

Free Women of Spain

The Roots of Anarcha-Feminism

David Porter

1992

a review of

Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women, by Martha A. Ackelsberg
(Indiana University Press, 1991)

I write this review on the day George Bush officially declares his intent to run again for president. Against the backdrop of this obscene, insulting non-event, the positive image of grassroots politics evoked by *Free Women of Spain* stands out all the more. Obviously, envisioning and struggling toward fulfillment of people's fullest capacities is far removed from the media's image of politics.



Milicia women at the Madrid front, 1936

This new work by Martha Ackelsberg successfully conveys the intensity and meaning of genuine politics, as experienced by anarchist women of Spain the 1930s. It also consciously and convincingly overlays this experience on our own contemporary scene.

The result is a powerful portrayal of revolution within a revolution and clear suggestions as to where, by comparison, we stand in present-day North America.

Ackelsberg focuses on the emergence and struggle of the independent anarchist women's organization, *Mujeres Libres* ("Free Women"). The issues are presented within the intense context of the Spanish civil war and revolution of the late 1930s. Her ten years of research combined excellent, extensive archival inquiry with many interviews of *Mujeres Libres* activists.

Founded in 1936 by anarchist women militants in Barcelona and Madrid, *Mujeres Libres* attempted to recruit women to the anarchist movement. It also articulated and gave women strength for their intense inner struggle for self-worth and self-assertion.

At the same time, *Mujeres Libres* assisted the overall movement by enlarging the definition of anarchism—through the voice of direct female experience—to include new perspectives, organizing strategies and important goals immediately beneficial for women. In Ackelsberg's words, it was founded "because too few women had experienced empowerment within the existing organizations of the Spanish anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements. It aimed to become a 'community of empowerment' for working-class women and, at the same time, an organizational context for women's empowerment within the libertarian movement as a whole" (pp. 163–64). "Its very existence...was a form of direct action" (p. 177).

As repeatedly emphasized by *Mujeres Libres* activists, the organization promoted not individualist or elitist feminism, but a social revolution liberating men as well as women. It advocated not separatism from male anarchists, but the autonomy necessary to develop massive and equal female participation in defining and struggling for a common social revolution.

The *Mujeres Libres* organizational network included close to 100 local groups and over 30,000 women from all parts of republican Spain. Until the final conquest by Franco's fascist forces in early 1939, *Mujeres Libres* engaged in a tremendous range of activities.

As described by Ackelsberg in some detail, these included local classes in basic literacy, technical skills and general culture; widespread publishing; professional apprenticeship programs; maternity clinics and nursing schools; education on sexuality and contraception; support services for refugees and those at the front lines; and even pre-military training.

In one form or another, during the space of only two-and-a-half years, such energetic activity no doubt reached millions of Spanish women and men.

Many of the articulated impulses behind the founding of *Mujeres Libres* sound strikingly similar to female activists' critiques of experience in SDS, SNCC, campus and antiwar movements of the 1960s. The author could have strengthened her overall linkage of Spain to the present by noting more explicit connections.

Statements which appear in this book as recollections by Spanish anarchist women closely resemble those that abounded in U.S. movements in the late '60s. In movement activities, men were "always the leaders, and we [were] always the followers. Whether in the streets or at home. We [were] little better than slaves." And this despite the libertarian movement's stated goal of full equality for women.

"One time a companero from the [anarchist youth organization] came over to me, and said, 'You, who say you're so liberated. You're not so liberated. Because if I would ask you to give me a kiss [or more], you wouldn't.'"

"The boys started making fun of the [female] speakers, which annoyed me from the outset. When the woman who was speaking finished, the boys began asking questions and saying it didn't make sense [for women] to organize separately, since they wouldn't do anything anyway."

It was impossible for women to help teach workers at union meetings "because of the attitudes of some companeros. They didn't take women seriously. There is a saying: 'women belong in the kitchen or darning socks.' No, it was impossible: women barely dared to speak in that context."

Harassment by many male anarchists continued once *Mujeres Libres* was underway. One supposedly sympathetic top-level male leader explained that since people naturally try to hold on to whatever privilege they have, it was unrealistic to expect males in the anarchist movement not to do the same: women will have to struggle for equality on their own. At the same time, though favoring sexual freedom in principle, anarchist men typically “ridiculed or denigrated those women [as opposed to men] who practiced it.”

In organizational terms, *Mujeres Libres* was criticized for diverting women’s commitment to the anarchist cause into separate and, by implication, less significant “personal” struggles. It naturally followed that the three large male-dominated organizations of Spanish anarchists (FAI, CNT, FIJL) never recognized *Mujeres Libres* as a group equally important to their own in shaping the direction of Spanish anarchism and in sharing movement resources.

While silent on North American women’s experience in ‘60s movements, Ackelsberg does argue that the Spanish pattern was similar to that experienced by women in the historical socialist movement more generally. As she underlines, however, this contradiction in the anarchist movement was especially glaring.

After all, the essence of anarchism is rejection of all hierarchy, privilege and domination. In its unity of means and ends, it is committed to revolutionary practice within and by the movement consistent with social goals espoused. Liberation begins in the immediate present or it will never emerge.

Liberation of women—psychologically, culturally, politically and economically—can never be subsumed to an agenda of “higher priorities” decided by others (the movement’s predominantly male decision makers). Oppression is multidimensional; there must be progress toward the liberatory goals specific to each component of the movement if common overall movement objectives are to be reached.

According to Ackelsberg, many and perhaps most male Spanish anarchists gave lip service to this perspective. A significant minority seemed genuinely supportive of *Mujeres Libres*’ grassroots efforts and propaganda. Yet, reading Ackelsberg and hearing the direct voice of *Mujeres Libres* militants, it’s impossible not to believe that movement males’ fundamental ambiguity on this point (despite their heroic struggles in other realms) would have fatally prevented anarchist revolution—even without the more obvious, deadly obstacles of international hostility, ongoing war and the counterrevolutionary attitudes and behavior of most non-anarchists in Spain.

It’s obvious to anyone active in recent North American anarchist circles that a comparable pattern of oppressive male messages and critical female response has been as common here as it was in Spain. In part because of this, over the past twenty-five years there has emerged a significant wave of movement activity defining itself as “anarcha-feminist.”

Especially articulated during its earlier years in grassroots publications and by local women’s collectives, the origins, perspective and activities involved are in many respects quite similar to those of *Mujeres Libres*. It is surprising, therefore, that despite Ackelsberg’s clear effort to relate the experience of *Mujeres Libres* to contemporary North American feminist theory and practice, I found no reference in the book to contemporary “anarcha-feminism.”

It is certainly true (as Ackelsberg well demonstrates) that many of the issues articulated and explored by *Mujeres Libres* in the 1930s have been accepted for years as appropriate approaches in our own context by many in the larger feminist movement. These include movement strategies such as grassroots communication outside the workplace, personal consciousness-raising, and autonomous “communities of orientation in the process of consciousness change.”

They also include respect for and valuation of “difference” in the movement. Much of this perspective came from women’s own direct experience, including challenges from within the feminist movement by working-class females and women of color. But my guess is that “anarcha-feminist” writing and practice and/or exposure to anarchist writing and models from the past have also influenced modern feminism. Certainly Emma Goldman’s life and writings have been influential. And Goldman was an enthusiastic supporter of *Mujeres Libres*. Ackelsberg’s persistent linkage between the 1930s and the present certainly makes one curious about the extent of such influence on the contemporary movement, although that is not the subject of her book.

Another issue raised by the book concerns the dynamics of political devaluation or neglect. This theme was played out repeatedly in male Spanish anarchists’ attitudes toward grievances, issues, organizing strategies and organization of female comrades.

At various points throughout the book, it struck me that the overall attitude toward and treatment of anarchists generally by others of the so-called “progressive movement” is often quite comparable. How many times have the latter claimed that anarchists are hopelessly naive, unrealistic, inappropriately combining long-range utopian demands with immediate agendas for change, disorganized and overly spontaneous, diverting movement energies into less important areas and splitting the movement in the face of the enemy? In Spain, wasn’t the hostility of most other “progressives” in the Loyalist camp to the revolutionary agenda and activities of the anarchists similar to the reception of *Mujeres Libres* within, the existing anarchist movement?

If it is true, as Ackelsberg asserts, that traditional political discourse has excluded women from the classic liberal notion of “social contract,” it is just as true that anarchists and those who share their perspective without giving it a name have been excluded—by definition—from any form of statist social contract no matter how much “difference” it was prepared to tolerate. Traditional political theory always assumes the need for a state and excludes participation by anarchists in the “legitimate political community.”

Says Ackelsberg, many current feminist and participatory democratic egalitarian texts point out the need to acknowledge, respect and be enriched by “difference,” (the diversity of identities and various “communities of orientation”) in every realm of society. She finds that they have much in common with the writings and struggles of *Mujeres Libres*. If so, and if they are joined to the now-acknowledged need of many contemporaries to find non-hierarchical approaches to social revolution in the wake of East Europe’s debacle, respect for and influence by anarchist theory and practice may well grow in the coming decade.

Ackelsberg gives the reader a fine explanation of the Spanish events, the general perspective of anarchism and the inspiring goals and struggles of *Mujeres Libres*. All this, combined with her skill in relating them to present-day contexts and theory, make this a very worthwhile volume.

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