative atmosphere than that of the factory enabled young workers to contribute to the Allies and find recognition on the basis of 'feminine' abilities. A conventional tea party among middle-class female friends could suddenly turn into a political meeting where they discussed the harrowing situation of the Spanish refugees and asked for concrete collaboration. The assistance brought together political and humanitarian aspects, reflected what was considered 'feminine sensitivity', and conveyed a message accessible to people without prior ideological training. Until 1945 *ayudista* committees were considered top priority by the PCU leadership, increasing the importance of women within the Party structure; frameworks for women were created and these subsequently incorporated new militants. From 1941, women's anti-Fascist efforts were coordinated by Acción Femenina por la Victoria – a broad framework in which women, some of them Communist, acquired political experience and visibility. Sandra McGee Deutsch found that delegations of Uruguayan women took part in the 1945 demonstrations against the military government in Buenos Aires, thereby acquiring important political experience.³¹

The international prominence of the iconic figure of Dolores Ibárruri, known as 'La Pasionaria', during the Spanish Civil War, encouraged other Communist parties to champion women as public figures and role models.³² The ideal female Communist leader had to be of humble social origins, represent tenacity and devotion, and use a rhetoric combining Marxism with emotional appeal. The Uruguayan equivalent was Julia Arévalo, an activist who, before the age of 16, had participated in a match factory strike, later becoming a tobacco worker and a union organiser.³³ Arévalo was one of the

³¹ Sandra McGee Deutsch, 'Hands across the Río de la Plata: Argentine and Uruguayan Antifascist Women, 1941–1945', American Historical Association conference, Denver, CO, Jan. 2017.

³² As La Pasionaria was extolled as the quintessential figure of women's militancy, she overshadowed other outstanding Spanish militants. See Allison Taillont's concluding remarks in 'El modelo soviético en los años 1930: los viajes de María Teresa León y Rafael Alberti a Moscú', *Cahiers de Civilisation Espagnole Contemporaine*, 9 (2012), pp. 1–36. On La Pasionaria's image: Mercedes Yusta, 'La revista *Mujeres Antifascistas Españolas*, o la construcción de una identidad femenina comunista en el exilio francés (1946–1950)', *Pandora: Revue d'Etudes Hispaniques*, 5 (2005), pp. 119–31; Mónica Moreno Seco, "'A la sombra de Pasionaria': mujeres y militancia comunista (1960–1982)", in María Dolores Ramos (ed.), *Tejedoras de ciudadanía: culturas políticas, feminismos y luchas democráticas en España* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2014), pp. 257–82.

³³ An idealised biography of Arévalo: Alfredo Gravina, *A los diez años proletaria* (Montevideo: Editorial Problemas, 1987, 2nd edn).

founders of the PCU in 1920 and hence an important activist long before La Pasionaria's rise to fame. However, she acquired a prominent public profile only in 1937 when the Party began promoting her image. She was portrayed as a replica of La Pasionaria, with stern gestures and a solemn countenance.³⁴ Police persecution and her unaffected ways, modest clothing and humble background aroused curiosity and respect in a political scene undergoing democratisation. She symbolised the politicised 'woman of the people', a mother of five, without formal education, committed to the struggle, whose leadership was all the more remarkable given that her husband, a civil servant, worked away from home – in short, Arévalo embodied the idealised working-class woman. Her election to the Chamber of Deputies in 1942, and then to the Senate in 1946, was an indication of the importance given by the PCU to women's prominence and to its own role as a party of progress. After entering parliament, Arévalo embodied 'the woman next door' who, even as a famous politician, continued to shop at the local market. She was a prime example of the plebeian politician decades before the rise of José Mujica, 'the world's "poorest" president'.³⁵

In accordance with models established by other Communist parties and as disseminated at the meetings of the International Democratic Women's Federation, Uruguayan Communists co-founded Uruguay's Women's Union, in which women of different backgrounds promoted laws, rights, sociocultural benefits and services for women. Some prominent activists, such as painter Amalia Polleri, actress Sara Larocca and schoolteacher Celia Mieres, joined the Party in 1945. In the mid-1940s, several women were also among the authors of books published by Editorial Pueblos Unidos, the PCU's publishing arm.³⁶ The PCA was undergoing similar developments.³⁷

Two structural processes contributed to women's politicisation and drew them to the PCU: industrialisation as part of import substitution policy, which multiplied the number of women workers, and the growing presence of women in public spheres, modifying cultural patterns, particularly in professional sectors. The growth of the textile industry, in which women comprised 80 per cent of the workforce, created a new mass of workers whom Communists were able to unionise, recruiting prominent activists into the

³⁴ Their meeting in Paris at the Women's Democratic Federation's Conference was celebrated: 'Un encuentro histórico: Pasionaria y Julia, dos mujeres que personifican dignamente a sus pueblos', *Nosotras*, 12 (March 1946).

³⁵ Vladimir Hernandez, 'Jose Mujica: The World's "Poorest" President', *BBC Mundo* (Montevideo), 15 Nov. 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20243493> (last access 24 Sept. 2017).

³⁶ Carmen Massera (Garayalde), *Problemas de la cultura y la educación* (Montevideo: EPU, 1946); Julia Arévalo, *Crónicas de un mundo de heroísmo* (Montevideo: EPU, 1946); Celia Mieres de Centrón, *Idioma español, segundo curso* (Montevideo: EPU, 1947).

³⁷ Valobra, 'Formación de cuadros y frentes populares'.

Party.³⁸ Most female textile workers joined in with union activities at the basic organisational level. The women were indispensable for ensuring the union's ability to mobilise workers and effectively paralyse factories through strike action. Textile union leaders, invariably men, learned that they had to be responsive to women's complaints and demands, particularly concerning abusive conduct by employers, supervisors and even fellow workers.³⁹

Some Communist leaders called for substantial cultural change within the unions. Enrique Rodríguez, Secretary General of the Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union), demanded 'appropriate conditions and a suitable environment' for the inclusion of women activists and breaking 'the old patriarchal and feudal prejudices that make us believe that only adult men can manage trade unions'.⁴⁰ Despite this courageous statement, key union leadership positions in Uruguay continued to be occupied by men for the next five decades. Some women activists, highly regarded in the textile union, could not become leaders because of their husbands' resistance. Indamira Lacuesta was a brave activist and a great orator. Shortly after her wedding at the age of 22, she had to decline an invitation to represent the Uruguayan textile union at an international conference in Santiago de Chile because 'he would not let me go'. Her husband 'was envious of what I knew, of those I knew, he was jealous because I stood out, jealous because I was applauded'. Lacuesta had to renounce her activism.⁴¹

Hundreds of women, mainly workers from the textile, tannery, button and beverage industries, joined the PCU after their initial successful experience in the unions. Although the PCU seldom endorsed women's specific demands, many of them clearly linked issues of class and gender. Only sometimes would these female voices pass through the filters of Communist press editors, generally insensitive to gender issues. A short speech by a young button factory worker, Hilda Gozurrieta, at a neighbourhood branch ceremony, illustrates their burgeoning consciousness:

For the first time, I climb a public tribune with satisfaction, an honourable memory that I shall carry for as long as I live. I do it on a tribune of the Communist Party [...] As a woman, above all, I feel immensely proud to be able to address my *compañeras* on the very same platform from which the great fighter for the working class, our beloved Julia Arévalo, explained to us, Uruguayan women, our duties in the struggle for a better life [...].⁴²

³⁸ In 1937, 7,063 textile workers were registered as such; in 1941 the number was 9,029, and in 1947 it stood at 12,232. Ana Frega, Mónica Maronna and Ivette Trochón, *Baldomir y la restauración democrática: 1938–1946* (Montevideo: Banda Oriental, 1987), p. 81.

³⁹ See the memoirs of Héctor Rodríguez, *30 años de militancia sindical* (Montevideo: CUI, 1993), and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, *El tejedor: Héctor Rodríguez* (Montevideo: Tae, 1996).

⁴⁰ Enrique Rodríguez, *Informe al primer congreso ordinario de U.G.T.*, Montevideo, April 1944.

⁴¹ Sapriza, *Hilamos una historia*, pp. 27–8.

⁴² *Justicia*, 14 Dec. 1945.

The tribune of the PCU had conferred upon her, if only for a few minutes, a status comparable to that of intellectuals and politicians, the usual occupants of public tribunes.

For some young women joining the PCU was a dignified reaction to their experiences of class and gender abuse. In the Communist register, these were conceptualised as ‘class abuses’. For example, a veteran Communist related the experience that made her join the PCU during the mid-1940s. Barely 16 years old, she and her parents had emigrated from Eastern Europe a few years earlier; she was working in a modern advertising office, typing and packaging brochures. One afternoon her boss offered her a higher salary and to settle her in an apartment if she agreed to become his lover. After throwing a glass of water in his face and leaving in tears, the young girl went to look for two slightly older girls who sold the PCU newspaper in her neighbourhood; she decided to join the Party. In her eyes, those two Communist girls represented dignity and action against immoral capitalism, which had just manifested itself in a most repellent manner.⁴³

Communist women initiated many social and cultural activities catering for women. For example, with the collaboration of female doctors, nurses, medical students and a few sympathetic male physicians, the *Clínica Propia de la Mujer Trabajadora* (Working Woman’s Own Clinic) opened its doors in Capurro, a working-class neighbourhood.⁴⁴ It was a timely response to a growing need for healthcare among working women and a sphere of organisation and empowerment for the activists.

The monthly magazine *Nosotras* was the most representative expression of Communist efforts to politicise women.⁴⁵ It highlighted women’s activism in social, cultural, scientific and political contexts, and did not espouse a single unified conception but echoed a variety of sometimes contradictory viewpoints. In 1946 *Nosotras* came closer to a feminist agenda by alluding to the ‘double exploitation’ of working women and challenging patriarchal culture among the working class. María Celia Ibarburu, for example, referred to the task of forming women’s committees in preparation for the first National Women Workers’ Convention:

⁴³ Interview with Sarita Rozentraub, Montevideo, Oct. 2000.

⁴⁴ *Diario Popular*, 2 Jan. 1945. The clinic was owned and run by the Women’s Union of Uruguay. Attempts to repeat Capurro’s successful experiment failed. One such failure is recorded in ‘Clínica propia de La Teja y Pantanoso’, *El Popular*, 29 March 1957.

⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Leibner, ‘*Nosotras* (Uruguay, 1945–1953)’. *Nosotras* was founded in Jan. 1945. Julia Arévalo was chief editor on behalf of the PCU, while a group of young Communist women did most of the writing and editing, usually without payment. During its first two years, *Nosotras* was able to pay part-time salaries to its main editors and a secretary. It started as a women’s magazine entirely produced by women, but, with the PCU’s growing financial difficulties, it stopped paying salaries and began to rely partly on editing services and copy supplied by male reporters working for *Justicia*, the PCU’s main organ.

Get women workers involved in the committees' tasks, radio broadcasts, delegations, and other activities that will contribute to their development and understanding of the general problems in the Labour and Democratic movements.

Promote women to union committees so that they will have opportunities to train as section leaders. Feminine committees will strengthen the union, form cadres of women that can take steps in the same direction. These women will strengthen the union and break the preconceived notion that women can attend assemblies but not carry out ongoing tasks in the union.⁴⁶

For her part, María Julia Campistrous argued for the right to retirement after 25 years of work for all female employees:

We women who work outside the home – in factories, in businesses, for the state, etc. – have, at the end of our working day, even more tasks that await us. [...] food planning or preparation, the multiple aspects of household care ... Specifically, women have a double workload. Therefore it is only fair that, before men, women should be granted the unequivocal right to retire ...⁴⁷

However, towards the end of the 1940s the tone began to change. Communists now praised women who had fought alongside men in labour conflicts, without addressing the particular difficulties they faced. *Nosotras* highlighted model cases that illustrated the rise of the 'new woman' in Communist-ruled countries: a minister in the People's Democracy of Romania, the President of the Belarussian Parliament,⁴⁸ or the smiling faces of Russian tractor drivers in a *kolkhoz*.⁴⁹ The case of distinguished Uruguayan physician Dr Blanca L. de Baccigaluppi, a non-Communist ally who had recently returned from a women's conference in Paris, symbolised the emergence even in capitalist countries of the 'new woman' as a subject of social transformation.⁵⁰ At the same time a surprisingly traditional female archetype appeared, for instance in a sympathetic report about the deceased Francisca 'Panchita' Chiribao de Gómez, wife of the Party's Secretary General, a devoted housewife.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Nosotras* 10 (Jan. 1946), p. 7.

⁴⁷ Irene Pérez's summary of the women workers' convention, *Nosotras*, 11 (Feb. 1946), p. 17.

⁴⁸ Zajar Shapiro, 'La mujer en la URSS', *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Pictures of happily smiling Soviet women working in factories or on collective farms were published in nearly every issue of *Nosotras* from late 1945 on.

⁵⁰ 'La delegación femenina al Congreso Mundial de Mujeres en París', *Justicia*, 9 Nov. 1945. Participation in the conferences of the Women's International Democratic Federation contributed to the creation of a certain political culture. The Uruguayan representatives talked with pride about their struggles and learned from their comrades. Soviet, East European, French and Argentine Communist women were the most influential in those congresses. See *Second Women's International Congress: Account of the Work of the Congress which took place in Budapest 1–6 December 1948* (Paris: WIDF, 1949).

⁵¹ 'Hablemos de su recuerdo', *Nosotras*, 77 (Aug. 1952).

Nosotras' ambiguous attitude towards women's activism is also reflected in its report from a trade union office.⁵² While some young women workers were expressing militant enthusiasm, an experienced male union leader said: 'They are the backbone of the organisation and the ones who drive and encourage me to keep fighting the good fight. [...] One *compañera* in action represents ten men. When an organised working woman fights to assert her rights, this pushes the leaders to follow with even greater enthusiasm.'⁵³ A few years after the call by Enrique Rodríguez to bring about anti-patriarchal cultural change within the unions, middle-aged male leaders were paternalistically praising women's rank-and-file activism.

Nosotras' view of gender relations was no less ambiguous. It highlighted the possibility of achieving equality and breaking the mould of traditional role divisions, a process supposedly under way in the USSR and in the 'popular democracies' of eastern Europe.⁵⁴ But the models presented to Uruguayan women were contradictory: the young, militant female workers in the textile union supporting male leaders; modern, successful and progressive professional women; the caring and devoted wife of the Party's Secretary General; and, next to these, the contrasting model of Julia Arévalo, editor of *Nosotras*, Senator and member of the PCU Central Committee. At the same time, *Nosotras* presented demands regarding the family's shopping basket as 'feminine', assuming this would appeal to women's everyday experience.⁵⁵ Hence the telling statement: 'The best way to defend your husband's salary is to form a women's committee.'⁵⁶

In the late 1940s, the PCU press assumed that a 'housewife's awareness' was a practical starting point for discussing broader politics with women. In a description of the Women's Convention recently organised by the Women's Union of Uruguay, *Nosotras* stated: 'there was talk of fruit and vegetables, of their exorbitant prices, and of the absolute necessity for

⁵² *Nosotras*, 8 (Oct. 1945).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ In a single issue of *Nosotras*, for example, there is an article by Y. Umansky entitled 'In the USSR Women Have the Same Rights as Men' (p. 23), a letter signed by Klavia Zenova, member of the Supreme Soviet and forewoman in a big Moscow factory, criticising positions on the Cold War adopted by Eleonore Roosevelt (widow of former US president) (p. 8), and a portrait article on the life of Ana Pauker, Foreign Minister of Romania (p. 19): *Nosotras*, 32 (Aug. 1948).

⁵⁵ The discourse of Costa Rica's Communist Party towards women's mobilisation included similar contradictions. However, the existing research focuses on public discourse and does not include practices. Since Communist Parties around the world had the same textual references, similar public discourses are likely to be found, whereas practices depended much more on divergent and specific realities. Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz, 'Madres, reformas sociales y sufragismo: el Partido Comunista de Costa Rica y sus discursos de movilización política de las mujeres (1931–1948)', *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.m.bio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe*, 11: 1 (2014), pp. 45–77.

⁵⁶ *Nosotras*, 32 (Aug. 1948), p. 2.

Agrarian Reform'.⁵⁷ When writing for *Justicia*, the PCU's central organ, women reporters covered social issues that called for state assistance, while men primarily focused on labour conflicts. Poverty impinging on family households was constructed as a 'feminine' issue.⁵⁸

Contradictions and Ambiguities of Sectarian Introspection, 1948–55

In the hostile atmosphere of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the PCU went through a process of sectarian introspection, internal 'purges' and increasing political isolation, which affected women's participation and the framing of gender issues, albeit in contradictory ways. On the one hand, the dogmatic stance and reaffirmation of what set Communists apart from the rest of society involved particularly strong messages of radical allegiance to Communist ideals, including equality between men and women. The Communist press no longer made concessions to the habits of the middle classes, as it had done during the anti-Fascist period, nor did it make too many allowances for cultural conservatism within the working class. Isolationist dogmatism allowed some leeway for expressions of principled behaviour emphasising the rights of working women, presenting them again as subject to 'double exploitation' and providing outstanding models of female militants.⁵⁹ Such women were considered the best activists on 'feminine' issues such as the 'struggle for peace and against the high cost of provisions'.⁶⁰

During this period of intense regard for dogma, PCU activities always included at least one woman in a position of leadership. For example, the Special Commission appointed to solve the Party's financial crisis in 1952 was headed by five Party leaders, two of them women.⁶¹ This principled attitude towards women leaders' pivotal roles takes on special meaning when, a decade later, in the midst of a period of Party growth, a marked male hegemony can be observed. The example of Argentine Communist women leaders may have inspired the Uruguayan Communists during the 1950s. Under the military and Peronist regimes, the PCA was illegal most of the time. Argentine Communists, among them prominent women like Alcira de la

⁵⁷ *Nosotras*, 34 (Jan. 1949), p. 18: '¡Carestía no!, dijo la Convención de Unión Femenina del Uruguay.'

⁵⁸ For example, Regina Kanonich and Beatriz Soares Netto, 'El Municipio desaloja a las familias pobres en Maipú y Ramón Anador', *Justicia*, 3 Aug. 1951.

⁵⁹ For example, Amanda Canale's interview with Ema Cabrera about her daily life as a textile worker, 'Así vivo y trabajo', *Nosotras*, 77 (Aug. 1952).

⁶⁰ *Justicia*, 22 July 1951. The newspaper's report concerned the Women's Committee of Villa Dolores, which had collected women's signatures for a petition supporting peace and demanding that the municipality provide enough stock for local butchers' shops.

⁶¹ 'Dirigen la gran campaña', *Justicia*, 4 April 1952.

Peña, spent some time in Uruguay enjoying the hospitality of PCU activists. In the lists of candidates for the 1950s elections, the PCU nominated at least one outstanding woman.⁶² In the 1960s, the 'outstanding women' of the 1950 or 1954 elections would disappear from most lists.

On the other hand, this period, when the PCU functioned as a closed dogmatic sect, hostile to broader society, was also characterised by a much more pronounced hierarchical structure. The Party expressed devotion to its national leader, Eugenio Gómez, and to Stalin, as well as to some of its own minor leaders. Party cells and committees were named after the leader who headed them. Some cells or committees were chaired by women. For instance, the committees dubbed 'Rosita Dubinsky', 'María Cristina Zerpa', 'Rita Suárez Ibarburu' and, of course, 'Julia Arévalo' featured in the Communist press during the 1950 electoral campaign. Other women were singled out by the Party press by virtue of specific roles they played. Irene Pérez, an activist in the 'La Aurora' textile factory, was often mentioned, as was Rosita Dubinsky, Secretary of the PCU's Education Commission. Even in its reports about everyday grassroots activities, the PCU press of the 1950s made an effort to give prominence to women.⁶³ The sectarian attitudes also extended to the Party's increased intervention in its activists' private and family life. The Disciplinary Commission intervened in cases of supposed infidelity, imposing sanctions in the name of 'morality', understood as monogamous and heterosexual.⁶⁴ In 1950s Uruguay, a society characterised by hypocrisy and men's relative sexual liberty compared to that of their wives, the 'moral vigilance' exercised by the Party was probably construed by many as protective toward women.

Simultaneously, sectarian practices and a personality cult led to an extreme case of sexual harassment and abuse of power by the Secretary General's son, Eugenio Gómez Chiribao, who, despite his young age, had become the Party's Organisation Secretary. This case was at the heart of the internal crisis in the

⁶² In 1950 Julia Arévalo was the second candidate on the PCU's list for the Senate; Amalia Polleri was 13th on the PCU's list for the Chamber of Deputies; author and intellectual Carmen Garayalde was first on the list of PCU candidates to the Electoral Board. In 1954, Julia Arévalo was the second candidate for the National Government Council and second candidate for the Senate; Alcira Legaspi was an alternate (substitute) for Senate candidate number 4; on the list of Deputies, Rosa Dubinsky was number 9, Irene Pérez 18, Amalia Polleri 21. They had no real chance of being elected but the PCU placed them in prominent positions. In 1954, Carmen Garayalde and Erlinda Gutiérrez (a worker) topped the Communist list for the Montevideo City Board of mayors.

⁶³ A photo-report about the PCU cell in a Jewish medical society referred to six members, four of them women, and praised the 'outstanding activist' Rosa Dembovich: 'La agrup. mutualista israelita', *Justicia*, 20 Jan. 1950. Another report described the Communist cell at the Frigorífico Nacional company, which included six men led by a woman: 'La agrup. comunista del Frigorífico Nacional', *Justicia*, 15 Feb. 1952.

⁶⁴ This was very similar to the later attitude of Argentina's PRT-ERP (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores-Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo), as described by Cosse, 'Infidelities'.

PCU leadership in July 1955,⁶⁵ which resulted in the expulsion of both son and father, and a subsequent strategic shift, both organisational and political. The outraged moral reaction was decisive in the internal power struggle. The immediate review of the PCU's political practices and strategy made possible its swift and successful transformation. Within 15 years, the small and isolated party had become a mass party, hegemonic within the labour unions, and the bastion of the 1970s Frente Amplio (Broad Front) that broke the traditional model of Uruguayan bipartisanship. The sexual abuse scandal was so decisive for the political shift that eventually it was actively forgotten, relegated to the margins of the Party's institutional memory and absent from its leaders' public reports.⁶⁶ For later generations of Communists it became a vague, little-known rumour.⁶⁷ Despite the obvious differences between 'institutional memory' and militants' personal memories, there are some common elements and, I suggest, a consistent pattern of oblivion or suppression of memories of sexual harassment within Communist narratives involving traumatic experiences that were crucial for the forging of political identification. For the Party it was a decisive moment that led to a change of leadership, the most important turning point in its history. For some women, such as Sarita Rozenraub, experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace were pivotal in their decisions to take a stance and join the Party. As time passed and official Communist narratives took shape, such defining elements were buried and confined to rarely shared memories.

The Mass Party: More Women, Less Prominence, More Gender Conservatism

One of the keys to the political success of the Communists from the late 1950s lay in their persistent attempt to break down psychological barriers that had previously separated them from large sections of Uruguayan society. This included the adoption of a language and practices closer to the culture and habits of sectors from which the Party sought to recruit new members.⁶⁸ The commitment to gender equality, to changing power relations and to promoting alternative female models were among the elements sacrificed in the attempt to adapt Communist practices and messages to the level of consciousness of the broad masses of workers. This was not a deliberate nor an explicit decision but the cumulative result of numerous local developments. For example, it was decided that *El Popular*, the new Communist newspaper

⁶⁵ Leibner, *Camaradas y compañeros*, pp. 198–207.

⁶⁶ Since the early 1960s, the official documents of the PCU have referred to the moral scandal of July 1955 just as 'the 1955 crisis', 'the cult of personality deviations', 'the violations of Party norms'. See Leibner, *Camaradas y compañeros*, pp. 229–34, 265–8.

⁶⁷ I base this assessment on 20 interviews which I conducted in 2000, 2003 and 2004, and two more in 2013.

⁶⁸ Leibner, *Camaradas y compañeros*, pp. 287–94.

founded in February 1957, should publish whatever would interest workers. The newspaper tried to reflect popular culture, considered mainly in masculine terms.⁶⁹ Likewise, content deemed 'feminine' expressed conformity to traditional gender norms. Female readers could find in the sections devoted to them more cooking recipes and tips for children's education than examples of women transgressing gender roles or challenging male oppression. More than in previous decades, female voices of struggle were tied to their role as consumers – as 'housewives' and mothers – rather than to their role as working women. While it cannot be denied that women's militancy in the trade unions was still being promoted,⁷⁰ what changed substantially was emphasis and scope. In the 1960s the PCU reverted to a largely maternalist attitude. This was exemplified in an invitation to a women's preparatory event before the PCU's 18th Congress: 'the Communist Party will raise the demands of Uruguayan women for retirement after 25 years of work, regardless of age, for neighbourhood nurseries, for their children's right to a school and university education'.⁷¹

The PCU's first two 'demands of Uruguayan women' implied recognition of the over-exploitation of working women, acknowledged the unequal division of roles in the household, and aimed to alleviate the burden on women. The third demand, however, regarded mothers as entrusted with children's education. How is it that children's right of access to education came to be framed specifically as a women's issue? If during the 1940s and 1950s the PCU had timidly tried to encourage men to take part in the raising of children in order to promote women's participation in all spheres of public life, by the 1960s it no longer did so. The statement continued:

more and more women enlist in the people's struggle for liberation. In the trade unions [...] within the movements in support of the Cuban Revolution, against Franco's dictatorship, and in the anti-Fascist and mass organisations. And naturally, the Uruguayan woman is at the forefront of the people demanding to put an immediate stop to the brutally high cost of living.⁷²

While supposedly encouraging female involvement in all issues, the PCU considered that women's most visible and 'natural' role was in the struggle against the high cost of living.

⁶⁹ Leibner, 'Parti de masses, parti masculinisé?', pp. 143–4.

⁷⁰ The few outstanding working women's leaders who were being reported on had already been prominent during the preceding period: Irene Pérez, Blanca Peralta and 'Tita' Cogo. See *El Popular*, 10 Aug. 1958, p. 7 and 'La palabra de la mujer trabajadora. Un reportaje a la dirigente sindical Amalia Cogo', *El Popular*, 30 June 1968.

⁷¹ 'Mañana acto femenino del Partido Comunista', *El Popular*, 4 June 1962.

⁷² *Ibid.*

The PCU's successful strategic shift also led to a marked decrease in women's presence in high-ranking positions. Julia Arévalo ceased to be a candidate for the national legislature. No other Communist woman reached such a position until the late 1980s, after the 1973–85 military dictatorship that suspended all democratic institutions, including parliament. From 1958 to 1962 Arévalo was a municipal council member for Montevideo. In 1962 she was relegated from the top of the list of candidates for the municipal council to the second position. From 1966 until after the dictatorship, the national and municipal lists of the Frente Izquierda de Liberación (FideL, Left Liberation Front),⁷³ whose core was comprised of Communists, did not include any prominent women.⁷⁴

Paradoxically, the regression in promoting women's political representation was accompanied by the integration of new generations of female activists. During the 1960s, the Women's Union of Uruguay was headed by Sonia Bialous, whose words are cited at the beginning of this article. However, she enjoyed a limited degree of visibility and recognition from her own party. Her activity was made possible because her husband, Julio Dutrenit, himself a Communist intellectual, renounced some of his own activism to attend to the family pharmacy and thus facilitate her dedication.⁷⁵ This was an unusual attitude among Communist men.⁷⁶ From 1962, Bialous was also secretary of FideL's Women's Committee.

The number of women among trade union militants also grew, because of the increasing number of working women and the integration of civil servants and white-collar workers into the Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (National Workers' Convention, CNT), a new labour umbrella organisation.

⁷³ The acronym of the Left Liberation Front, created and led by the PCU in 1962, was chosen with reference to Fidel Castro, who was extremely popular with the Uruguayan Left. The Cuban revolution was warmly welcomed by the PCU, which maintained good relations with its leaders and appropriated its revolutionary symbols, charged with masculine connotations.

⁷⁴ In the Chilean Communist Party, the only other Latin American Communist Party with constant parliamentary representation during the 1960s, an internal struggle was conducted in order to have a first woman in parliament. After a failed attempt to promote a female candidate in 1959–60, 23-year-old Gladys Marín became in 1965 the first Communist woman in the Chilean parliament: Yazmín Lecourt, 'Relaciones de género y liderazgo de mujeres dentro del Partido Comunista de Chile', unpubl. MA thesis, Universidad de Chile, 2005.

⁷⁵ Information about Sonia Bialous' career and family background was obtained from her daughter, Silvia Dutrenit. Personal communication, May 2003.

⁷⁶ To cite an example of the attitude typical of Communist men at the time: Rita 'Chicha' Ibarburu was a highly regarded activist. From the 1940s she was a reporter for PCU's newspapers and formed part of its propaganda teams. For more than a decade, until 1973, she was Secretary Editor of *Estudios*, the Party's theoretical journal, and trusted assistant to Rodney Arismendi, the Chief Editor. Since she was married to Alberto Suárez, the PCU's Organisation Secretary, and married couples were not allowed to be part of the same organ, she was not eligible for the top party leadership forums. Without children, both were able to devote themselves fully to politics, but he did not step aside for her.

In June 1968 the Women's Union of Uruguay announced its dissolution and the incorporation of its leaders, membership and property, including the Capurro Clínica Propia de la Mujer Trabajadora, mentioned above, into the Women's Commission of the CNT.⁷⁷ This formally subordinated women's struggles to those of the working class, abandoning for a while the goal of a multi-class space for women, as the Women's Union had been in the 1940s.

However, the main practical problem for the development of women's labour activism remained the division of roles in working-class homes. In the 1960s, this thorny issue was simply cast aside by all Uruguayan left-wing organisations. The Communists preferred to avoid cultural conflicts within the working class and did not challenge gender relations. In the Communist press of the 1960s, which had far wider range than that of previous decades, I have not come across any appeals to find ways of adjusting the scope and practices of activism to women's needs, as Enrique Rodríguez had done in 1944. Husbands were not asked to take on household tasks in order to facilitate wives' activism. According to some of my interviewees, this was occasionally done by gently appealing to a specific person, but it no longer formed part of a public commitment of the Communist Party. The 'double burden' of the female worker was mentioned only in support of social legislation such as maternity leave or early retirement for women, not to challenge the division of labour in households.⁷⁸

According to interviews conducted with Communist working women, their militancy reached its peak just before marriage or the birth of their first child.⁷⁹ It was very difficult for a married woman to find work; many factories sought to avoid dealing with demands for maternity leave.⁸⁰ The few women who continued with intensive activist involvement were either unmarried or childless.⁸¹ In the entire Uruguayan Left no new Julia Arévalo surfaced, neither in terms of her public prominence nor of her dual role as political leader and mother.⁸²

⁷⁷ 'Incorporación a la Comisión Femenina de la CNT', *El Popular*, 4 July 1968.

⁷⁸ 'Mujeres obreras manifestarán junto a UGT el 2 de setiembre', *El Popular*, 24 Aug. 1958.

⁷⁹ A Communist activist from Nuevo París, a working-class neighbourhood, mentioned that his own father criticised him in the late 1960s for allowing his wife to work part-time. If young married mothers faced such social pressure when working, one can surmise how difficult it must have been to be politically active. Interview with Oscar Fernández, Montevideo, Aug. 2013.

⁸⁰ On one occasion, textile strikers demanded the restitution of a worker dismissed for 'being married and not declaring that when receiving the job'. 'Por la reposición de la obrera despedida en Fibratex', *El Popular*, 15 July 1958.

⁸¹ Felina 'Chichí' López was a dedicated activist from the 1950s, unmarried and without children. In the 1960s she became Organisation Secretary of the Communist cell in the Hilanderías del Uruguay spinning factory. Even for her, an experienced organiser, leading positions outside the factory were mostly inaccessible. Interview, Montevideo, Feb. 2004.

⁸² The activism of many married Tupamaro men was backed by spouses who looked after their children and were labelled 'peripheral activists'. Clara Aldrighi, *Memorias de insurgencia* (Montevideo: Banda Oriental, 2009).

In an article dating from 1962, Julia Arévalo herself addressed, with veiled criticism, the issue of women's integration into the PCU and into trade union activism.⁸³ Most of her proposals did not extend beyond generalities, except for one suggestion – to reinstate separate women's cells and committees.⁸⁴ The topic was certainly always under discussion within the PCU. There were activists – men as well as some women – who were opposed to women-only cells. Many experienced women, well integrated into the Party, were reluctant to join a women's cell. They saw it as a regression in their own status.⁸⁵ Leaders of 'mixed' cells were also unwilling to relinquish the few *compañeras* they could rely on in order to assist in the creation of a women's cell. Apparently, women-only cells had been much more attractive in preceding decades, but changes in Montevidean public culture from the end of the 1950s made them look anachronistic. For the majority of young females, the ongoing modernising process of women entering most public spaces and institutions was an important advancement and they did not want to be pushed back into segregated spaces.⁸⁶ Ana Laura de Giorgi correctly pointed to the reluctance of young Communists during the late 1960s to recognise a grand old Communist like Julia Arévalo as a model for women.⁸⁷

During the expansion of Communist activities within new working-class neighbourhoods from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, young women's participation in Communist branches was represented as something novel and even 'exotic', another attractive reason for male members to join. *El Popular* described a Communist Youth working-class circle in 1958: 'These boys, workers from Carmeta, Aceranza, Radio Mayo, [...]. There is also the kind and pleasant presence of some pretty and friendly young female members of the Circle, who, like their *compañeros*, actively participate in political and organisational life.'⁸⁸

Women's participation in Communist activities grew during the 1960s, and their presence basically returned to being regarded as 'natural'. As women workers were encouraged to mobilise as workers, irrespective of their specific conditions,⁸⁹ they were presented as fighting for supposedly 'feminine' issues in the Communist newspaper's reports of their participation in

⁸³ Julia Arévalo, 'La mujer en las luchas obreras y populares', *El Popular*, 4 June 1962.

⁸⁴ Valobra, 'Formación de cuadros y frentes populares', shows that in the late 1940s segregated women's cells enabled the development of women cadres in the PCA and simultaneously limited women's prominence in its structures.

⁸⁵ As conveyed by two activists during interviews: these were invited to join women's cells, but preferred to remain in 'mixed' cells.

⁸⁶ On the changing habits among young leftists during the 1960s, see Markarian, *El 68 uruguayo*, pp. 132–7.

⁸⁷ De Giorgi, 'La otra nueva ola', pp. 210–11.

⁸⁸ 'Amable fiesta realizó el círculo Juvenil Unión', *El Popular*, 21 July 1958.

⁸⁹ Rosita Dubinsky, 'Nuestras futuras gaviotas ... En fábricas, campos, liceos y escuelas, en barrios y oficinas la mujer combate y forja su unidad', *El Popular*, 10 Jan. 1964.

struggles. For example, a photo of female textile workers marching in the street in the rain was entitled 'Nothing can Stop them in their Struggle against Poverty.'⁹⁰ A women's demonstration during a labour conflict was hence touted a 'struggle against poverty', whereas male workers took part in struggles for rights, for salaries or for justice.⁹¹

Moreover, representations of 'the feminine' in *El Popular*, even in the late 1960s, at a time of political and cultural effervescence, of mass integration of young people into social and political struggles, and of generalised rebellion, were notoriously conservative. For example, on the significant date of 5 May 1968, in the midst of great youth uprisings and workers' demonstrations in Uruguay, as in many other countries,⁹² *El Popular* included, as it did every Sunday, a page devoted 'To the Woman and the Home'. There was also a section on the same page entitled 'Young, Fashionable Girls', accompanied by photos of teenage models: 'For the teenage girl's choice, these three designs will be super trendy this coming winter. Brushed fleece in a brand-new style, paired with bold accessories, adds a special charm to the profile of the young female student or employee.'

Targeting two emerging sectors of the youth – students and office employees – this evidently did not differ much from what might appear in any commercial 'bourgeois' newspaper. As noted by Vania Markarian in respect of *minifaldas* ('miniskirts'),⁹³ Communists were embracing aspects of Western youth's modern fashion. They also contributed to the growing legitimisation of changing conventions with regard to courting, pre-marital sex and freer interactions between young men and women. However, from the point of view of gender roles and gender relations, theirs was no more than a timid liberalisation. On the same page another article targeted housewives, explaining how to prepare caramel pancakes. Below, under the heading 'Take this into Account, Mum', readers were given advice about the care and education of children.

The third section of the same page was different. A box with the byline of Irene Pérez, Secretary of the CNT's Women's Commission, was entitled: 'In Light of the Brutal Police Attack on 1 May, the Female Worker Will Respond

⁹⁰ 'Nada las detiene en su lucha contra la miseria', *El Popular*, 3 July 1962.

⁹¹ Covering a protest by meat workers, *El Popular's* journalist spoke with 'women workers and with some wives of workers'. Instead of talking about salaries, as he had done earlier with the men, the dialogue focused on hunger and shortages. 'Los trabajadores de la carne se mantienen en pre-conflicto. Mujeres del Cerro hablan sobre la cruda realidad en que viven', *El Popular*, 20 July 1958.

⁹² Gould, 'Solidarity under Siege'.

⁹³ Markarian, *El 68 uruguayo*, p. 78. Markarian, 'To the Beat', convincingly shows how flexible the PCU was in adapting to new youth cultures. By allowing a variety of cultures to coexist, the Communist Youth was able to unify thousands of young people around its main political mission.

with Increased Militancy.’ Returning to the dramatic events of that week, women were addressed to mobilise as workers:

In this impressive demonstration, the mass participation of female workers stands out as a remarkable event and as a sign of new times. [...] it is an indication of the growth of women’s consciousness, [...] they understand more fully every day that it is only when organised and [as participants] in the struggle that the pressing issues of every household can be resolved.

This rather interesting approach sheds light on the contradictions of Communist messages directed at women. Even a militant call for women to join the struggle claimed that only through activism could they resolve household problems, assuming that such an argument was necessary to increase mobilisation. Women taking public action were not portrayed as a social challenge, nor in terms of their empowerment; rather, they were depicted as caring for the family. The transgression of social conventions – women protesting – was presented as an effort to defend traditional social values.

The appeal to traditional values in order to promote women’s mobilisation reveals one key to the success of the PCU in this period – a strategy that sought to shape, mobilise and develop revolutionary consciousness on the basis of the existing social ideology in popular milieus. The editors of *El Popular* believed that since recipes, childcare advice, and fashion ads reflected the everyday interests of the majority of working-class women, they were necessary to reach and mobilise them, without upsetting deeply-rooted gender values. In the interviews with veterans who were young Communists at that time, no criticism or unease was voiced with regard to these conservative attitudes.⁹⁴ While the activities of the Communist Youth provided opportunities for less controlled interactions between young men and women and a relatively safe environment for young women to participate in activities at night,⁹⁵ which undoubtedly empowered them, their increasing participation had no impact on the PCU’s agenda or on the absence of women from its leadership. In a period of intensified confrontation with an increasingly authoritarian

⁹⁴ The 1960s young communist interviewed in 2000, 2003 and 2004 were Luis Carlos Barboza, Adhemar Bas, Marissa Battagazzore, Lina García, León Lev, Tatiana Oroño and Ramón Rivarola. Leftist criticism of the PCU in the 1960s alluded only to revolutionary strategy, not to the Party’s conservative attitudes. Ana María Araújo and Horacio Tejera, *La imaginación al poder: 1968–1988* (Montevideo: FCU, 1988); Eduardo Rey Tristán, *La izquierda revolucionaria uruguaya, 1955–1973* (Seville: CSIC, 2005); Leibner, ‘Las ideologías sociales’; María Ferraro-Osorio, ‘En 1968 la mayoría de los uruguayos fuimos jóvenes: o la entrada en disidencia de una generación’, *Nuevo Mundo – Mundos Nuevos* (2009), available at <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/56227>, last access 14 Oct. 2017; Markarian, *El 68 uruguayo*.

⁹⁵ Leibner, *Camaradas y compañeros*, pp. 300–27; de Giorgi, ‘La otra nueva ola’; Markarian, ‘To the Beat’.

regime, the Communist organisation was looking for militants (men or women) for ‘the main struggle’, and was not interested in promoting women’s liberation or cultural conflicts within the working class.⁹⁶

The argument put forward by María del Carmen Feijoó and Marcela Nari with regard to the Argentine radicalised Left of the 1960s applies here.⁹⁷ Women’s liberation was overshadowed by the forthcoming Socialist revolution. In an article on the eve of International Women’s Day in 1965, activist Elisa Basovich explained how the struggle for women’s liberation was related to the supposedly imminent Socialist revolution. Since women’s oppression began with the appropriation of labour as private property, its abolition would lead to women’s liberation: ‘The entire Socialist camp is living a reality of the abolition of private property in the means of production; there, nobody can exploit anybody, so women will finally be liberated. They have shown that they can do any kind of task for the common good.’⁹⁸

During 1968–9 tens of thousands were involved in head-on clashes with representatives of the established order. Workers at UTE, the state-owned electricity and telephone company, were the protagonists of one of the most heated labour conflicts. Concerned because of the company’s strategic importance and determined to break AUTE (Agrupación UTE), its Communist-led union, President Pacheco Areco decreed the company’s services essential and took it under military control. In its coverage of the conflict, *El Popular* emphasised the central role of women: ‘The women delegates understand the importance of prioritising the full integration of women into the union. Regarding this matter, María Cristina Ures, committee member of AUTE’s interurban transmission section, was adamant, given the majority of women in her area of work (approximately 85 per cent).’⁹⁹

The growing presence of women in many workplaces during the 1960s was indeed a challenge for union leaders. They thought about how to integrate them into the unions, but did not realise that this would require changing the structures of the union, its practices and its language.¹⁰⁰

With the deterioration in economic and social conditions and growing political polarisation Uruguay experienced new forms of political violence in 1968. In August, Líber Arce, a Communist student, was gunned down in

⁹⁶ I disagree with de Giorgi’s argument that ‘the Communist discourse, centred on equality, did not allow them to develop a political practice that would allow them to perceive socio-cultural differences that goes beyond what they defined as the main contradiction’. As I have shown, in earlier periods the discourse of equality did allow Uruguayan Communists to perceive gendered relations of power and differential conditions.

⁹⁷ Feijoó and Nari, ‘Women in Argentina during the 1960s’.

⁹⁸ ‘8 de Marzo, Día Internacional de la Mujer’, *El Popular*, 7 March 1965.

⁹⁹ ‘La Agrupación UTE elabora petitorio de presupuesto; activa participación de las trabajadoras’, *El Popular*, 22 June 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Wladimir Turiansky, leader of AUTE, later admitted: ‘we were blind to the issue’. Interview, Montevideo, Feb. 2004.

the street by police during a protest, becoming the first Uruguayan student martyr. The spectacular actions with which the Tupamaro guerrillas had launched themselves on to the world's stage also made clear the potential for violent death. At odds with the Tupamaros in the Uruguayan context, but justifying guerrillas in other Latin American countries, *El Popular* made reference to Tamara Bunke, alias Tania, the Argentine-German martyr who had died in Bolivia a year earlier while serving with Che Guevara's guerrilla group. Her martyrdom had special significance: 'The main lesson that springs from her fighting example: the gradual incorporation of women in great struggles for national liberation against imperialism.'¹⁰¹ If the example – so near yet so far (Bolivia) – of a woman martyr was necessary for Uruguayan Communists to publicly point out a path for women's activism which did indeed imply a break with models of womanhood prevailing in Uruguayan society, it was a 'model' mentioned with reference to an armed struggle which the Communists still considered inappropriate for Uruguay.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, women's martyrdom quickly became a hot topic. On 21 September, two other young Communist students were killed by the police during street protests. First, Hugo de los Santos was injured, shot while his comrades sought shelter at the entrance to the university. As the police kept firing, young Communist Susana Pintos, waving a piece of white cloth, left her refuge to help the wounded. She was hit by a bullet and later died. The following day, the Communist newspaper reported the deaths and presented the two new martyrs.¹⁰³ Susana Pintos' description fitted the mould of a heroine. Unlike Bunke (whose only 'feminine' attribute mentioned was her beauty), Pintos was endowed with 'feminine' traits. She had been a dedicated *compañera*; a fellow student described her as 'a sister' who, with her 'big heart', was always exemplary in the way she helped others. A hardworking student, secretary of the Student Association, she was said to have continued to fulfil her tasks even when unwell. Susana Pintos was killed for attempting to rescue the injured and 'her final words were to inquire about the fellow student she was with at the very moment that they wounded her'.¹⁰⁴

These descriptions matched socially accepted 'feminine' ideals of selflessness and sacrifice. If in the case of Hugo de los Santos the fact that he was hit while marching at the front of the demonstration was highlighted (asserting his 'manly' courage in the face of the police), in the case of Susana Pintos it was her eager and selfless devotion that was emphasised. Her sacrifice could be

¹⁰¹ Francisco Ramírez, 'A un año de la muerte de "Tania", la guerrillera', *El Popular – Revista de los Viernes*, 6 Sept. 1968.

¹⁰² The PCU did not rule out the possibility of resorting to armed struggle in the near future. Leibner, *Camaradas y compañeros*, chap. 13.

¹⁰³ 'Dos muchachos ejemplares', *El Popular*, 22 Sept. 1968.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

understood even by those who still believed that a woman had no business confronting the police in the streets.

A few days later, the Communist newspaper promoted another example of women taking to the streets, offering a further model of mobilisation:

An unusual event occurred on Thursday afternoon in Ciudad Vieja, when 5,000 women, many accompanied by their children, conducted a silent demonstration from the Cathedral to Plaza Independencia in memory of the young fallen martyrs from the recent events, and in support of the return to democratic normalcy [...] women from the most diverse social sectors wearing black ribbons; [...] leaders of the National Women's Movement for Liberty: Sra Chouy Terra, Sra Gómez, Sra Fernández, Sra Ornstein and Sra Alba Roballo; leaders of the Women's Committee of the FIdEL: Julia Arévalo, Sonia Bialous de Dutrenit, Elina Crotoggini de Restuccia; the wives of Senators Michelini and Vasconcellos; leaders of the working class: Irene Pérez, Amalia Cogo and Alicia Rezzano; nuns, teachers, UTU professors; local government employees, public administration officials, municipal workers; factory workers, students, prisoners' wives, housewives ...¹⁰⁵

This was a 'civilised' and 'feminine' protest, involving a broad political spectrum. Women were 'unusually' taking to the streets to defend 'democratic normalcy'. The solemn march, silent and orderly, was both a wise tactical move to neutralise police's repression and a cultural message to legitimise women's mobilisation in a still fairly conservative society. Yet it also reflected conceptions of civility and decency shared by the demonstrators. What a difference from the 'frantic [Communist] troublemakers' of the early 1930s! The women marching in 1968 resembled far more the bourgeois march that Communist women had disrupted three decades earlier. Even working-class Communist women had internalised – at least on paper – some bourgeois standards.

In PCU documents, in the programmes of its political front, and even in documents of its University Committee from the mid-1960s, a women's agenda was practically non-existent.¹⁰⁶ FIdEL's women's committees acted as an extension of FIdEL itself, framing limited issues as 'women's demands': improved housing conditions, more day-care centres, an end to price rises, and provision of school dinners.¹⁰⁷ In an effort to be attuned to

¹⁰⁵ 'La demostración femenina del jueves', *El Popular*, 28 Sept. 1968. While the bourgeois women – politicians or wives of politicians – were described as 'Señora', the communists were named without this title. The UTU is the Universidad del Trabajo del Uruguay, a technical university.

¹⁰⁶ At FIdEL, *Segunda Convención del Comité Universitario*, 6–9 May 1965, there was no mention of women's demands. FIdEL, *Plataforma de lucha* (1966), listed 'feminine' demands as: 'extension of health and maternity insurance coverage', 'women's right to work', 'retirement pension coverage for all working-women', special protection for 'motherhood and childhood', 'kindergartens and nurseries in companies'.

¹⁰⁷ 'Comités femeninos del FIdEL encaran vasta movilización', *El Popular*, 6 April 1963.

the consciousness of those whom it was seeking to integrate in its political project, the PCU encouraged women's participation through channels that were recognised as 'feminine' from a relatively conservative point of view. From the perspective of Uruguayan Communists' previous trajectory, there was some backpedalling, precisely at times of growth in Uruguayan communism: times that led to the establishment of the Frente Amplio, the political left-wing force that was to transform Uruguayan politics, just before the massive repression by the military dictatorship. This notwithstanding, the tens of thousands of Uruguayan women who took part in the mobilisations of the 1960s and early 1970s undoubtedly experienced some kind of life-changing empowerment, even if it was not portrayed as such at that time.

Conclusion

From the early 1920s, Uruguayan Communists considered women's liberation from patriarchy and the promotion of equality between men and women to be part of their agenda. Yet as members of the very society that they wished to transform, Uruguayan Communists also shared many of the prejudices and attitudes they hoped to overcome; their practices were hence often contradictory and ambivalent. But there was a history to this complex trajectory. Some forms of solidarity with anti-Fascist struggles in Europe favoured women's participation and prominence (1935–45), and the PCU also promoted women's representation in politics and their self-representation in its press. Many working women entered the ranks of the PCU motivated by experiences of abuse – which they framed as class abuse, while noting its gendered dimensions. However, in the early 1950s, as the climate of the Cold War reduced the political influence of the PCU and it developed the dynamic of a closed sect, women's activities were seriously affected. Contradictions were exacerbated: a strong verbal commitment to ideological principles, including women's rights and women's political participation, went hand in hand with women losing their prominence in the PCU's leadership while patriarchal and abusive practices were bolstered by a local personality cult. Different contradictions emerged with the PCU's cultural rapprochement to the working class during the period of its transformation from a small, isolated sect to a mass party (1955 to the early 1970s): women's mass entry into the party accompanied by a regression to more traditional and maternalist approaches to women's issues, integration into mixed cells and activities and loss of political prominence, increasing mobilisation in the name of 'normalcy'. Paradoxically, some of the means used by the PCU to promote women's mobilisation during the late 1960s conformed to bourgeois notions of decency that in the 1930s had been used to criticise poor women as Communist agitators as they erupted into public spaces. As the Party built its growing political force

around its increasing expectations of wielding political power, gender – as one of the issues belonging to a previous agenda of progressive cultural transformation of the working classes, with its implication of conflict – was set aside, relegated to the time following the expected revolution.

The history of women in the PCU in the period studied here confirms Helen Safa's observation that militant Latin American women tended to highlight their reproductive role as wives, mothers and consumers of state services, confronting primarily the state and not capital.¹⁰⁸ However, this article refutes the assumption that such a role challenged traditional Marxist emphasis on labour unions as the main site of mobilisation. The PCU, a 'traditional Marxist party', did indeed mobilise women by invoking their reproductive roles, but at the same time organised many young women in factory cells and union committees. Despite recent studies on the history of feminism and women's participation in Latin American Left politics, the contradictory periods of the 1950s and 1960s still await further research. This study suggests that, in the case of the PCU, women's wider participation in the 1960s was paradoxically bought at the price of taking some steps back from the PCU's earlier, more feminist standpoint, and by avoiding open cultural confrontations inside the working class. This was the result not only of a strategic choice, but also of quotidian contradictions within the Party, itself part of the society it intended to radically transform. In this respect, the experience of PCU women – as well that of women in other mass organisations of the Latin American Left in the 1950s and 1960s – anticipated the impressive participation of women in the social movements of the 1980s generally rooted in traditional and reproductive gender-roles. During the second half of the twentieth century, the Latin American Left developed its mass appeal largely by adapting itself to popular cultural assumptions. Challenging gender conceptions was among the first issues to be sacrificed in the process of the transformation of the Left in the 1950s and 1960s from small avant-garde organisations into mass parties and movements rooted in popular culture. Only later, towards the end of the 1980s and under pressure from women activists, did the Latin America Left start to find ways to be both popular and gender progressive. Further research on the history of women in other Latin American Left organisations might enrich and will probably modify the conclusions of the present study.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo examina la dinámica de la participación de mujeres en el Partido Comunista del Uruguay (PCU) desde los años 1920 a los 1960. A pesar de su compromiso con la emancipación femenina y la igualdad entre hombres y mujeres, las

¹⁰⁸ Safa, 'Women's Social Movements in Latin America'.

actitudes del PCU hacia la equidad de género fueron frecuentemente contradictorias y sus mensajes ambiguos. Aunque promovió la participación de las mujeres, el partido osciló entre buscar superar los prejuicios sociales, sostener posiciones principistas y dogmáticas, y acomodarse a los hábitos conservadores prevalentes en la clase obrera. Las mujeres fueron alentadas a tomar parte en las actividades pero no a asumir posiciones de liderazgo. Los años 1960s, irónicamente un periodo caracterizado por la apertura y el éxito político, fue una década de regresión en cuanto a la igualdad de género, lo que contrastó con la larga trayectoria comunista uruguaya en relación a los derechos de las mujeres.

Spanish keywords: política de mujeres en Latinoamérica, comunismo uruguayo, mujeres y comunismo, activismo político de mujeres, género y política de base

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo examina as dinâmicas da participação de mulheres no Partido Comunista do Uruguai (PCU) entre os anos 1920 e 1960. Apesar do comprometimento em relação à emancipação e igualdade entre homens e mulheres, as atitudes do PCU no que diz respeito a igualdade de gênero foram muitas vezes contraditórias e suas mensagens, ambíguas. Apesar de promover a participação das mulheres, o partido oscilava entre buscar superar preconceitos sociais, manter posições morais e dogmáticas, e acomodar os hábitos conservadores prevalentes entre as classes trabalhadoras. Mulheres eram encorajadas a tomar parte das atividades, porém, não a assumir posições de liderança. Os anos sessenta, ironicamente um período caracterizado pela abertura e sucesso político, foi um década de retrocesso em relação à igualdade de gênero, em contraste com a longa trajetória de luta dos comunistas uruguaios pelos direitos das mulheres.

Portuguese keywords: política de mulheres latino-americanas, comunismo uruguiaio, mulheres e o comunismo, ativismo político feminino, gênero e política de base