Lessons from Spain's Mujeres Libres

Anarchism & the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women

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In 1936, groups of women in Madrid and Barcelona founded Mujeres Libres, an organization dedicated to liberation from their "triple enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as producers." While it lasted for less than three years (its activities in Spain were brought to an abrupt halt by the victory of Franco's forces in February 1939), Mujeres Libres mobilized over 20,000 women, and developed an extensive network of activities designed to empower individual women while building a sense of community.

Like the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement in which they were rooted, Mujeres Libres insisted that the full development of their individuality was dependent upon the development of a strong sense of connection with others.

Mujeres Libres in the Spanish Revolution

Those who established Mujeres Libres were all deeply committed to the larger anarchist movement and its goals. But they found the existing organizations of that movement inadequate to address the specific problems confronting them as women, whether in the movement itself or in the larger society.

They came to insist that a separate organization, devoted to emancipation–to freeing women from their triple enslavement: enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as workers–was essential both to women and to the success of the larger movement. In this brief piece, I will locate Mujeres Libres in the context of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement–what it offered, what its limits were, and then explain why–in that case–women thought it necessary to create an autonomous women's organization.

Anarchism aims to abolish hierarchy and structured relations of domination and subordination in society, and to create a society based on equality, mutuality, and reciprocity in which each person is valued and respected as an individual.

This social vision is combined with a theory of social change, two dimensions of which were particularly critical to understanding Mujeres Libres' visions and actions: a) means must be consistent with ends; and b) people cannot be directed into a future society, but must create it themselves, recognizing, thereby, their own abilities and capacities.

Further, some nineteenth-century anarchist writers and activists, both in Spain and elsewhere, specifically addressed themselves to the subordination of women in their societies, and insisted that full human emancipa-

tion required not just the abolition of capitalism and of authoritarian political institutions, but the overcoming of women's cultural and economic subordination, both within and outside the home.

For example, as early as 1872, an anarchist congress in Zaragoza, Spain, declared that women ought to be full equals of men in the home and in the workplace.

However, neither theory of anarchism nor the practice of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain was egalitarian in the full sense of the word. Although many writers acknowledged the importance of women's emancipation to the anarchist project, and the importance of them to the movement, few gave those concerns top priority. As was the case with socialist movements throughout Europe, many anarchists treated the issue of women's subordination as, at best, secondary to the emancipation of workers, a problem which would be resolved "on the morrow of the revolution."

Thus, although the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement offered the promise of fully integrating a concern with the subordination of women into a theory of radical social transformation, that promise was not fulfilled in practice. Despite the apparent awareness at the core of anarchist theory that relations of domination were manifold and complex, attention to the subordination of women was repeatedly given lower priority than the oppression of male workers. Mujeres Libres was founded to address itself to this and other shortcomings of the movement.

Mujeres Libres and Anarchist Understandings of Social Change

As I noted above, Mujeres Libres was created by women who were, themselves, deeply-rooted within the larger anarcho-syndicalist movement. They, too, rejected domination in all its forms, and looked toward a society characterized by mutual respect and reciprocity, in which each person would be valued and respected as an individual. They recognized that economic organization–and structures of power and dominance based on control over the means of production–was an important source of power and inequality. They noted that such relationships dehumanize both the powerful and the relatively powerless, and insisted that the only way out of such relationships was through the self-organization of the disempowered/subordinate.

Lucía Sánchez Saornil, 1933

The process of organizing and struggling collectively changes people's perceptions of themselves, raises consciousness, empowers, and enables people to create a new reality. At the same time, they did not privilege economics, insisting that it was necessary to confront all forms of hierarchically-structured power, not just those based in economic relations (e.g. including the state, church, and men over women). And, perhaps most importantly, they took to heart the anarchist insistence on the relationship between means and ends in social struggles. You cannot create an egalitarian society through authoritarian means; any truly revolutionary process must create an egalitarian society in its practices. At the same time (and perhaps a bit paradoxically), "You can't improvise a revolution"–people must prepare for it.

In the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist context, that meant (a) direct action: revolutionary activity must begin where people are, not through intermediaries (e.g., political parties). And, they must be activities which change the realities in which people live. In Spain, anarchists advocated–and supported–union organizing and work-place strikes, but also "quality of life" protests and other forms of community. The other cru-

cial feature of this approach was (b) education, in a variety of forms. They believed strongly that literacy would contribute to an improved sense of self, and greater ability to gain information about the world. Thus, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists created "rationalist schools" and ateneos (storefront cultural centers) in the early years of the 20th century, designed for both adults and children.

They organized and supported an extensive array of cultural centers, youth groups, drama groups, a variety of outdoor and informal activities that would contribute to "enculturation," literacy, a sense of what Martin Luther King, Jr. would later call a sense of "somebodyness." These sorts of activities–particularly those connected to cultural/literacy programs–were a "signature" element of anarchist organizing in both rural and urban areas.

The Subordination of Women

Some anarchist writers in the early years of the 20th century used the example of what happened to women in male-dominated society to illustrate their claims about the disempowering effects of hierarchy in general. But that did not mean that all (or even most) male anarchists (or anarcho-syndicalist organizations) were committed to the liberation of women as a significant priority for the movement. In fact, the movement in Spain was divided both about the place of women in working-class organizations, and about the nature of women's subordination and what would be necessary to overcome it.

There were two dominant streams of thought in Spain about male-female relationships during the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. One followed the work of Proudhon, and treated women, essentially, as reproducers, who contribute to society in and through their role in the home and family. A second, with roots in Bakunin's views, asserted that women were equal to men and that the key to women's emancipation would be their full incorporation into the paid labor force on equal terms with them. The official position of the CNT [Confederación Naciónal del Trabajo, the anarcho-syndicalist labor union confederation] followed this second view. But that was no guarantee that the majority of CNT members would act in accordance with that commitment.

But there was, in addition, a third view–held mostly by women within the movement (but not only)–that organizing women into unions would not, in itself, be sufficient. Those who held to this perspective (one articulated, for example, by Emma Goldman) insisted that the sources of women's subordination were broader and deeper than economic exploitation at the workplace. Therefore, women's subordination was as much a cultural, as an economic phenomenon, and reflected a devaluation of women and their activities mediated through institutions such as family and church. Some located woman's subordination in her reproductive role, and in the double standard of sexual morality, arguing that these, too, would have to change.

Movement Organizations & Women's Subordination

> "All those compañeros, however radical they may be in cafes, unions, and even affinity groups [FAI–Federacidn Anarquista Iberica, Iberian Anarchist Federation], seem to drop their costumes as lovers of female liberation at the doors of their homes. Inside, they behave with their compañeras just like common husbands."
>
> –Kyralina [Lola Iturbe]

Most women reported that male colleagues (in unions, youth groups, cultural centers) did not always treat them with respect. As Enriqueta Rovira (who came from a large family of anarchist activists) said she told her comrades: "It's true that we have struggled together, but you are always the leaders, and we are always the followers. Whether in the streets or at home, we are little better than slaves!" Women virtually always found themselves in a minority among activists in unions or ateneos, which meant that it was difficult to get other women involved–especially when their small numbers made them particularly vulnerable to sexist comments or actions from their male comrades.

A few of their stories help to recall the atmosphere of the time.

1. Azucena Fernandez Barba had two parents deeply committed to the movement. She and sisters (who included Enriqueta Rovira) and brother helped found the ateneo Sol y Vida in Barcelona. But, she stated, "inside their own homes, [men] for got completely about women's struggle. It's the same as–to use an analogy–a man who is obsessed with playing cards. They go out to play cards, and they do it regardless of what's going on in the house. The same with us–only it wasn't cards, but ideas…They struggled, they went out on strike, etc. But inside the house–worse than nothing."

2. Pura Perez Benavent Arcos also noted that men did not seem to take women seriously, whether at home or in more "public/political" context. She reported that when girls went to meetings of the Juventudes (the anarchist youth movement), the boys would often laugh at them even before they spoke!

3. Pepita Carpena, long active in the CNT and Juventudes in Barcelona, told this story about one of her experiences with a compañero from the Juventudes:

> I'll tell you a story–because, for me, what has always been my saving grace is that I'm very outgoing, and I'm not bashful about responding to people who give me a hard time…
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> One time, a compañero from the Juventudes came over to me and said, "You, who say you're so liberated. You're not so liberated"–I'm telling you this so you'll see the mentality of these, these men–"because if I would ask you to give me a kiss, you wouldn't."
>
> I just stood there staring at him, and thinking to myself, "How am I going to get out of this one?" And then I said to him, "Listen: when I want to go to bed with a guy, I'm the one that has to choose him. I don't go to bed with just anyone," I said. "You don't interest me, as a man. I don't feel anything for you…Why should you want me to 'liberate myself,' as you put it, by going to bed with you? That's no liberation for me. That's just making love simply for the sake of making love."
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> "No," I said to him, "love is something that has to be like eating: if you're hungry, you eat; and if you want to go to bed with a guy, then…"
>
> "Besides, I'm going to tell you something else. Perhaps you'll get angry at me–(this I did just to get at him, no?)–your mouth doesn't appeal to me…And, I don't like to make love with a guy without kissing him."
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> He was left speechless! But I did it with a dual purpose in mind…because I wanted to show him that that's not the way to educate compañeras…That's what the struggle of women was like in Spain–even with men from our own group–and I'm not even talking about what it was like with other guys."

These attitudes and behaviors reflected some of the variety of views that had been developing on women's proper place–both in society and in a revolutionary movement. Despite an official commitment to women's equality, the organization of women workers was rarely, if ever, taken seriously. Many male anarchists effectively viewed women more as "helpmates" than as active revolutionaries.

Further, although women actively joined unions in the late 19th century–and even constituted a majority of members in some textile locals–they were rarely represented in union leadership. The practice of anarcho-syndicalist unions–whether with respect to the mobilization of women workers or to the incorporation of "women's issues" into the syndical agenda–tended to lag rather far behind its ideological commitment to women's equal inclusion.

Mujeres Libres: Captación and Capacitación

In this context, between 1934 and 1936, women began to discuss the specific subordination of women within the movement–and ways to organize to address it. Why a separate organization for women? Not because they didn't

trust men; and not because men were not ready to commit themselves to women's equality. Rather, because only through their own autonomous, self-directed actions would women come to recognize their own capacities and be able to participate as equals within the revolutionary movement. Lucia Sanchez Saornil, who was to be one of the three co-initiators of Mujeres Libres, wrote in 1935:

> "It is not he the male compañero] who is called upon to set out the roles and responsibilities of the woman in society, no matter how elevated he might consider them to be. No, the anarchist way is to allow the woman to act freely herself, without tutors or external pressures; that she may develop in the direction that her nature and her faculties dictate."

Groups started meeting in a variety of cities and towns throughout the country, with different foci. In Terrassa, women textile workers, all members of the clandestine CNT union, started meeting in 1928. Their purpose: to become comfortable speaking in a group, and to discuss issues (work or salaries, for example) that they might wish to raise in union assemblies. As a result of these meetings, the union included the right of women to equal salary with men for equal work, and eight weeks of paid maternity leave in its demands as early as 1931.

In Barcelona, a group began to form late in 1934. It brought together women who were involved in CNT unions with the goal of fostering solidarity and encouraging them to take more active roles in their unions and in the movement. As Soledad Estorach (one of those who called that first meeting) reported,

> "In Catalonia, at least, the dominant position was that men and women should both be involved. But the problem was that the men didn't know how to get women involved as activists. Both men and most women thought of women in a secondary status.
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> "For most men, I think, the ideal situation would be to have a compañera who did not oppose their ideas, but in whose private life would be more or less like other women. They wanted to be activists 24 hours a day–and in that context, of course, it's impossible to have equality…Men got so involved that the women were left behind, almost of necessity." As a result, "What would happen is that women would come once–maybe even join. But they would never be seen again. So many compañeras came to the conclusion that it might be a good idea to start a separate group for these women…"

Similar efforts were undertaken in Madrid, and elsewhere. Eventually (sometime in 1936), the groups learned of one another's activities, and representatives started meeting together. They wanted to explore what they recognized as the specific subordination of women in capitalist society, in an atmosphere that would take women–their lives, experiences, and hopes–seriously.

Before I turn to an exploration of their programs, I want to make clear that they did not define themselves as "feminists"–by which they meant women who focus on access to education and professional jobs. These types of issues had long been the concern of middle-class feminists, but they had been rejected by anarchists as irrelevant to the concerns of working-class people (women as well as men), and as reinforcing structures they were committed to overthrowing.

As Soledad reported, "We aren't and we weren't 'feminists,' those who were fighting against men. We didn't want to substitute a feminine hierarchy for the masculine hierarchy. It was essential that we work and struggle together, because otherwise, there would be no social revolution. But we needed our own organization to fight for ourselves."

During the early months, groups engaged in a combination of consciousness-raising and direct action. They created networks of women anarchists who attempted to meet the need for mutual support in union and other movement contexts; and attended meetings with one another, checking out reports of chauvinist behavior on the part of their male comrades, and strategizing about how to deal with it. The Barcelona group established guarderias volantes, "flying day-care centers." In their efforts to involve more women in union activities, they were met repeatedly with the claim that women's child-care responsibilities prevented them from staying late at work, or going out at night, to participate in meetings. They decided to address this problem by offering child-care services to women who were interested in serving as union delegates.

In July 1936, the Spanish Civil War began with an attempted military coup d'etat that was repulsed by a combination of armed civilians, including many CNT members, and some loyal soldiers. The failed coup–and resulting civil war–provided the context for widespread social revolution that built on over 70 years of anarchist (and socialist) organizing in Spain. Militias replaced the army, workers collectivized factories abandoned by owners, agricultural workers took over abandoned farms/estates, and many municipalities were also collectivized.

Meanwhile, in August, the US, Britain, France, Italy, and Germany signed a "Non-Intervention Treaty," although Italy and Germany immediately announced they wouldn't abide by it, and supplied soldiers and war materiel to the fascist rebels throughout the conflict. This treaty resulted in the increasing international isolation of the Republican government, as only Mexico and the USSR agreed to provide any material support to the Loyalists. Russian support, in turn, contributed to a vast increase of the power of the Communist Party within the Republican coalition.

In this context, Mujeres Libres developed two sets of goals capacitación and captación. Capacitación can roughly be translated as "empowerment"–coming to an awareness of/acting on one's capacities or abilities. This was the essence of virtually all its programs derived from Mujeres Libres' commitment to direct action and, specifically, the notion of "preparation."

They organized education and literacy programs, at all levels, for both adults and young people; employment and apprenticeship programs–in both rural and urban areas–because they believed women's employment was critical to their emancipation, and not simply a temporary response to wartime labor shortages; programs of consciousness-raising, that also took place in the context of unions and workplaces; programs of education and support around motherhood and child-rearing; education around sexuality and birth control for women, educational programs for soldiers around prostitution, and articles and advocacy opposing the sexual double-standard; support for the war (e.g. propaganda campaigns, visits to militias at the front); and, extensive public relations and media efforts, including creating a magazine that published 14 issues, a broad-based program of publications (books, pamphlets, etc), a radio program, and public speaking (both teaching young women to speak in public, and organizing tours with CNT and FAI to villages and small cities).

Captación took on ever-greater importance as the counterrevolution grew in strength: it meant mobilizing women into the libertarian, as opposed to communist movement organizations. The women of Mujeres Libres saw themselves in a struggle with the Communist Party (and the Association de Mujeres Antifascistas–the Communist-dominated women's organization) for the allegiance and affiliation of women. They expected to have support from the CNT and the Juventudes in their efforts, but these organizations never seemed to understand what Mujeres Libres was trying to do. Instead, they viewed the women as "separatists" who were undermining the unity of the anarchist/anarcho-syndicalist cause. As the civil war dragged on, and the need for support from male-dominated organizations increased, Mujeres Libres tried to explain to their male comrades why they needed a separate organization. As they wrote in a communique in 1938:

"We are aware of the precedents set by both feminist organizations and by political parties… We could not follow either of these paths. We could not separate the women's problem from the social problem [e.g., class-based injustices], nor could we deny the significance of the first [women's subordination] by converting women into a simple instrument for any organization, even our own libertarian organization. The intention that underlay our activities was much much broader: to serve a doctrine, not a party; to empower women to make of them individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organization."

Their struggles, however, were never fully understood or appreciated. They never received the explicit financial and other support from the broader movement they expected. Their experiences have been, and are, echoed by women involved in radical movements in many other places around the world (including both in the U.S. and Canada).

Conclusions/Appreciation

Mujeres Libres demanded that the new society–and efforts to create it–include women as well as men. Practically, they insisted that the movement treat women and men equally, while respecting women's differences from men–not an easy task, and one that we, in the U.S., have not necessarily been much better at. This perspective was Mujeres Libres' unique contribution to development of the libertarian movement in Spain (and, in fact, in the broader world). At the same time, it was that which posed the greatest challenges for them.

Despite the difficulties they had (I explore both the successes and difficulties in my book, Free Women of Spain), it is important to recognize what they accomplished, even in the midst of civil war.

First, they acted on the basis of an understanding of the situation of women in society that was advanced–even revolutionary–not just for their own time, but even for ours. Most significantly, they conceived of the emancipation of women as an integral part of "human" emancipation. Further, they struggled hard to work toward that end in the context of a broad social movement, which, in turn, required them to confront their own comrades and organizations, at the same time that they were trying to work with them. These are not now–nor were they then–easy goals to achieve.

Second, they offered a truly important vision of emancipation of women: one that was not about women's conquest of power (economic, political, or social), but that was a profound critique of hierarchy in all its forms. They insisted that striving for privileges for some will always leave on the margins others who are "disprivileged" (e.g., today, the unemployed, the immigrants, the underemployed, "welfare mothers," gays). And they envisioned a society "mas justa, mas humana Para todos" [more just, more humane, for everyone]–and they insisted that, if such a goal is to be achieved, women must work for it together with men.

Third, they recognized the importance of diversity, variety, differences among people. And they put forward a vision of social transformation in which different groups would be included, with all their differences. They argued that true freedom–emancipation in the full sense of the word–is to be achieved only in community, and through social/collective struggle. As one of their original "calls" put it:

> "Do you live in a village where women are relegated to a life of obscurity and insignificance, considered little more than things, dedicated exclusively to the care of home and family? Undoubtedly, many times you have found yourself disgusted with this, and, when you have witnessed the freedom that your brothers, and the men of your household exercise, you have felt sorrow at the plight of woman…
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> "Well, against all that you have had to suffer, against all this, comes Mujeres Libres. We want you to have the same freedom as your brothers, we want your voice to be heard with the same respect as that of your father. We want you to achieve that independent life that you sometimes imagine for yourself.
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> "Now, remember, all this will require work from you; these goals will not be achieved simply by wanting them; you will need the help, the collective efforts of other compañeras. You will need others to be interested in the same things as you; they will need to help you, and you to help them. In one word, you will need to work together in community."

Not a bad vision, even for our own day!

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