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# Feminisms and neo-Malthusianisms during the French Third Republic: Madeleine Pelletier and Nelly Roussel through the lens of their literary production<sup>1</sup>

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by

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**Abstract:** Feminisms and neo-Malthusianisms emerged in France as movements at the end of the nineteenth century. The neo-Malthusian feminists were a minority among feminists and within the neo-Malthusians. Nevertheless, they defended original topics which remained taboo at their time like the right for women to access abortion and sexual pleasure. These demands were part of a broader agenda that two French neo-Malthusian feminists, Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939) and Nelly Roussel (1878-1922), both qualified as “integral feminism”, understood as the economic, intellectual, legal, political, religious, sexual and social emancipation of women. In such a wide range of claims, this article focuses on a comparative approach of how Pelletier and Roussel became neo-Malthusian “integral feminists”, analysing the similitudes and differences in their trajectories and showing how their literary production was a significant part of their activism.

Feminisms and neo-Malthusianisms – in the plural to show their heterogeneity – emerged in France as movements at the end of the nineteenth century and peaked during the Third Republic. Another common characteristic they shared was that they formed an *avant-garde* and did not become mass movements. Furthermore, the neo-Malthusian feminists were a minority among feminists, and they were also few in numbers within the neo-Malthusians. Nevertheless, they defended original

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Kirsten Cova (1930-2020).

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topics which remained taboo at their time like the right for women to abortion and sexual pleasure. These demands were part of a broader agenda that two French neo-Malthusian feminists, Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939) and Nelly Roussel (1878-1922), both qualified as “integral feminism”, understood as the economic, intellectual, legal, political, religious, sexual and social emancipation of women. In such a wide range of claims, this article focuses on a comparative approach of how Pelletier and Roussel became neo-Malthusian “integral feminists”, analysing the similitudes and differences in their trajectories.

If an extensive bibliography, mentioned here after, has been published on Pelletier and Roussel, investigating them separately, there is a great lack of comparative studies between the two, with the exception of an unpublished Master degree, in History, written 46 years ago (Claude Maignien and Magda Safwan 1975). Therefore, much remained to be written and published to compare Pelletier’s and Roussel’s trajectories, and this article aims to stimulate further research: for example, they would deserve to be studied at a Ph.D. level. Among the numerous sources – Pelletier and Roussel were prolific writers – less studied by the historiography, is their literary production. Roussel wrote various theater plays such as *La Sœur de Comte Jean* and *La Passion du jeu* (1896); *Par la Révolte: Scène symbolique* (1903); *Pourquoi elles vont à l’Église* (1910); *La Faute d’Ève* (1913), and Pelletier was the author of two plays: *In Anima vili, ou un Crime Scientifique. Pièce en trois actes* (1920); *Supérieur! Drame des classes sociales en cinq actes* (1923) and three short stories, *Trois Contes* (undated). When Roussel passed away at the end of 1922, she had read the narrative that Pelletier published that year: *Mon voyage aventureux en Russie communiste*. Ten years later, Pelletier signed a utopian novel, *Une vie nouvelle* (1932), followed by a partly autobiographical novel, *La Femme vierge* (1933).

Comparing how Pelletier and Roussel became neo-Malthusian “integral feminists” and how their literary production was a significant part of their activism, is interesting because they were at their time preeminent figures abroad among feminists and neo-Malthusianists. This article aims to provide a more comprehensive approach of their outstanding contribution to both the history of feminisms and neo-Malthusianisms, as well as the relationships between the two and to comparative women’s history (Anne Cova 2006).

### **Becoming a neo-Malthusian “integral feminist”**

Having grown up in opposite *milieus*, Pelletier and Roussel presented themselves when they were adults as “integral feminists”: they used this expression namely to underline that feminism was their first claim. Indeed, while also being freemasons – which they considered as a means for women to make their political education – and neo-Malthusians, their main concern was above all feminism. In her handwritten memoirs Pelletier asserted: “I can say that I have always been a

feminist, at least since I was old enough to understand”<sup>2</sup>; Roussel also defined herself in the first place as an integral feminist<sup>3</sup>.

### Two Parisians with opposite background

If Pelletier and Roussel belonged to the same generation of Parisian women born in the capital city during the 1870s, just less than four years apart: Madeleine Pelletier was born 18 May 1874 and Roussel 5 January 1878, the places where they lived were different. Pelletier grew up in the popular republican *II<sup>e</sup> arrondissement*, while Roussel’s home was located in the wealthy *XI<sup>e</sup> arrondissement*. These peculiarities would last throughout their lives as Pelletier moved several times but often in poor neighborhoods, unlike Roussel.

Another difference between their background was the profession exercised by their parents. Pelletier came from a modest family: her parents and mainly her mother – since after a stroke, her father became hemiplegic when Pelletier was 4 years old – ran a greengrocer shop, whilst Roussel came from a bourgeois family: her mother was the daughter of a railroad engineer and her father was a building contractor. Their childhood also diverged in numerous ways as Pelletier in her autobiographical writings recalled mostly bad memories especially regarding her mother, whereas Roussel “was close to her mother” according to the historian Elinor Accampo (Accampo 2006: 16; see also on Roussel: Albistur and Armogathe 1979; Laurence Klejman and Florence Rochefort 1989; Cova 1992; Accampo 2000; Beach 2005a; Cova 2008, 2010 and 2011; Accampo 2017). On Pelletier’s number of brothers and sisters, one of her biographers, Felicia Gordon, mentioned that it is uncertain but Pelletier’s mother had eleven miscarriages (Gordon 1990: 8; see also on Pelletier: Maignien 1978; Boxer 1981; Largillière 1981 and 1982; Ev-Kurtz 1985; Bidelman 1986; Lesselier 1987; Barnel 1988; Sowerwine 1988; Mitchell 1989; Maignien 1990; Sowerwine 1991; Maignien 1991; Gordon 1992; Maignien and Sowerwine 1992; Maignien 1992a; Bard 1992 and 1992a; Klejman and Rochefort 1992; Lesselier 1992; Louis 1992; Coffin 1992; Zaidman 1992; Cova 1992a and 1993; Beach 2005b; Bard 2010; Cova 2011; Maignien 2012; Cova 2016; Sowerwine 2017; Cova 2018). On her side, Roussel was the first of two girls: her sister, Andrée, was born two years after her, in 1880.

In terms of education, Pelletier and Roussel stopped their studies when they were teenagers: Pelletier at the age of 13 years old left school and started to participate in anarchist and feminist circles, and Roussel went to school until she was 15 years old because her parents considered that for a girl coming from the bourgeoisie it was enough. Both lost their fathers when they were teenagers (Roussel was 16 years old when her father died, in 1894). This difficult period of adolescence was also marked by the fact that they did not have the chance to pursue the studies that would have allowed them to achieve what they wanted to do in terms of pro-

<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, “Doctoresse Pelletier: Mémoires d’une féministe”, manuscript in the Fonds Marie-Louise Bouglé, at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, cited in Gordon 1990: 7.

<sup>3</sup> Nelly Roussel, “A propos de l’amour libre”, *La Voix des femmes*, 31 March 1921.

fessional careers: Roussel would have liked to become an actress and Pelletier a researcher. It is not a coincidence if in Pelletier's utopian novel, *Une Vie nouvelle* (A New life), the main character, Charles Ratier, is a brilliant research scientist. Nevertheless, the distancing with their parents had also a positive impact: benefiting from her maternal grandfather's library, Roussel took refuge in literature and in particular in theatre. Pelletier also used to read a lot, built her personality against her mother and became independent.

Pelletier's and Roussel's educational paths diverged when Pelletier decided to prepare, on her own, the Baccalaureate, which she obtained with the highest grade, "mention très bien", at the age of 23, in 1897, while a year later, in 1898, Roussel got married, at the age of 20, to a freemason sculptor, Henri Godet (1863-1937). He was fifteen years older than her and encouraged Roussel to become freemason in the same mixed lodge of which he was part: La Grande loge symbolique Écossaise. Pelletier was also initiated in that lodge thanks to Paul-Maurice Legrain (1860-1939), renowned physician for his fight against alcoholism. Pelletier changed lodges several times but never ceased to be freemason. In 1904, she was initiated to La Philosophie sociale and then to the lodge Diderot where she met Gustave Hervé (1871-1944). Some members of La Grande loge symbolique Écossaise – including Pelletier and Roussel – gave lectures at universités populaires (popular universities). Indeed, Roussel first performed her play *Par la Révolte: Scène symbolique* (By the Revolt: Symbolic scene) at one of the popular universities in Paris, in 1903. Roussel started her career as a public speaker, encouraged by her husband. Godet strongly advised her to introduce herself to the audience as wife and mother (they had three children: Mireille, in 1899; André in 1901 and Marcel in 1904) while Pelletier remained single, praised celibacy and claimed to never have had sexual relations. If Pelletier and Roussel projected a completely different image of themselves, virgin and single versus wife and mother, nevertheless they both insisted on being integral feminists.

Pelletier and Roussel were Dreyfusardes and claimed the revision of the trial that condemned Dreyfus. On this occasion, Roussel questioned what true patriotism was and castigated the "fameux 'patriotes'" (famous "patriots"), the anti-Dreyfusards who predicted a war as an inevitable consequence of the revision of the trial and "en tremblent de peur" (trembled with fear)<sup>4</sup>. The feminist Marguerite Durand (1864–1936) who had founded, in 1897, a daily feminist newspaper, *La Fronde*, actively engaged it in favour of Dreyfus. Durand also struggled, a few years later, for Pelletier to obtain the right to apply to the psychiatry competition. The year 1903 was important for Pelletier as she became "*la première femme interne des asiles de la Seine*" (the first woman psychiatrist intern in the Seine asylums) after long studies of medicine (Barnel 1988). She was the first one, in France, to obtain the right to apply to the psychiatry competition, supported by *La Fronde* to which Roussel collaborated. Indeed, *La Fronde's* campaign for Pelletier's admission was successful and opened this career to women.

<sup>4</sup> Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris, Fonds Nelly Roussel, manuscript of Nelly Roussel, *Patriotisme, Causerie* (undated), cited in Cova 1992: 665.

Despite their different backgrounds, Pelletier and Roussel were both marked by religion. Roussel came from a catholic family and received a catholic education; Pelletier, at the age of 7 years old, was sent to a religious school and five years later stated her “*volonté de quitter ce milieu hostile*” (her desire to leave this hostile environment)<sup>5</sup>. Pelletier’s mother was very religious, and Pelletier described her a “*véritable fanatique*” (veritable fanatic), an anti-freemason and royalist<sup>6</sup>. Pelletier built her personality in opposition to her mother’s: She became atheist, anticlerical, freemason and an extreme left-wing militant. Roussel also claimed to be atheist and strongly criticized the catholic church, namely in her comedy in one act entitled *Pourquoi elles vont à l’Église* (Why women go to church). Nevertheless, religious terms were often present in Roussel’s lectures and plays, especially when she glorified the “mission” of motherhood convinced that a day would come when motherhood would be a “*espèce de sacerdoce*” (a kind of priesthood)<sup>7</sup>. Both Pelletier and Roussel rejected the holy Bible’s principle “In pain you shall bring forth children”.

### Free motherhood

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pelletier and Roussel were very active in their contribution to feminisms and neo-Malthusianisms: Roussel tirelessly travelled around France and abroad (Belgium, Hungary, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), giving 250 lectures throughout her career, and also writing more than 200 articles (Accampo 2017: 1270-1271) in particular in the feminist, free-thinking and neo-Malthusian press: *L’Action*; *Génération consciente*; *La Femme affranchie*; *La Fronde*; *La Libre Pensée internationale*; *La Mère éducatrice*; *La Voix des femmes*; *Le Libertaire*; *Le Néo-Malthusien* and *Régénération*. Along her life, Pelletier also collaborated to various journals: *La Brochure mensuelle*; *L’Acacia*. *Revue des Études maçonniques*; *L’Anarchie*; *La Fronde*; *La Guerre sociale*; *La Revue socialiste*; *La Voix des femmes*; *L’Équité*; *Le Libertaire*; *Le Socialiste*; *L’Éveil de la femme*; *L’Idée libre*; *L’Insurgé*; *Le Semeur contre tous les tyrans*; *Les Documents du progrès*. *Revue internationale*; *Le Malthusien*; and founded her own monthly journal: *La Suffragiste*. She travelled to Portugal in 1910 and wrote articles, published in French and Portuguese, about her hopes that in this country women will soon obtain the right to vote but that did not happen<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Anne dite Madeleine Pelletier, 23<sup>th</sup> November 1939, Notes écrites par Hélène Brion, dossier Madeleine Pelletier at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, p. 9, cited in Cova 1993: 273.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Nelly Roussel, “L’Église et la Maternité”, *L’Action*, 6 December 1904. Nelly Roussel, “La Liberté de la maternité”, in Nelly Roussel. 1930. *Trois conférences de Nelly Roussel*. Paris: Marcel Giard, p. 51, cited in Cova 1992: 663.

<sup>8</sup> Doutora Madeleine Pelletier, “Portugal e o voto das mulheres”, *O Mundo*, 8 December 1910. Madeleine Pelletier, “La République portugaise et le vote des femmes”, *Les Documents du Progrès*. *Revue internationale*, March 1911: 178-184.

In 1904, Roussel for the first time gave a talk in Paris on “La liberté de la maternité” (free motherhood), that became her “sujet favori” (favorite subject)<sup>9</sup>. For Pelletier also this topic was at the core of her concerns: “La Maternité doit être libre” (Motherhood must be free) was the title of a chapter in Pelletier’s 1911 book, *L’Émancipation Sexuelle de la Femme* (The Sexual Emancipation of Woman). Free motherhood meant for Pelletier and Roussel that to give birth should not be an obligation for women and they should be released to decide on their own bodies if they want to be mothers or not. Using the metaphor of a flower that blossoms and fades, Pelletier warned women against repeated pregnancies that weaken them: “C’est à la femme seulement de décider si et quand elle veut être mère” (it is up only to the woman to decide if and when she wants to be a mother)<sup>10</sup>. Pelletier and Roussel were indefatigable in their fight against unwanted pregnancies and for the right not to have children. Furthermore, they dissociated reproduction from sexuality, and claimed women’s right to sexual pleasure. Pelletier separated the sexual act, a source of pleasure, from maternity, reproductive function, synonymous for her with alienation. She claimed the right to pleasure for women, she who, according to her statements, had never had sexual intercourse. For Pelletier, sexuality is a physiological function, but it is inappropriate to display passions in public. It is not sexual freedom that she advocated but the end of women being considered as sexual objects. Recognition of women’s sexual desires and the right to pleasure were her two leitmotifs. Roussel also advocated the right for women to love without fearing to become pregnant and the right to have carnal pleasure. Pelletier denounced motherhood, which “fait de l’amour une véritable duperie pour la femme” (makes love a real deception for the woman), suffering the risk of pregnancy and Roussel claimed the same: “L’Amour fécond, l’amour stérile” (Fertile Love, Sterile Love)<sup>11</sup>.

Nevertheless, for those who have decided to become mothers, Pelletier and Roussel considered that it should not occupy their entire lives. In Pelletier’s words, it should be only a simple “*épisode*” (episode)<sup>12</sup>. Pelletier and Roussel wanted motherhood to be no longer the *raison d’être* of women’s lives and were also very critical regarding marriage. Roussel considered marriage as a “*vieille forteresse vermoulue*” (old worm-eaten fortress) and constantly fought against the power exercised by married men on their wives<sup>13</sup>. On several occasions, Pelletier considered

<sup>9</sup> Nelly Roussel, “Chemin faisant”, *La Libre Pensée de Lausanne*, 28 November 1906, cited in Cova 1992: 663.

<sup>10</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1926. *L’Émancipation Sexuelle de la Femme*. Paris: La Brochure Mensuelle. (First edition 1911, Paris: Giard et Brière), chapter III: “La Maternité doit être libre”, p. 42, cited in Cova 1993: 280.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. Nelly Roussel, “L’Amour fécond, l’amour stérile”, *Régénération*, January 1903.

<sup>12</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, “Les Suffragettes anglaises se virilisent”, *La Suffragiste*, October 1912, cited in Cova 1992a: 79.

<sup>13</sup> Nelly Roussel, “Propos Interrompus”, *L’Action*, 23 November 1906, cited in Cova 1992: 664.

marriage as “*esclavage*” (slavery), symbol of the oppression women undergo within the family<sup>14</sup>.

Pelletier and Roussel’s personal experiences explained the importance they gave to free motherhood. In the space of less than five years, Roussel gave birth to three children, one of whom died at a young age – André died at the age of four and a half months – and she had complications during her second delivery. It was a decisive experience for Roussel and she later wrote that it was the fact to give birth in such difficult conditions that made her so “*pitoyable*” (pitiful) with regard to motherhood<sup>15</sup>. Roussel described in great detail the different states of what she called the “*épreuve redoutable*” (dreadful ordeal): pregnancy with discomfort and heaviness; childbirth, true torture and martyrdom; and convalescence, which can be slow<sup>16</sup>. For Pelletier, as a physician who performed abortions – in 1911, she published a brochure entitled *Pour l’abrogation de l’article 317. Le Droit à l’Avortement* (For the repeal of article 317. The Right to Abortion) –, a pregnant woman was, she argued, “*dans un état d’infériorité tant au point de vue physique que dans ses facultés intellectuelles*” (in a condition of a physical and intellectual inferiority)<sup>17</sup>. Pelletier evoked painful pregnancies and painful deliveries. Pelletier and Roussel were some of the few feminists of their time to insist so much on the female pains of motherhood. Roussel even went so far as to compare the pains of motherhood to the tortures of Christ. The language they used to describe different stages of pregnancy was eloquent as they made a comparison with animals: Roussel was convinced that repeated unwanted pregnancies make women comparable to animals and for Pelletier there was also an animal side of motherhood. Nevertheless, in her play, *In Anima Vili, ou un Crime Scientifique* (In a Vile Soul, or a Scientific Crime) Pelletier was against animal experiments. Also in one of her short stories *Trois contes*, entitled “*La Mort aux chats*” (Death to cats), she showed compassion towards the sufferings of animals. Feminists were, in general, very sensitive to the well-being of animals. This phenomenon was not unique to France, with Annie Besant (1847-1933) in the United Kingdom converted into an opponent of vivisection by Anna Kingsford (1846-1888).

To the pains that surrounded motherhood, Roussel had to add the pains of her own illness since she was diagnosed with neurasthenia and “suffered from abdominal and digestive disorders, as well as insomnia, acute anxiety, depression, and menstrual pain during the last twelve years of her life” (Accampo 2006: 168). Pelletier also endured depressive episodes and did not hide that her disgust for women’s bodies went back to when she was a teenager and had her menstruations

<sup>14</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, “Fille-mère”, *La Fronde*, 15 July 1926; “Mariage ou célibat”, *La Fronde*, 28 August 1926; See also Madeleine Pelletier, “Mariage”, *L’Éveil de la femme*, 10 November 1932, cited in Cova 1993: 284.

<sup>15</sup> Nelly Roussel, “La liberté de la maternité”, in Nelly Roussel. 1930. *Trois conférences de Nelly Roussel*. Paris: Marcel Giard, p. 34, cited in Cova 1992: 663.

<sup>16</sup> Nelly Roussel, *Le Néo Malthusien*, August 1919.

<sup>17</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1926 (First edition 1911. Paris: Giard et Brière). *L’Émancipation Sexuelle de la Femme*. Paris: La Brochure Mensuelle, chapter V: “La Femme et la race”, p. 81, cited in Cova 1993: 280.

for the first time: “*Je n’avais jamais eu d’amour pour ma mère mais je sentais pour elle un certain respect; je le perdis à l’instant en me la représentant... comme moi et j’en eus un dégoût qui me resta très longtemps*” (I had never felt love for my mother but I felt a certain respect for her; I lost it instantly by representing her... like me and I felt a disgust which remained with me for a very long time)<sup>18</sup>. Pelletier and Roussel emphasized the discomfort that menstruations could give which was a taboo issue even among feminists and neo-Malthusians.

For Pelletier and Roussel pains were not inevitable during delivery, they were preventable. Pelletier in her utopian novel, *Une Vie Nouvelle*, stated that a simple injection should remove the pains of childbirth. The first part of the title of one of Roussel’s plays, *Par la Révolte*, indicated the right to refuse to suffer. By questioning the taboo of maternal pains and by assigning to themselves the right to liberate women from unwanted pregnancies, Pelletier and Roussel provoked controversies, even among their supporters, and were under police scrutiny.

### “Integral Feminism”

Defining themselves as “integral feminists”, Pelletier and Roussel were highly active in the feminist written press and in various feminist groups. In 1900, when she was 22 years old, Roussel started to collaborate with the feminist journal *La Fronde* and a year later joined the feminist group *Union Fraternelle des Femmes* (Fraternal Union of Women, henceforth UFF) at its founding, in 1901. The UFF “was considered the ‘daughter’ of Marguerite Durand’s *La Fronde* [...] Its group identity formed around shared left-wing politics (pro-Dreyfus, anticlerical) and literary ambitions” (Accampo 2006: 40). Roussel also collaborated with other women’s journals such as *La Femme affranchie* founded in 1904 by Gabrielle Petit (1860-1952); *La Mère éducatrice* created by Madeleine Vernet (1878-1949) in 1917, and *La Voix des femmes* whose first issue was also published in 1917, under the direction of Colette Reynaud (1872-1965).

If Pelletier started early, when she was a teen, to participate in feminist circles, she involved herself with some responsibilities much later, when Caroline Kauffmann (1840-1926) invited her, at the end of 1905, to the leadership of the group *La Solidarité des femmes*, which campaigned in favour of women’s suffrage. In 1906, at the age of 31, Pelletier became general secretary of *La Solidarité des femmes* and simultaneously militated in socialist politics. Pelletier also collaborated in the feminist written press such as *La Fronde* but above all founded, in 1907, her own journal in order to claim women’s suffrage, the most important demand for her as the title of her journal indicated: *La Suffragiste* (The Suffragist). During the municipal elections of 1908, Pelletier broke the windows of a polling room in protest against the fact that women could not vote; however, after this episode, she would no longer use violence. On her side, Roussel never participated in any violent action and concentrated her activism in giving lectures: In 1908, for that purpose, “she was

<sup>18</sup> Anne dite Madeleine Pelletier, 23<sup>th</sup> November 1939, Notes écrites par Hélène Brion, dossier Madeleine Pelletier at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, p. 8, cited in Cova 1993: 274.

absent from Paris for fifty-one of the first ninety days” of that year (Accampo 2006: 141).

For Pelletier and Roussel the right for women to vote was the basis of their emancipation – the *sine qua non* claim of any freedom. Once women’s suffrage had been obtained, they would be able to acquire other reforms like economic independence through education. Indeed, Pelletier and Roussel put a great emphasis on that topic and defended coeducation. Both were concerned about the education of young girls: in 1899 Roussel published in a literary journal, *Paris qui passe*, an article entitled “*Sur l’Éducation des jeunes filles*” (On the Education of Young Girls), and Pelletier wrote a brochure on *L’Éducation féministe des filles* (Feminist education for girls), in 1914. It denounced sexist education and offered a whole education programme for girls (of which sex education was a part), a fundamental issue for the emancipation of women. It was essential for the education of girls and boys to be similar for the simple reason femininity was a social construction: no dolls for little girls because they merely prepared them for the bondage of motherhood. According to Pelletier, women must become virile and educate themselves if they did not want to have a boring work. She was convinced sexual differentiation was the product of culture and education and Pelletier denounced – thirty-five years before Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) who published *Le Deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*) in 1949 – the social construction of femininity.

Civil code reforms were also fundamental for Pelletier and Roussel and were key issues since the birth of feminisms that demanded the recasting of the Napoleonic civil code of 1804. Pelletier and Roussel argued for the repeal of all articles in the civil code that established the inferiority of women. The importance of the code was paramount as it reached beyond France’s borders to inspire civil codes across Europe. By the centenary of its promulgation that took place in Paris in 1904, at the official celebration banquet, Kauffmann threw balloons from the spectators gallery on which was written “The code crushes women; it dishonours the Republic”. Roussel also participated in that protest. Pelletier and Roussel targeted the numerous articles of the civil code that make women eternal minors or in Roussel’s words “eternally sacrificed”, like article 213 which stipulated that married women must obey their husbands. *L’Éternelle sacrifiée* was the title of a famous lecture Roussel gave for the first time in Paris, in 1905. This title was inspired by the expression *L’Éternel féminin* that Roussel changed into “eternally sacrificed” to demonstrate how women were sacrificed at all levels. Between 1905 and until 1908, Roussel delivered sixty-four times this lecture.

Pelletier and Roussel strongly fought against social prejudices and deplored the use of the term “*filles-mères*” (single mother) which harmed the dignity of women. They lamented that single mothers were often cornered to infanticide or prostitution and defended those on whom opprobrium weighed, coupled with the ban on the search for paternity until the law of 16 November 1912. The promulgation of this law did not satisfy them entirely because it was too restrictive. For Roussel, it was a “*palliatif très insuffisant*” (very insufficient palliative) and it was more important to allow the mother to be able to live without the father by the creation of a mater-

nity wage that she proposed (and which was not included in that law)<sup>19</sup>. Pelletier was against such a proposal but published an article in *La Suffragiste*, written by the feminist Remember (born Louise Deverly, 1845-1925), which deplored, vehemently, the inefficiency of this law: “*Le Sénat accoucha piteusement d’une loi dont la nullité le dispute à l’odieux... puisque la jeune fille séduite ne pourra établir la paternité de son enfant que si elle peut produire une lettre de son séducteur*” (The Senate gave birth pitifully to a law whose nullity disputes it with the odious... since the seduced girl can only establish the paternity of her child if she can produce a letter from her seducer)<sup>20</sup>.

Pelletier and Roussel were critical of the majority of the feminist movement that, in their opinion, was too moderate. Pelletier blamed the “*féminisme en décolleté*” (feminism in the neckline) that men used, according to her, “*pour dauber entre eux le féminisme*” (to daub feminism between them) and Roussel reproached feminists for not daring to proclaim their feminism louder<sup>21</sup>. The strategy of the small steps of the reformist feminist movement such as the one adopted by the *Conseil National des Femmes Françaises* (National Council of French Women, henceforth CNFF) founded in 1901, in Paris, did not satisfy Pelletier and Roussel at all since they rejected tiny improvements. Furthermore, Pelletier denounced the struggles for power within the CNFF.

When the president of the CNFF, Julie Siegfried (1848-1922) asked women in August 1914 to involve themselves in the war effort, Pelletier and Roussel claimed their pacifism. Thus, they were against the war and criticized all the more the feminists that rallied the Sacred Union. Pelletier ironized on women that “*font des chandails*” (make sweaters) and Roussel qualified war as a “*crime*” (crime) and a “*monstre social*” (social monster)<sup>22</sup>. Roussel testified in favour of the feminist socialist Hélène Brion (1882-1962) – who was a friend of Pelletier – accused in 1918 of pacifist propaganda.

The impact of the war radicalized Pelletier and Roussel’s commitment in activism. As a consequence, Roussel moved away from UFF and became the president of a group called *L’Action des femmes* (Women’s Action) founded in 1915 and whose honorary president was Céline Renooz (1840-1928), defender of integral feminism. After the war, Pelletier and Roussel started to collaborate regularly with the journal *La Voix des femmes*, sympathetic to the communist cause. Following

<sup>19</sup> Nelly Roussel, “Manifestation en faveur de la Recherche de la Paternité, Présidée par M. René Viviani, Ministre du Travail, Salle des Sociétés Savantes (9 février 1910)”, in Nelly Roussel. 1919. *Paroles de Combat et d’Espoir. Discours choisis*. Epône: Société d’Édition et de Librairie de l’Avenir Social, p. 40, cited in Cova 1992: 666.

<sup>20</sup> Remember. “La Recherche de la paternité”, *La Suffragiste*, January 1912, n° 24.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of 2 November 1911 of Madeleine Pelletier to Arrya Ly, Fonds Marie-Louise Bouglé, at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, série 83 féminisme, cited in Cova 1993: 276.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of 21 December 1914 of Madeleine Pelletier to Arrya Ly, Fonds Marie-Louise Bouglé, at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, série 83 féminisme, cited in Cova 1993: 278. Nelly Roussel, “Créons la citoyenne, conférence faite à Paris, salle des Fêtes du ‘Journal’ le 16 mars 1914”, in Nelly Roussel. 1930. *Trois conférences de Nelly Roussel*. Paris: Marcel Giard, p. 117; Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Fonds Nelly Roussel, manuscript of Nelly Roussel, *Le Monstre*, 2 August 1914, cited in Cova 1992: 667.

the split in the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (French Section of the Workers' International, henceforth SFIO) during the Tours congress held in December 1920, which resulted in the creation of the *Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste* (French Section of the Communist International) Pelletier voted in favour of joining the Third Communist International and affiliated herself to the new born *Parti Communiste Français* (French Communist Party, henceforth PCF), in which she remained until 1925.

During the last four years of her existence, Roussel despite her serious health problems, as she suffered from tuberculosis, regained strength and published “at least sixty-six articles in newspapers and gave twenty-six public talks” (Accampo 2006: 206). Among the topics she favoured, was the fight against the law of 31 July 1920 which prohibited the sale of abortifacients or to provide written or oral information on means of abortion. Pelletier also struggled constantly against this law which aimed to weaken the neo-Malthusians and to punish them with imprisonment.

### **Neo-Malthusianism: the first chapter of feminism**

Pelletier and Roussel proclaimed that neo-Malthusianism was an integral part of feminism: its “chapitre premier” (first chapter) for Roussel and neo-Malthusianism’s most important chapter is women according to Pelletier<sup>23</sup>. For both of them, neo-Malthusianism’s insistence on free motherhood and on the right for women to control their bodies was fundamental. Pelletier even went further when she considered that this right was absolute and could go until suicide. Pelletier and Roussel wrote articles in the neo-Malthusian press: Roussel regularly contributed to *Génération consciente*, *Le Néo-Malthusien*, *Régénération* and *Rénovation*, and Pelletier to *Le Malthusien*.

Neo-Malthusianism entered Pelletier and Roussel’s lives early. Since she was a teenager, Pelletier participated in anarchist meetings, where neo-Malthusians were present. Roussel was related by alliance with Paul Robin (1837-1912): Godet’s sister married Robin’s son, in 1900. Robin was the founder of the French neo-Malthusian movement and of the first French neo-Malthusian association, the *Ligue de la Régénération Humaine* (League of Human Regeneration), in 1896. According to Accampo, Robin had a decisive political influence on Roussel: “Nelly Roussel came to know Paul Robin at a time when she was already a feminist but had not yet converted her feelings about motherhood into a political ideology” (Accampo 2006: 45). In the obituary Roussel wrote in 1912 for Robin’s death, she called him a “new Christ” using again a religious language. Women and free thought was a topic dear to Roussel and one of her lectures was entitled “*La Femme et la libre pensée*” (Woman and Free Thought), which she delivered thirty-nine times, between 1906 and 1910 (Accampo 2006: 109).

<sup>23</sup> Nelly Roussel, “Féminisme et malthusisme,” *Génération consciente*, January 1911, cited in Cova 1992: 664. Madeleine Pelletier. 1935. *La rationalisation sexuelle*. Paris: Éditions du Sphinx, chapter VI: “Dépopulation et civilisation”, p. 51, cited in Cova 1992a: 75.

A corollary of women having control over their own bodies was, for Pelletier and Roussel, the right for abortion. This right praised by the neo-Malthusians should be used in their opinion as a last resort, not as a contraceptive method but as an extreme means. Therefore, the neo-Malthusians were responding to the accusations of those who equated neo-Malthusianism with the theory of the right to abortion, claiming neo-Malthusian propaganda was designed precisely to help avoid abortion. Indeed, in practical terms, neo-Malthusian propaganda encouraged the dissemination of information about abortion and the sale of contraceptives. Pelletier and Roussel denounced the social inequalities of motherhood in which not all women are in the same situation, where those who knew how to restrict their fertility almost always come from privileged backgrounds. Thus, motherhood was less binding in wealthy areas than among the poor ones. Giving the example of breastfeeding, mothers who had financial possibilities were not obliged to breastfeed and could entrust their babies to nurses. As a matter of fact, Roussel put her last child, Marcel, during his first two years in a “*pouponnière*” (nursery). Pelletier and Roussel considered that mothers were not compelled to be exhausted by breastfeeding.

The neo-Malthusians were sued by the tribunals in the 1920s and 30s due to the promulgation of two laws that reinforced the pursuits: the already mentioned law of 31 July 1920 and the law of 27 March 1923, which saw abortion become a “*délit*” (misdemeanour) and consequently prison sentences were handed down in a much more systematic way. The 1920 law passed to the indifference of the left-wing political parties and Roussel publicly criticized the President of the *Ligue des droits de l’homme* (League of the Rights of Man) the freemason MP Ferdinand Buisson (1841-1932) for that attitude. On her side, Pelletier refrained from criticizing Buisson, maybe because she was grateful that, thanks to his support, she became a supply doctor for *Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones* (Posts, Telegraphs and Telephones) in 1906, and exercised this profession until 1930, which allowed her to gain economic independence.

Pelletier and Roussel ironically targeted the “*repopulateurs*” (repopulators) that always encouraged more births, but themselves had very few children as they practiced birth control. They made fun of Jacques Bertillon (1851-1922), father of only two children, who symbolized this “repopulator” movement and was the founder, in 1896, of the *Alliance Nationale pour l’Accroissement de la Population Française* (National Alliance for the Growth of the French Population). Roussel revolted against this National Alliance that produced according to her “*élucubrations insensées*” (insane rantings) and managed to attract “*la sympathie facile des patriotes en chambre, des bourgeois hypocrites, et de tous les esprits superficiels*” (the easy sympathy of the patriots in the room, the bourgeois hypocrites, and of all superficial minds)<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Fonds Nelly Roussel, manuscript of Nelly Roussel, *Fécondité!* Undated. cited in Cova 1992: 665.

### From revolt to a utopian society

Pelletier and Roussel both revolted against the situation that women had to undergo in society and they favoured action in order to emancipate them. Roussel gave lectures all over France and abroad that ended many times with a representation of a militant theater play such as the one entitled *Par la révolte*, and Pelletier was deeply engaged in politics.

### The revolt

At the age of 25, Roussel published her drama *Par la révolte*, but her passion for theater was aroused much earlier – she wrote her first play at the age of six – strongly stimulated by the readings in her maternal grandfather’s library which represented a shelter, especially when her mother “remarried barely a year after Léon Roussel’s [Nelly’s father] death” (Accampo 2006: 21). Roussel’s grandfather also motivated her not only to read but also to act. On the contrary, Roussel’s husband “had encouraged her to pursue public speaking, rather than a career in the theater, a path actually more difficult for women than acting, because it was rare and made them more vulnerable to ridicule” (Accampo 2006: 127). Roussel declared various times that theater was her passion and before publishing *Par la Révolte*, she wrote, in 1896, two plays: *La Sœur de Comte Jean* (Count’ John’s Sister) and *La Passion du jeu* (The Passion for Gambling). In these plays, the setting was in Paris and some characters, two sisters, were similar as they both acted as moral guardians for their brothers, highlighting the importance of the moral influence played by women.

The topic of *Par la Révolte*, was significant of Roussel’s trajectory. She revolted when she could not continue her studies after the age of 15 and could not pursue her professional dream to become an actress. Thus, the marriage with Godet gave her the opportunity to develop as a speaker of talent. Her charisma was evident by the success of her lectures which had an audience that oscillated between 150 and 2000 persons. The reading of her plays at the end of some lectures also contributed to her fame which reached its apogee at the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1905 and 1908, out of the 122 lectures Roussel gave, including 74 outside Paris, 57 were followed by a dramatic reading of her short play *Par la Révolte* (Accampo 2006: 101). At the end of each performance, copies of *Par la Révolte* were sold in the form of brochures (from 25 to 150 copies each time) and a total of 3,964 copies of *Par la Révolte* were purchased between 1905 and 1907 (Accampo 2006: 101). *Par la Révolte* was a great success and went through five editions and was translated into Portuguese and Russian. The most important performance of *Par la révolte* took place in 1905 in conjunction with the Freethinkers international congress which totalized 20,000 participants from all over the world. In that performance, Roussel played the role of Eve accompanied by actresses from the renowned *Comédie Française*. The topic of the play was an allegory in which Eve was oppressed by the church and society, but managed to liberate herself by revolt. In another play written ten years later, in 1913, entitled *La Faute d’Ève* (Eve’s Fault) and that Roussel “performed only for private audiences”, Eve is no longer a

victim but is “already liberated, and she is eager to enter into battle from the outset” (Accampo 2006: 169). In both plays, the general idea defended was the necessity to revolt and to struggle for the progress of humanity.

For Pelletier, her revolt aroused also early in her childhood and was as for Roussel a constant throughout her life. The main character in the novel she published in 1933, *La Femme vierge* (The virgin woman), Marie Pierrot, revolted against women’s social position when her mother declared: “*Les femmes ne deviennent rien du tout; elles se marient et élèvent leurs enfants*” (Women become nothing at all: they marry and raise their children)<sup>25</sup>. In order to upset this “fate”, Pelletier after her medical studies entered politics. For her, politics was a fundamental part of her activism, as it is well underlined by the title of the book written by the historians Maignien and Sowerwine: *Madeleine Pelletier: Une féministe dans l’arène politique* (Madeleine Pelletier: A Feminist in the political arena). Pelletier was a militant at the extreme left, in the different currents: first she was “*guesdiste*” in 1905–1906 and then “*hervéiste*” in 1907–1910. This move in her political *engagement* was significant of her desire of action and revolt as she was attracted, in her own words, by the “*puissance révolutionnaire*” (revolutionary power) of Gustave Hervé’s group<sup>26</sup>. She also wrote articles in the monthly journal founded by Hervé in 1906, *La Guerre sociale* (The social war). In her play entitled *Supérieur! Drame des classes sociales en cinq actes* (Superior! Social class drama in five acts), Pelletier denounced social injustices and praised revolt. She was elected at the SFIO in 1909, replacing Hervé at the *Commission administrative permanente* (Permanent administrative commission) which represented the summit within the party hierarchy, and she was the only woman to be part of it. Despite these achievements, Pelletier was very critical of the socialist party: “*Comme femme, j’étais un peu au Parti socialiste dans la condition des juifs décriés du Moyen Âge*” (As a woman, I was a bit in the socialist Party in the condition of the decried Jews of the Middle Ages)<sup>27</sup>. Roussel, who did not enter politics, shared also this critical view against the socialists who considered that they should not ally with the feminists of the bourgeoisie to which she belonged. Pelletier was very much disappointed when she participated at the First International Socialist Women’s Conference under the direction of Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), held in Stuttgart, in 1907, and Pelletier tried to oppose, in vain, to a resolution adopted, which stated that socialist women should not ally themselves with “bourgeois” feminists.

At the beginning of the twenties, Pelletier published a pamphlet entitled *Capitalisme et communisme* (Capitalism and communism), where she criticized capitalism. If Roussel shared her critiques against capitalism, she did not join the PCF like Pelletier. For her, the fight against capitalism was doubled with the one against masculinism, that Roussel defined as a “*doctrine de la suprématie, de la prédominance du principe masculin*” (doctrine of supremacy, of the predominance of the

<sup>25</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1933. *La Femme vierge*. Paris: Valentin Bresle, p. 25, cited in Cova 1992a: 78.

<sup>26</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, “Guesdisme ou Hervéisme?”, *La Suffragiste*, n° 17, June 1910, cited in Cova 1993: 276.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

masculine principle)<sup>28</sup>. Pelletier also considered that masculinism was the great enemy and was disappointed with her experience in politics. In the thirties, she turned to fiction and dedicated herself to the writing of a utopian novel, while performing abortions in secret.

### A utopian society

In 1932, Pelletier published a utopian novel entitled *Une Vie Nouvelle* in which she recounted the establishment of a new world, in France, some years after a revolution. In this new society, there is no marriage and children are raised by official bodies; abortion is legalised; domestic work is industrialised; the working day is five hours and everyone is entitled to have three months holidays. For women who have decided by themselves to become mothers, pregnancies are happy events in which women give birth in maternity wards. In the novel, one of the characters goes to the maternity hospital to give birth, and during delivery she feels no pain thanks to a simple injection. Many expectant mothers give birth while reading a novel or listening to the radio. There are no longer any “*sages-femmes*” (midwives), but rather “*accoucheurs ou des accoucheuses spécialisés*” (birth attendants, women or men) who deliver the babies<sup>29</sup>. The mother does not necessarily see the child after giving birth, instead, should she wish, the child can be sent directly to a nursery or the mother can raise them herself. In addition to the right to maternity leave during her pregnancy, following birth the woman has the right to one entire year maternity leave. Women therefore are no longer reluctant to give birth to children, and the heroine of the book has four. In this new society, mothers are well paid and do not have to take care personally of their children: thus, they give birth without being worried.

Pelletier in her utopian society admits matriarchy, which she understands as the belonging of children to their mother. She does not believe in matriarchy as a system – Roussel was also not in favour of matriarchy – but considers that the father does not have rights over the child since his role is limited to just a second. For Pelletier, the only *raison d'être* of the family is the protection of the child and the society of the future will provide it. Assistance is a right, it is not a “*déchéance*” (forfeiture)<sup>30</sup>. Charity, according to her, is humiliating and she wishes state intervention through collectivization at all levels. Pelletier describes a model establishment, “*une maison de puériculture*” (a nursery), where all children benefit from the same care and therefore the same opportunities<sup>31</sup>. The goal being to raise children from an early age by the community. At the end of the novel *La Femme vierge*,

<sup>28</sup> Nelly Roussel. 1904. “Qu’est-ce que le féminisme?”, *La Femme affranchie*, n° 2, September, cited in Cova 1992: 670.

<sup>29</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1932. *Une Vie nouvelle*. Paris: Eugène Figuière, p. 27, cited in Cova 1992a: 86.

<sup>30</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. Undated. *Aujourd’hui et demain. L’Assistance. Ce qu’elle est. Ce qu’elle devrait être*, Paris: Beresniak, p. 9, cited in Cova 1992a: 85.

<sup>31</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1923. *L’amour et la maternité*. Paris: La Brochure mensuelle, p. 19, cited in Cova 1992a: 85.

Marie Pierrot manages one of these institutions. After the “*maison de puériculture*” or the “*pouponnière*”, the child is oriented towards a boarding school because the majority of the children enjoyed community life and in this new society many ask to their parents to send them to a boarding school. Once the internship is completed, the brightest students go to university and the others to vocational schools. Pelletier insists on meritocracy and on the joys of community life. In this perspective, abandonment is not a tragedy but a happy event since the state will replace the family. Pelletier admits that it is not easy, at the beginning, to convince parents to entrust their children to the state, but slowly women will recognize the benefits of education by the state and they will free themselves from the “*chaînes maternelles*” (maternal chains)<sup>32</sup>. Women who love children will become officials of social maternity, i.e. they will take care of children.

In many of her writings, Pelletier turns to the future and projects the image of a society as she would like it, without family structure. According to Pelletier, family prejudiced both sexes, but while men exercised a “*petite monarchie absolue*” (small absolute monarchy) by the power conferred by the laws and the customs, women must serve them in order to fulfill their duties as wives<sup>33</sup>. Pelletier considered that family is “*essentiellement conservatrice*” (essentially conservative)<sup>34</sup>. Hence in the future society that Pelletier envisages, the destruction of the family will take place gradually because of the very slow evolution of laws and customs. For her, the triumph of feminism implies the destruction of the family. In this new society, religion is abolished, and she mentioned the example of Russia where she had travelled in the twenties.

In 1922, ten years before publishing her utopian novel, Pelletier wrote a narrative entitled *Mon voyage aventureux en Russie communiste* where she related her six week stay in Moscow, in 1921, and her adventures to reach the “*terre promise*” (promised land)<sup>35</sup>. Before her departure, communist Russia represented for her the realization of the ideas for which she has militated. Once in Russia, she very quickly questioned the revolutionary sincerity of Bolshevik Russia, by noting that communism was the work of only a tiny minority of militants who imposed their ideas on the mass, which she described as “*pâte amorphe*” (amorphous paste)<sup>36</sup>. With regard to the situation of women, she approved the code which had been drawn up on marriage and welcomed the freedom of appearance of women. In this new code, women do not lose their names when they marry; equality is complete between the spouses; married women are not supposed to obey their husbands; adultery is not an offense and divorce is granted on the will of only one of the spouses. Pelletier

<sup>32</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, *Capitalisme et Communisme*. Undated (legal deposit in the National Library in 1926). Nice: Imprimerie Rosenstiel, p. 13, cited in Cova 1992a: 86.

<sup>33</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1926 (First edition 1911, Paris: Giard et Brière). *L'Émancipation Sexuelle de la Femme*. Paris: La Brochure Mensuelle, chapter II: “Le Féminisme et la famille”, p. 14, cited in Cova 1993: 284.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, cited in Cova 1993: 284.

<sup>35</sup> Madeleine Pelletier. 1922. *Mon voyage aventureux en Russie Communiste*. Paris: M. Giard. p. 35, cited in Cova 1993: 284.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103, cited in Cova 1993: 285.

mentioned the entry of women in several professional sectors, but noted their low number, even their absence in the higher functions of the state, with the brilliant exception of Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) in Social Affairs, first woman People's commissar from 1917. Roussel had been critical towards the ideas of Kollontai, namely when she solicited Russian women to take part in the military effort and Roussel ironically wondered by what means will the men participate in the maternity charges.

Pelletier managed some encounters with Kollontai and related them in these terms: "Elle me dit assez peu de choses: bien que j'aie pu la voir plusieurs fois. Elle semble redouter de parler de questions politiques, parce qu'il y a toujours quelqu'un là" (She tells me very little: although I have been able to meet her several times. She seems to dread talking about political issues, because there is always someone there)<sup>37</sup>. Kollontai has just written a book on the sexual question with which Pelletier finds many points of agreements including the right to abortion and the education of children by the state. But Pelletier expresses her divergences when Kollontai makes the sexual act a moral obligation. Pelletier feared the logic of social control over the individual and came into conflict with her. Kollontai's ideas on sexuality were a subject of controversy in Russia. The "new woman" she advocated and in particular the right to free union were not well accepted and, in 1920, Lenin expressed his disagreement with her. Pelletier noted the gap between Kollontai's theory and her practical achievements during her visit to the Maison des enfants trouvés (Foundling house) in Moscow. She was shocked by the fact that mothers did not have the right to abandon their children there, due to overcrowding, while Kollontai advocated education by the state. In addition, during this guided tour, breastfeeding was praised which did not please Pelletier and reminded her of Adolphe Pinard (1844-1934), defender of maternal breastfeeding in France. She noted that Russian women were confined to activities related to children and they passed, according to the expression of Lenin, from individual maternity to social maternity. Pelletier's assessment was that if, from the point of view of the law, equality was complete (except for military service), in practice many prejudices persisted, and Russia had not achieved the integral feminism that she advocated. Nevertheless, it was on an optimistic note that she ended her narrative by stressing that "peu à peu, des supériorités féminines se feront jour" (little by little female superiorities will emerge) and that we must aid Russian communism "de tout notre pouvoir" (with all our power)<sup>38</sup>. Thus, she supported the Soviet model but remained also skeptical because in her view, it was utopian to seek the regeneration of men and women in revolutions. Pelletier was elitist and individualist. Elitist because she considered that "En somme, la force du féminisme est dans l'élite intellectuelle de la nation" (In short, the strength of feminism is in the nation's intellectual elite) and she praised "une élite restreinte de femmes" (a small elite of women)<sup>39</sup>. Furthermore, various times in her writings, she mentioned "le peuple amor-

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142, cited in Cova 1993: 285.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218, cited in Cova 1993: 285-286.

<sup>39</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, "La République portugaise et le vote des femmes", *Les Documents du Progrès. Revue internationale*, March 1911: 184.

phe” (the amorphous people)<sup>40</sup>. Individualist in the sense that she gave primacy to the individual against the state: for example, when she performed abortions against the laws passed by the state which prohibited such practice (according to her the reason of the state was never a good motive). In *In Anima Vili, ou un Crime Scientifique*, Pelletier analysed individual superiority through the character of the brilliant scientist Charles Delage. Intellectual superiority was a leitmotiv in her other play: the first part of the title speaks by itself: *Supérieur!* The hero of that play came from a proletarian milieu and wanted to be an intellectual, therefore joined anarchist groups. Without doubts, Pelletier was inspired by her own youth. The same can be said of her short stories, *Trois Contes* (Three Tales), where in the first story entitled “*Un Traître*” (A Traitor), the main character had a terrible childhood and left school at 13 years old.

The disappearance, disintegration of the family will be carried out for the benefit of the individual. Pelletier ideal society turns around the development of the individual: Defence of freedom of thinking, of individualism and of women as individuals. In *Capitalisme et communisme*, Pelletier criticized the Russian revolution for having ignored individual freedom, the basic principle according to her. Rousset would certainly have agreed as she strongly believed in individual freedom, but she died precociously of pulmonary tuberculosis on December 18, 1922, three weeks before she would have turned forty-five. In 1919, she had published a collection of poems entitled *Ma forêt* (my forest) where she described the beauty of the forest of Fontainebleau and simultaneously her tiredness and sickness. Pelletier lived almost twenty years longer than Rousset, since she passed away at the age of sixty-five. Like Rousset, during the last years of her life, Pelletier had serious health problems: in 1937, after a stroke, she became half paralyzed. Nevertheless, with two women accomplices, she kept on performing abortions. Pelletier was charged by the police and the investigating judge considered it useful to have her examined by a doctor who claimed she suffered from mental disorders. A suit was then signed and Pelletier was declared “irresponsible” and was sent to Perray-Vaucluse asylum, in the Ile de France region, in June 1939. There, she learned about the outbreak of the Second World War, which she hoped would be a short conflict. She died at Perray-Vaucluse from another stroke on December 29, 1939, few months after her internment. It was a tragic end for the first woman psychiatrist intern in the Seine asylums. There is no evidence that she was insane and according to the last letters she wrote to her friend Brion, the doubt persists. The real reason of her internment was maybe to avoid a public trial<sup>41</sup>.

A comparative approach of Pelletier and Rousset’s trajectories shows that they were at the forefront of the feminist and neo-Malthusians movements. Pelletier and Rousset were charismatics and in their own words “integral feminists”, which was their motto. Talented public speakers, they adapted their language to their audience, did not mince their words, were against all half measures, and defended free motherhood during their entire lives. Rousset crossed France and travelled abroad

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178. Madeleine Pelletier. 1922. *Mon voyage aventureux en Russie Communiste*. Paris: M. Giard. p. 103, cited in Cova 1993: 285.

<sup>41</sup> Cova 2018: 87.

giving lectures that frequently ended with the performance of one of her plays and Pelletier also travelled abroad and gave public lectures. Roussel's play *Par la Révolte* was translated into Portuguese and Russian and Pelletier travelled to Portugal and Russia. If Pelletier and Roussel dedicated a lot of their time to the writing of articles in the feminist and neo-Malthusian written press, their literary production was also a significant part of their militant propaganda. Both tried to conciliate feminism and neo-Malthusianism, which was not an easy task to achieve; similarly, it was difficult to bridge the gap between feminism and socialism. The revolt Pelletier and Roussel praised meant the fight against all kinds of injustices regarding women, especially they wanted women to have the right to control their bodies and sexuality. This claim will be the core of feminisms of the second wave – *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) – and Pelletier and Roussel were pioneers in already advocating it at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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