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Models of Revolution: Rural Women and Anarchist Collectivisation in Civil War Spain

MARTHA A. ACKELSBERG

This article explores revolutionary activities in rural Spain during the years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), comparing two different (anarchist) perspectives on the nature of women's subordination and empowerment. One – evident in the activities of the mainstream anarcho-syndicalist movement – understood women's subordination to be rooted in her economic domination and, consequently, viewed economic participation as the route to empowerment. The second – developed in the anarchist women's organisation, Mujeres Libres – understood women's subordination to have broader cultural roots, and, consequently, saw the need for a multi-faceted programme of education and empowerment as key to women's liberation. The article examines the agricultural collectivisation sponsored by the CNT, as well as the activities of Mujeres Libres, comparing the successes and failures of each approach.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first weeks and months of the Spanish Civil War, as many in the 'propertied classes' abandoned their factories or landholdings for safety in rebel-held zones, both industrial and agricultural workers found themselves with opportunities to reorganise their lives and social networks.¹ Unionised industrial workers in urban centres such as Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and their environs collectivised factories and organised worker-control committees to administer them. In rural areas, agricultural labourers took over land belonging to 'the fascists' or their sympathisers, consolidated their own small holdings, and rearranged cultiva-

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tion in teams of workers. Pre-existing patterns of social relations shifted markedly as working people, both urban and rural, gained greater degrees of control over their lives and work.

This social revolution took place in the context of 70 years of anarchist and socialist organising, and, beyond that, of centuries-old Spanish traditions of collectivism and communalism. Anarchist visions of a society without domination, and perspectives on how to achieve that vision, had particular and significant implications for women. Anarchists challenged socialist claims that all relations of domination and subordination were rooted in economic relations; they argued that hierarchy and authority relations existed in a variety of at least semi-independent domains (politics, religion, the family) and needed to be addressed in these contexts, as well as in the economic. In terms of *strategies* for social change, the most significant implication of this position was that means had to be consistent with ends. Anarchists insisted that it is impossible to create an egalitarian society by means of an inegalitarian or hierarchical social movement because those in directing positions will come to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as indispensable. Furthermore, anarchists argued that the essence of oppression is the denial of people's sense of their own capabilities; successful revolutionary strategy, therefore, must embody popular empowerment. This perspective on oppression and liberation constituted one major difference between anarchism (or libertarian socialism) and Marxist (or authoritarian) socialism. On the anarchist view, the only way to create a non-hierarchical society – in which everyone is empowered, and sees him or herself as a valued participant – is through organisations and movements that are egalitarian and participatory and, therefore, empowering [Ackelsberg, 1984; 1985a; 1991: Ch.1].

What did this mean for women, who were virtually universally acknowledged to be subordinated in Spanish culture and society? Despite the recognition that, in general, subordination had roots that were broader and deeper than simply economic relations, the prevailing view in the Spanish anarchist movement (beyond that of the followers of Proudhon, who argued that women were, and should remain, subordinate to men within the family!) was that women's sexual and social subordination was a consequence of their economic subordination and exclusion from the paid workforce. Once the economic arena were restructured along more egalitarian lines, and women engaged in paid work along with men, the specific subordination of women would end.

Another view, much less common in the movement as a whole, but which had been developing slowly in anarchist journals in the early years of the twentieth century, and was articulated, at the time of the Civil War,

by the newly-created libertarian women's organisation, *Mujeres Libres*, was that women's situation could not be understood simply in economic terms. According to this view, women's subordination had broader cultural roots – economic domination was reinforced by childhood socialisation, the teachings of the [Roman Catholic] Church, state practices, etc. Therefore, to overcome their subordination, women would require a more broad-based programme of empowerment, directed specifically to them and their needs [Nash, 1976: 8–12, and 1981; also Ackelsberg, 1991: Chs.1–2]. This perspective was rooted in the belief that revolution is a process of empowerment.

During the early months of the Spanish Civil War, revolutionary collectivisations took place in both urban and rural contexts in widely-scattered areas of the country, the content and process varying with the local situation. This article examines the revolutionary movement in rural areas in an effort to explore the ways these two perspectives on women's subordination and empowerment (one, that subordination is rooted primarily in economic domination; the other, that subordination has broader cultural roots) expressed themselves in revolutionary practice.

SPANISH ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM AND THE 'WOMAN PROBLEM'

As early as 1872, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement committed itself to equality for women as part of its vision of an anarchist society. The *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, or CNT (the anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation) renewed that commitment at its Saragossa Congress of May 1936, which set out an extensive vision of 'libertarian communism.' In the section concerning 'family and sexual relations,' the Congress declared [CNT, 1955: 197–8] that 'Since the primary aim of the libertarian revolution is to assure the economic independence of all, without distinction of sex, the interdependence of men and women, a consequence of [women's] economic inferiority created by capitalism, will disappear along with [capitalism]. That means that the two sexes will be equal, in both rights and duties.'

Consequently, although the movement often appealed to women for their loyalty and participation, neither in the pre-revolutionary context nor during the years of the Civil War did it present women's emancipation as a major revolutionary goal. And even when it did address the issue, it rarely challenged dominant definitions of women's roles. As was the case in most left movements – both in Spain and elsewhere in Europe – most anarchist appeals to women called on them to abandon their homes and contribute to the economy as a *temporary* contribution to the war effort

[Ackelsberg, 1991: Chs.3–4]. Very few appeals advocated a more far-reaching reordering of women's roles and statuses. So, for example, the women's section of the anarcho-syndicalist-affiliated Liberal Professions Union called on women to 'develop your own personality', and 'do not believe that your life consists only in homemaking and the abandonment of your personality in the midst of family life'. Women, it continued, have the responsibility to develop their minds, by 'reading, studying, and nourishing it [the mind] with good thoughts so that you can take the place appropriate to your personality in both personal and social life'. Nevertheless, much of the advice seemed oriented to women in their roles as mothers: 'Women, the crown of female life is motherhood.' Women were encouraged to develop and educate themselves so that they could be better mothers, and encourage their daughters (as well as sons) to develop all their talents and abilities [*Sindicato Unico*, 1936: 9–10; *Mañas*, 1937: 4].

By contrast, the beginning of the Civil War also coincided with the founding of the anarchist women's organisation, *Mujeres Libres*, which set as its goal the overcoming of women's 'triple enslavement – to ignorance, as women, and as producers'. While all its initiators were women affiliated with one or another of the major anarchist movement organisations – the CNT, the FAI (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, Iberian Anarchist Federation) or the FIJL (*Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias*, the anarchist youth organisation) – each believed that a separate organisation, run by and for women, would be necessary to overcome women's particular subordination and enable women to take their rightful places in the revolutionary process. Accordingly, *Mujeres Libres* emphasised women's emancipation as a central and necessary focus of revolutionary activity. As its journal, *Mujeres Libres*, stated in an editorial early in 1937:

We are not talking now about a gradual evolution, nor about 'consciousness'. Not even about an interest in social issues ... We have said many times that woman's independence is inseparable from her economic independence. We have said that 'the home' is, in most cases, a symbol of slavery ...

But now we are not talking about any of that ... We are not talking, here, about raises in salary, nor of gaining more-or-less recognised women's rights, but of the future life. Of our participation and orientation, as women, in that future life.

From now on, every woman must transform herself into a defined and defining being; she must reject hesitation, ignorance ... Revolution is not in any sense a state of 'being', but one of 'creating'

[or doing] that transcends our particular anxieties, our illusions, and reaches even to our children ... [*Mujeres!* n.d., emphasis added].

AGRICULTURAL COLLECTIVISATION AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Economic life provided the major context for the working out of different visions of equality. In many republican-held areas, particularly in Valencia, Aragon, and in some parts of rural Madrid, Catalonia, and Andalusia, anarchist- and socialist-inspired collectivisation changed the face of the countryside, restructuring long-standing patterns of land tenure and cultivation. In order better to understand the nature and significance of collectivisation, it may be helpful to provide some information on pre-revolutionary patterns of land-working and land-holding.

Economic development in Spain was very uneven, and patterns of land tenure varied widely in different regions. In Andalusia and Extremadura, for example, most land was held in large tracts, known as *latifundias*, that were owned by absentee landlords, and worked by essentially landless day-labourers who lived in urban agglomerations of 10–15,000 people. This area had been a major focus of anarchist unrest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, in the final years and months just preceeding the Civil War, witnessed numerous declarations of *comunismo libertario* (libertarian communism), when agricultural workers joined with other townspeople to take over town halls and declare workers' communes. Most of the 'revolutions', however, were quickly quelled by the Civil Guards. In the aftermath of the Generals' rebellion of July 1936, day-labourers in many of these Andalusian communities took over lands on which they had previously worked and established collectives. However, since much of this area fell to rebel forces by late summer of 1936, little record remains of these efforts.

The areas of the country where anarchist collectivisation was most popular were Aragon, Valencia, and, to a lesser extent, rural Castile and Catalonia.² In each, the pattern of collectivisation varied with pre-existing forms of land tenure. In much of Aragon, for example, land had traditionally been held in relatively small family plots. There, many small landholders formed collectives by pooling land they had always worked. Those who did not wish to join (especially those with larger plots worked by hired labourers) were either left to themselves as 'individualists', or 'relieved' by the collective of any land beyond that they could work without hired labour. Others, who had owned very little property in the pre-war period established collectives on estates expropriated from 'fascists', or abandoned by their owners. Susan Harding [1984: 72] has

characterised the collectivisations in Aragon as 'intensely and inescapably contradictory'. While 'many villagers joined collectives eagerly', many others 'participated unwillingly', and the presence of CNT-led militia troops often undermined any meaningful notion of 'choice'.

In Valencia, once the rebellion had been put down in the cities, both the CNT and the UGT (the *Unión General de Trabajadores*, the socialist trade union federation) initiated efforts to collectivise latifundial land and land abandoned by owners disloyal to the Republic. But there were few *latifundias*, and relatively little of the cultivated land was owned by fascist sympathisers. Nevertheless, as it had in Aragon, the CNT encouraged agricultural labourers in many villages to take over parcels on which they had been working, and it also set up local, regional, and national federations to assist the collectives with production and distribution. Even so, levels of consciousness and ability were often fairly low (see, for example, Bosch [1987: 147–68]).

Similarly, in Catalonia in the pre-war period, much land was held in relatively small family plots, or in slightly larger holdings worked by sharecroppers. The CNT had relatively few supporters in the area, and most of these were day-labourers. The sharecroppers and '*rabassaires*' [vine-tenders] tended to affiliate with the *Unió de Rabassaires* [an organisation of the small-holders and sharecroppers who worked the vineyards], formed in 1922, which pressed for legal reform of property laws to guarantee greater security of tenure to sharecroppers, rather than for the more radical programme of collectivisation favoured by the CNT [Balcells, 1977: 353–4, 359]. These differing background conditions dramatically affected outcomes when the rebellion (and revolution) broke out: where large (and especially absentee) landholdings predominated, revolutionary collectivisations were much more likely; where land was more evenly divided, and landlords remained in the area, more co-operativist approaches seemed to prevail [Vilanova, n.d.: especially 129–34]. Thus, for example, one collective in Lerida (in Catalonia) was formed when a few 'enthusiasts' initiated the expropriation of a few relatively large landholdings by those who had previously worked as labourers or sharecroppers. In addition to the founders, only a few of those who joined the collective had been members of the CNT prior to the war; others apparently joined less out of ideological commitment than out of a need for work and sustenance (interviews, 1977). The *Generalitat* [the autonomous Catalan government] attempted to provide some direction and coordination of the collectives, through its 'Decree of Collectivisation and Worker Control', passed in October of 1936. But it is not clear how effective its programme of 'obligatory syndicalisation' (meant to guarantee equity for members of different worker organisa-

tions) actually was (see Muria, [1937: 10–21]; for an overview of rural collectivisations see 'L'enquesta' [1936]).

In sum, the patterns of collectivisation varied as much as, if not more than, pre-existing patterns of cultivation. In many communities, anarchist organisations took complete control of both 'governance' and production, creating municipal collectives. In slightly larger villages, workers expropriated and collectivised the lands of large holders, allowing those who had previously owned the land to continue working it, but assuring that all who had been sharecroppers or day-labourers became full members of the collective. Most collectives were 'governed' by weekly or bi-weekly general assemblies in which each member of the collective had one vote. Production was usually organised by work groups, each composed of eight to ten workers. Often members pooled their farm animals; many built new barns and/or storage areas; and some created canals, roads, and irrigation systems that made a permanent contribution to the infrastructure of rural Spain.³

For Spanish anarcho-sindicalists, this reorganisation of rural social life, like that which occurred in urban collectives, represented a revolution that was both 'economic and ethical'. The collectives were to serve as building blocks of the new society. They represented 'an attempt to construct ... cells of an anarchist society ... federated among themselves' that would serve as partial examples of anarchism in practice – of a society free of domination [Bernecker, 1982: 182–3, 260–61; also Ackelsberg, 1985b: 100–21]. The process of collectivisation embodied the anarchist principle of 'preparation' for revolution *as* revolution: we create a new society, and the new men and women who are to participate in it, by creating it.

What were the implications of these changes for women? What roles did women play in the process of revolutionary collectivisation in rural areas, and how did collectivisation affect the conditions of their daily lives? First, it is important to note that, for all the regional differences in patterns of landholding, virtually nowhere were women able to inherit land in their own right. Although most women did *work* the land, their labour was generally considered secondary to that of men, and tended to be defined as 'women's work'. Women were responsible for the household plot and, perhaps, for a few animals that provided milk or eggs for home consumption.

Soledad Estorach, who was an activist both in the CNT and in the Barcelona-based *Grupo Cultural Femenino* (women's cultural group), which was to become part of *Mujeres Libres* in the fall of 1936, travelled with representatives of anarchist organisations through Aragon, Catalonia, and parts of Valencia in the first few months of the war. She

described [*Estorach*, 1982] the role of these travelling activists – at least some of whom were women – in the process of collectivisation:

When we got to a village, we'd go to the provisional committee of the village, and call a general assembly of the entire village. We'd explain our paradise, with great enthusiasm... And then there would be a debate – *campesino* [rural land-worker] style – questions, discussion, etc. By the next day, they'd begin expropriating land, setting up work groups, etc.

We'd help them form a union, or create work groups – sometimes there would be no one in the village who could read or write, so some of these matters took a bit longer! We'd also make sure they named a delegate to send to the next *comarcas* or regional meeting. And we'd go out to the fields to work with them, to show them that we were 'regular people', not just outsiders who didn't know anything about this. We were always welcomed with open arms.

Some women were involved, then, in the initial propaganda tours that helped provide the impetus for collectivisation in many rural villages. But, for a variety of reasons, evaluation of the roles women played in the day-to-day functioning of the collectives as a whole is complex. Neither contemporary accounts nor more recent monographic studies of collectivisation offer much direct information on the nature or extent of women's participation. Of surviving documentary evidence, most focuses almost entirely on men's activities. Even oral histories have been somewhat sketchy on women's participation on a day-to-day level. Based on materials I have been able to examine, I explore here three aspects of the functioning of rural collectives for clues about women's place: work standards and the distribution of work, salaries and wage scales, and criteria for and/or practices of membership.

Work Standards

A traditional sexual division of labour seems to have prevailed in the distribution of work within the collectives: for the most part, 'work' was defined as the activities of men; women's activities – as they had been in the pre-war period – tended to be dismissed as extensions of 'housekeeping'. The minutes of a collective in Lerida, for example, suggest that norms for women's work were different from those for men's – not least because the participants seemed to assume that women would continue to bear primary responsibility for domestic duties. For example, one delegate, speaking on behalf of his *compañera*, complained that it was unfair to make her work the same hours as the men on the farm, since she

would, in addition, cook meals, wash, and iron clothes. During the course of a discussion of workers who left their posts early, one member suggested that women were the ones who tended to leave early – so that they could get to the co-operative store in time to get food and other supplies. He proposed that men might also participate in this process. His suggestion was rejected, however, on the strength of another's claim that 'the woman knows better than anyone what she will need during the day, or for the week to come'. Finally, reports of debates some months later indicate continued discussion over what standards were appropriate for *women* workers, in particular. The minutes report, for example, that 'Oriol pointed out that the issue of *compañeras* is a problem in all the collectives, and says that it is a product of egoism and a failure of collective spirit ... but in this case, we must at least make sure that the women comrades do certain jobs, such as laundry and cleaning the house' [*Colectividad Campesina 'Adelante'*, 20 Dec. 1936, 14 March, 20 June and 18 July 1937].

Evidence from other collectives reveals similar approaches. Women were expected to work, but the conditions of their work were different from men's. A 'Guide' for collectives published in *Cultura y Acción*, the journal of the anarchist federation of Aragon, Rioja, and Navarra, for example, stated that 'all individuals over 15 years of age, of both sexes, are obliged to work for the collective, and with respect to married women and invalids, assemblies will determine the nature of their obligations'. A description of the collective in Morata de Tajuña (in Castilla) made specific mention of the fact that ninety women took part in work groups. However, since 415 families, or 1,300 persons, comprised the collective, the figure of 90 women suggests that most were *not* part of the regular work groups which were the basis of the collective's economic structure ['*Guión*,' 1936; *CNT-AIT*, n.d.: 49–50]. Everywhere, domestic chores fell automatically to women.⁴ In Villafranca del Panadés, for example, where commerce as well as farming was collectivised, the collective distributed ration cards to *women* 'in order to control everything sold in the stores of the village' [*Boletín de Información*, *CNT-FAI*, 1936]. And, except on small or very poor collectives, women apparently worked outside the home only under unusual circumstances, for example, the harvest, when all hands possible were needed.⁵

Wages

Salaries and wage scales are another indicator of the ways the collectives understood equality and/or sexual difference. Most collectives attempted to move toward pay equity in some fashion. There seem to have been two

major schemes. One was to pay all members a set amount per day. The other was the so-called 'family wage' which adjusted the amount of the wage to the size of the family, in an approximation to the communist-anarchist goal of 'to each according to his need' (for examples, see 'L'Enquesta' [1936; 1937]).

Some collectives paid all workers the same wage, regardless of the type of work done. Those of Monzón and Miramel in Aragon, for example, paid men and women equally. But most collectives set fairly significant differentials between wages paid to women and those paid to men.⁶ Further (as has been the case in a variety of industrial contexts as well, and certainly not only in Spain), even so-called 'family-wage' systems incorporated an unequal valuation of labour. 'Adelante!' (in Lerida) and 'El Porvenir' (in Valencia), for example, paid wages to the 'family head' scaled according to the number, sex and ages of family members. The (male) head of family in 'El Porvenir' received 4 ptas. per day for himself; 1,50 for his *compañera*; 0,75 for each child over 10; and 0,50 for each of those under ten. In Granadella, the collective set a wage of 2 ptas. per week for 'workers 18 years or older', 1 pta. for those between 15 and 18, and 1 pta. for '*compañeras* over 18'.⁷ Some collectives in Aragon operated with a combination of these two systems. In Fraga, for example, women who worked outside the home in the traditionally women's task of tending and packing figs received the same daily wage for their work as did men. During those months when they 'simply kept house, or kept up the family plot', they were not paid. The family wage paid to the husband or father was said to reflect their contribution indirectly.⁸

Although the movement as a whole, and most collectives, touted the introduction of the 'family wage' as a progressive step, one that would overcome much of the exploitation that had characterised pre-war rural life, all of these groups seemed oblivious to its implications for women. H.E. Kaminski, who travelled in Catalonia during this period, noted the paradox [1976: 101]: 'In fact, this libertarian communism takes off from the existing state of things. The proof is that the family wage leaves the most oppressed person in Spain, the woman, in complete dependence on men.' As Bernecker [1982: 185-6] points out, single women who did not live with their parents were totally ignored in this system (though there were probably not many of them living in rural villages). And, of course, these wage scales, which everywhere paid women less than men, were in complete violation of the principle of equal pay for equal work that the CNT had committed itself to as far back as its founding conference in 1910. Despite this, the family-wage scheme apparently met with no resistance on these grounds from within the CNT ranks.

Why this should have been the case is a complex question. On the one

hand, although the CNT was committed in principle to the equality of women, the goal of 'equal pay for equal work' was rarely raised before the war – and, even then, usually only by small groups of women. Within the rank and file of the movement, the Proudhonian position – that women were inferior to men, and ought to define themselves in terms of home and children – probably predominated over the more egalitarian official position of the movement. Reinforcing this point of view was the fact that Spanish culture was heavily dominated by the Catholic Church, which took the position that 'woman's place was in the home'. Virtually the entire educational system – including that supported by the state – was staffed by members of religious orders. Many people (including anarchists) argued that women were deeply affected by Church rhetoric, as they were much more likely than men to attend Church, and because the Church sponsored a variety of women's clubs and benefit societies. In fact, considerable opposition to the extension of suffrage to women in the 1930s came from leftists and republicans who feared that giving the vote to women would effectively *increase* the power of the Church. Temma Kaplan has suggested that anarchist opposition to the Church (and the traditional family structures it supported) may well have alienated substantial numbers of women [Kaplan, 1977] – and, consequently, left the movement, as a whole, feeling that women's issues were of only marginal importance. Some combination of these factors probably accounts for the relative lack of attention to economic equity for women within mainstream anarchist organisations – although pay equity was a significant aspect of *Mujeres Libres*' programme, as we will see.

Membership

The question of membership standards and criteria is also complex. Collectives based their legitimacy on democratic authority structures, and on a system of decision-making in assemblies, in which all members participated and in which each had one vote. But who qualified for membership? Bernecker [1982: 178] concludes that 'all inhabitants of the village' had the right to vote; though he notes that Hugh Thomas argued that it seems most likely that only male workers were present at the assemblies. My own research suggests that the situation probably varied from village to village. Many reports from collectives published in *Boletín de Información CNT-FAI* contain phrases such as 'all in the collective are workers, including both women and men', or 'The Collective is composed of all those over 18, of both sexes ...'.⁹ On the other hand, the minutes of the Lerida collective rarely refer to women at all, and when they do, almost never by name; more often, women appear as 'the *compañera* of

...', which suggests that they were not considered members at the same level as the men.

This ambiguity also makes difficult any evaluation of participation in leadership and decision-making within the collectives. The minutes of a number of collectives, as well as interviews with male participants on those and other collectives, suggest that women's involvement in communal decision-making was rather limited. Given the general societal devaluation of women's worth, however, such reports should not necessarily be taken as indicative of the levels of women's participation. Nevertheless, a number of women also reported that women were often silent in meetings – a silence they attributed to the fact that most women had had little experience of speaking in public. This was to become a major focus of *Mujeres Libres*' programmes.

It is, of course, possible that, then as now, women did much and received little or no recognition for it. Soledad Estorach reported [1982], for example, that there were some collectives in Aragon where the first delegates to the village committee were women. Why? Because men were often away from home for long periods, tending the flocks. Those who actually kept the villages going on a day-to-day basis were the women. From all reports, however, the leadership of women in these villages probably represented an exception to the general pattern, rather than the rule.

By some measures, the collectives accomplished a great deal. Women participated actively in many rural collectives, and even took positions of responsibility in some of them. Particularly in those collectives that recognised – and remunerated – women's work, women began to be viewed as at least somewhat independent. In a more general sense, women's *social* autonomy increased. Whereas, in the pre-revolutionary period, rural women were rarely if ever seen outside the home unaccompanied by a male (except, perhaps, when marketing), young women in rural areas began to move about more freely, even to go to bars, for example, with other women friends. In a significant number of areas, formal marriage ended, even if the nuclear family remained the norm.¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite a long-standing CNT commitment to women's equality within the economic sphere, without a specific focus on women's equality and participation, there were limits to what the collectives achieved. Even in the terms accepted by the CNT (that is basing women's equality on labour-force participation), the collectives fell short of their mark in a number of important respects. Most collectives treated women as secondary workers, and placed married women, in particular, in a kind of economic nether-world. In effect, the refusal to address women's subordination as an independent focus left intact a public/private split

which identified women with the home and domestic duties, and limited the ability of women to achieve equality within the broader economic realm. Further, in the absence of specific attention to women's subordination, apparently gender-neutral structures of participation effectively reproduced existing gender disparities. Without a challenge to the public/private dichotomy, and the gendered division of labour, most women did not come to see themselves (nor were they seen by their male comrades) as fully equal participants in rural revolutionary transformation.

MUJERES LIBRES: REVOLUTIONISING WOMEN'S ROLES

Mujeres Libres was founded in 1936 by independent groups of women affiliated with either the CNT, the FAI, or the FIJL, with the objective of empowering women to take their places in the revolutionary movement. While all its founders were members of these libertarian movement organisations, the 'initiators' (as they liked to call themselves) believed a *separate* organisation was necessary to enable women to overcome their 'triple enslavement, to ignorance, as women, and as producers'. From its beginnings early in 1936, Mujeres Libres soon spread (helped by announcements in more 'mainstream' anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist media) to towns and villages throughout the Republican zone [Ackelsberg, 1991: Ch. 4].

Many of its activities were educational in nature. Its programmes in rural areas, in particular, responded to both the accomplishments and the limits of revolutionary collectivisations. For Mujeres Libres, women's emancipation would not result simply from women's incorporation into the labour force. This was so because the forces of subordination operated in more than simply the economic realm; the Church, for example, reinforced the subordination of women in many domains, not just the religious. As a result, most women were not fully prepared to take their places as equal participants, even if they were given the opportunity. Mujeres Libres took seriously, that is, the anarchist vision of preparation for revolution *as* revolution, effectively (though not always explicitly) insisting that women's subordination in the so-called 'private sphere' would have to be addressed if women were to take active roles in the social revolution.

Mujeres Libres focused on the links among economic, cultural (including, importantly, religious), and sexual subordination.¹¹ In Mujeres Libres' view, overcoming their subordination *as women* was a crucial component of women's active participation in revolution. As Emma Goldman (an ardent supporter of Mujeres Libres) wrote in *Mujeres*

Libres in December, 1936: 'It is clear that there can be no true emancipation as long as there is domination of one individual over another, or of one class over another. And there cannot be any reality to the emancipation of the human race as long as one sex dominates the other.' Thus, *Mujeres Libres*' programmes had a number of different components: encouraging anarcho-syndicalist unions and other movement organisations to take women and women's subordination seriously; working together with these largely male organisations to train women to take their places in the paid labour force; and, most significantly, engaging in education and consciousness-raising programmes among women to counter the influence of the Church and to encourage women to play a broader role in the revolution.

Education

Education formed the centre of *Mujeres Libres*' programmes of *capacitación* [empowerment, development of one's abilities], and took primary place in discussions of its accomplishments. Education (free from the traditionalist views propagated by Church- and state-supported educational institutions) was essential to releasing women's potential and enabling them to become fully contributing members of the movement and the new society. Most basic to these programmes was a crusade against illiteracy. Embarrassment about 'cultural backwardness' prevented many women from active engagement in the struggle for revolutionary change. Literacy was to be a tool to develop self-confidence and further participation.¹² In towns and villages, as well as in major cities, *Mujeres Libres* offered programs in basic literacy, as well as more specialised courses. In an effort to support women in rural areas, for example, *Mujeres Libres* established farm schools for girls who had come to the city from rural areas to engage in domestic service, aimed at teaching them skills that would enable them to participate more effectively in collectivised farming in their native villages. In addition, both nationally and regionally, *Mujeres Libres* established committees focused on culture and propaganda, to spread the message in person as well as in writing. A group in Barcelona made regular radio broadcasts. Others travelled through the Catalan countryside to speak to those who might not be reached by written or radio propaganda. Given the high rates of illiteracy – particularly among women – these verbal messages were especially important.

Pepita Carpena, who travelled as a representative of *Mujeres Libres* to rural villages, described her experiences [*Carpena*, 1981]:

We would call the women together, and explain to them ... that

there is a clearly defined role for women, that women should not lose their independence, but that a woman can be a mother, and a *compañera* at the same time ... Young women would come over to me and say, 'This is very interesting: what you're saying we've never heard before, it's something that we've felt, but we didn't know ...'.

The ideas that grabbed them the most? Talk about the power men exercised over women ... There would be a kind of an uproar when you would say to them, 'we cannot permit men to think themselves superior to women, that they have a right to rule over them.' I think that Spanish women were waiting anxiously for that call.

Employment

Mercedes Comaposada, one of the originators of *Mujeres Libres*, described the place and importance of employment programmes in *Mujeres Libres*' overall plan: 'In conjunction with education, work was the key to women's self-development. We wanted to open the world to women, to allow women to develop themselves in whatever ways they wanted to ...' [1982]. *Mujeres Libres* viewed work as a necessary and indispensable part of life. Humans had the capacity to use technology to lighten the burden of labour, structuring production so that machines would be at the service of people, and the exploitation of some by others would end [*Grangel*, n.d.; also 'Mujeres con carga', n.d. and '*Campesinas*', n.d.]. Labour should be the expression of human capability and creativity, a prerequisite for freedom ['*Trabajo*', 1936]. The vision of work as part of a fulfilled life was especially important for women – who, until then, had been deemed unfit for productive labour. *Mujeres Libres* insisted that work contributed both to general social progress and to women's emancipation more specifically, enabling women to be – and to experience themselves as – productive members of the society ['*El Trabajo*']. In these respects, *Mujeres Libres*' programmes served as an important counter not only to prevailing social norms, but also to the perspectives propounded by Church-supported women's and labour organisations.¹³

In addition to working with unions to develop apprenticeship programmes for industrial jobs, *Mujeres Libres* prepared women for work in rural areas, most notably by establishing experimental stations for agriculture and aviculture to provide women the knowledge they would need to participate in rural production. Some articles in the journal addressed themselves specifically to rural women, offering them the education they would need to take their places in production:

Arms alone are not enough, rural comrades. Nor is everyone's combined force sufficient. We must change the rhythm of production and produce more, much more....

How?

By organizing teams, groups of physically strong women, who are knowledgeable about work in the fields, and to prepare two or three women trained in agricultural technology for each of these groups ... That way, rural workers will accomplish more with less work.

In *Mujeres Libres*' classes, you can prepare yourself for this new rhythm of work which is so necessary, gaining knowledge about agriculture, aviculture, and rural administration.

Campesina: You have always been in the fields, always with your arms outstretched above your heads, waiting, exhausted, dark and sad, like one more plant, devalued and enslaved. You have been waiting: for clouds, storms, floods, the tax collector ... all the disasters and calamities of rural life ... *Campesina*: We are now left without the old landlords, and the fields are laughing. Along with the old masters, illiteracy, dirt, children without number, all these will vanish ... [*Campesina*, n.d.].

Agricultural experiment stations, offering such courses, existed in Barcelona, Aragon, and in Valencia, and women came to them from many surrounding communities. For example, *Mujeres Libres* reported on a collective in Amposta that had a new chicken co-operative, directed by a woman. The director had been sent by the collective to an institute sponsored by *Mujeres Libres* to learn how to organise and manage the work (as reported in Giménez [n.d.a]; see also Giménez [n.d.b]; Pérez [n.d.] and 'Campesina' [n.d.]).

While even *Mujeres Libres* often reported on the operation of these collectives without especially noting the overall sexual division of labour (men tended to work in the fields, women in shops and laundry), or the apparent assumption of women's primary responsibility for child-rearing and domestic duties [e.g., Giménez, n.d.a] nevertheless *Mujeres Libres* did call repeatedly for women's full participation in economic and social life:

How beautiful would life be with mothers and sisters who are knowledgeable! How quickly Society would be transformed if women participated in social struggle!

A thoroughly libertarian Aragon, with well-plowed fields, men of steel, the Aragon of struggles for revolutionary aims, also has its brave women. Women who are able to substitute for men in the field ... [Gómez, n.d.].

Consciousness-raising

Through all of these educational activities, *Mujeres Libres* attempted to raise consciousness about women's social and political participation. Virtually every issue of the journal had at least one article on women as social-political activists, or on the exploits of exceptional women, whether in contemporary Spain or in other historical and geographical contexts.¹⁴ In attempts to reach both unaffiliated women and anarchist men with its message, *Mujeres Libres* published columns in other anarchist periodicals, such as *Acracia*, *Ruta*, *CNT* and *Tierra y libertad*, dealing with women's participation in revolutionary struggles. Representatives of *Mujeres Libres* joined representatives of the CNT, FAI, and FIJL on propaganda trips to the countryside, introducing (often illiterate) rural workers to libertarian ideas and practices. Radio broadcasts supplemented these speaking tours. In addition, booklets and pamphlets, as well as pictorial expositions in Madrid and Barcelona, highlighted the achievements and activities of women.

Finally, *Mujeres Libres* attempted to articulate a sense of what life might be like for fully self-conscious, self-empowered women. Women's situation differed from that of men: although men and women should engage together in the struggle to overcome relations of domination imposed on them from outside (primarily by capitalism), women had an additional struggle, for their 'interior liberty', their sense of self. In this they would have to struggle alone – and, all-too-frequently, against the opposition of their male comrades or family members. Nevertheless, 'when you have achieved your goal, you will belong only to yourselves . . . You will become persons with freedom and equality of social rights, free women in a free society that you will build together with men, as their true *compañera*. . . . Life will be a thousand times more beautiful when the woman becomes a really "free woman" [*mujer libre*]' [*Ilsa*, n.d.; also '*La mujer*', 1937].

In addition to these programmes oriented toward developing women's capacities to enable them to participate more fully in revolutionary transformation, other activities addressed a wide range of concerns. *Mujeres Libres* addressed issues of sexuality, including birth control and 'conscious motherhood'; offered courses and pamphlets on child care and child development; sponsored institutes to train teachers in new, and more open, methods of education to prepare young people for a libertarian world; struggled to eliminate prostitution (and proposed *liberatorios de prostitución*, centres where prostitutes could go for retraining to develop new skills); and supported refugee services, particularly in those rural areas flooded with ever-increasing numbers of

refugees from war zones (for more details, see Ackelsberg [1991: Ch. 5]).

The exigencies of war, of course, set limits on Mujeres Libres' achievements. Mujeres Libres claimed between 20,000 and 30,000 members, virtually all of them working-class women, and many of them in rural areas. Thousands of these women participated in educational activities of one sort or another. Yet, economic crisis brought on by prolonged civil war limited both funds and opportunities for major social reorganisation. The project of *liberatorios de prostitución*, for example, never really progressed beyond the idea stage.

Overall, perhaps the most important aspect of Mujeres Libres' activities was its very existence as an independent, autonomous, organisation, setting its own goals and priorities. Its existence, in effect, reflected in an organisational context what Mujeres Libres was attempting to communicate at the individual level: that women needed to be able to define themselves. In fact, Mujeres Libres' insistence on autonomy and self-definition became a major source of tension within the larger movement context: the CNT and FAI did not see the need for an autonomous women's organisation, any more than they saw the need for specific attention to women's subordination.

In the view of the major movement organisations, Mujeres Libres' work with women should have been undertaken (and understood) as *auxiliary* to the work of purportedly 'gender-neutral' working-class organisations. They saw no need for an *independent* organisation of and for women, with the authority to develop and implement its own programmes of education and empowerment. Thus, although individual CNT unions and FAI groups engaged in a variety of joint projects with Mujeres Libres groups at the local level, neither the CNT nor the FAI as *national*-level organisations ever accorded Mujeres Libres the respect and monetary support Mujeres Libres believed it deserved. To the women of Mujeres Libres, this lack of support was particularly galling given the active support the Spanish Communist Party offered to Communist-affiliated women's groups. Of course, Communist-sponsored women's groups were hardly 'autonomous' or self-defining in Mujeres Libres' terms; and, given the larger Civil War context, the Communist Party had many more resources available to it than did libertarian movement organisations. Representatives of Mujeres Libres argued repeatedly – though unsuccessfully – most dramatically at the joint plenary of libertarian movement organisations in October 1938, that it deserved organisational recognition as an autonomous 'fourth branch' of the movement (along with CNT, FAI, and FIJL), and that its work

among women was crucial to the overall success of the revolutionary project. These arguments, however, fell largely on deaf ears; mainstream organisations refused to acknowledge the connection *Mujeres Libres* saw between autonomy and empowerment and, therefore, refused to support the organisation as an autonomous entity.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the limited progress of the social revolution itself – despite all the collectives did manage to achieve – demonstrates the importance of *Mujeres Libres*' perspective. Given the exigencies of the wartime situation, large numbers of women in both urban and rural contexts were drawn into 'non-traditional' work. In rural areas, many women took on new roles with enthusiasm, breaking gender barriers and social expectations that had seemed unchanging for generations. New modes of social interaction followed upon these new economic roles. Yet, without explicit and direct challenges to women's subordination and to the public/private split, and without specific programmes directed at empowering women, there were limits to what women would achieve, no matter how 'revolutionary' the context. The experience of rural women, even in this limited venue, seems to validate the original anarchist perspective on domination and social change – that is, that a focus on economic issues alone is insufficient. Effectively to overcome domination requires empowering people in a variety of contexts, addressing the specific conditions of their lives. Revolutionary activity – even anarchist revolutionary activism – cannot be gender-blind.

NOTES

1. George Orwell, travelling in Barcelona in December, 1936, reported, for example [*Orwell*, 1967: 4–5], that it 'was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle ... In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist.'
2. Material on the process of collectivisation is taken largely from Ackelsberg [1991: 77–9].
3. The literature on collectives is extensive and growing. The most thorough monographic study is Bernecker [1982]. Other helpful surveys include Mintz [1970]; Leval [1971]; and Carrasquer [1986]. On changes in the infrastructure see Breitbart [1979]; and Catlla [1976].
4. See, for example, *Sindicato agrícola* [1937a], which discusses how to ensure that women will complete their tasks. Also 'Verdu' [1936], which reports that, at the founding of the collective, women were reminded to work at home sewing clothing for combat troops; and 'Mora de Rubielos' [1936], for a similar reminder to women at the founding of that collective.
5. See, for example, the rules of a collective in Binéfar [*Realizaciones revolucionarias*, 1977: 85]; also Bernecker [1982: 174].
6. On Monzón and Miramel, see Escuder [1979] and Carrasquer [1979]. For an overview of wages in collectives in Catalonia see 'L'Enquesta de la Conselleria' [1936; 1937].
7. Information on wages in Lerida comes from 'Certificats de Treball'. On Tabernes de

- Valldigna in Valencia, see 'Colectividad productora "El Porvenir", de Tabernes de Valldigna (UGT-CNT)', cited in Bosch [1980: 29]. On Granadella, 'Granadella', *Boletín de Información, CNT-FAI*, 7 Dec. 1936. In Avinyonet del Penedés [Colectivitat Agrícola, 1937], families would receive 4 ptas. for the first male worker, 3 ptas. for each additional male worker, and 1 pta. each for women and children.
8. On Fraga, see Chiné [1979]. A similar plan seems to have been implemented in Alcañiz. See Sindicato Agrícola Colectivo [1937b].
 9. See 'Alguaire,' *Boletín de Información, CNT-FAI*, 6 Oct. 1936; 'Granadella', *ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1936. See also 'Esplugas de Francolí', *ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1936.
 10. See Pons Prades [1974: 93ff]; and documents located in Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Guerra Civil-Salamanca, Político-Social de Barcelona, Carpetas 1392 and 626.
 11. See, for example, 'El problema sexual y la revolución', *Mujeres Libres*, No.9; and 'Laboratorios de prostitución', *Mujeres Libres*, No.5. Compare Aranguren [1963: 231-43].
 12. See the advertisement 'Mujeres Libres', *Tierra y Libertad*, No.47, 10 Dec. 1938, p.3. On the literacy campaign more generally, see 'Salvemos a las mujeres' [1937: 8], and 'Realizaciones' [1938: 4].
 13. On the role of the Church in promoting particular kinds of organisations among women see Capel Martínez [n.d.: 217-23, 258-62]; also Basauri [1979a: 22-3 and 1979b: 28-43].
 14. Those by Kiralina (Lola Iturbe) were later published in book form [*Kiralina*, 1938].
 15. On tensions and struggles within the movement see Ackelsberg [1991: Ch.6]; and Nash [1981: Chs.2, 7].

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