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Federica Montseny and Spanish Anarchist Feminism

Shirley F. Fredericks

1976

I traversed the streets of Toulouse on a hot August afternoon in search of rue Belfort 4, on a pilgrimage to meet one of the pioneers of Spanish feminism. I entered a cluttered courtyard and ascended the rickety staircase of a dilapidated building looking for some sign of the headquarters of the Spanish anarchists in exile. Suddenly, there it was, identified by a small, unpretentious red and black sign over the door. It was exactly five o'clock, the time for my appointment with Federica Montseny, matriarch of Spanish anarchists.¹

I knew by the sound of her walk that the woman who appeared had to be Federica Montseny: she radiates irresistible energy. She is short and maternally rotund, yet her hair is predominantly a youthful black. Her handshake is strong and when she speaks I

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¹ The material in this article is drawn largely from the author's interviews with Federica Montseny (August 5 and 7, 1972) and letters from her (July, 1971-present) with reference to a number of Montseny's writings from 1923 to the present. The most complete Montseny collection is to be found in the Max Nettlau Archive in the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.

understand instantly how this Spanish anarchist must have moved the workers with her powerful, conviction-filled voice.

Montserrat describes the missionary zeal of the nineteenth-century anarchist pioneers, including both of her parents. She talks about the unfortunate necessity of “propaganda by deed,” usually individual terrorist action used to counter severe governmental repression, and about her involvement with the organization of anarchist workers in the 1920’s, which had to be clandestine because the government of Dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera had outlawed the anarchists. Montseny describes the work of the Federation of Iberian Anarchists, made up of individuals loosely bound together by their “purist” definition of anarchism and by their desire to prevent the drift of the larger workers’ organization, the Confederation of Labor, into a compromise with the government. She tells me about her efforts to protect the revolution which she maintains had begun in Spain with the Civil War in 1936. The last of our discussion takes place in Montseny’s home over a delightful dinner topped off with brandied fruit and coffee. It is then that she asks me many questions about the United States: the status of women, the position of the blacks and the workers, the general attitude about the Vietnam War. Over and over my answers produce a look of regret in Montseny’s eyes. “Ah,” she finally sighs, “it will be long before the revolution comes to the people of the United States.”²

Although Federica Montseny’s interest in the United States is longstanding, dating from the Sacco and Vanzetti affair to the present, unfortunately we know little about her. What follows is an attempt to rectify that situation by presenting an overview of the fascinating life of this remarkable woman, who is a role model both as a feminist and an anarchist.

Federica was the only surviving child of Federico Urales and Soledad Gustavo. The anarchist philosophy of her parents and the rural environment in which she spent her childhood had a

² Interview with Montseny, August 7, 1972.

As for Juan Carlos, she shrugs her shoulders, “We shall have to see...” She suggests with sadness and regret that she expects no rapid change in Spain under the leadership of Franco’s designated heir. In listening to her in 1972, I felt she had resigned herself to dying in exile. Now, however, four years later, Montseny’s old enthusiasm has returned. She writes, “We are, how shall I say, filled with high hopes” for the future of Spain.¹⁹

Secondly, I ask her if she thinks that she has succeeded in raising her two daughters to be “new women” and her son to respect and to allow equality between the sexes. After a moment’s pause she says, “Not with my son, but Blanca, the youngest, perhaps...”²⁰ She sighs and says that she has tried, but that “tradition is strong and customs die slowly. One can but hold to one’s principles while trying to drag the mass of society forward toward a better tomorrow.”

When I left Federica Montseny I felt that affinity, so essential to the anarchist idea of freedom and friendship, extended to me in Montseny’s parting *brazos* which were as firm as her welcoming handshake.

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¹⁹ Federica Montseny to Shirley Fredricks, Letter, August 25, 1976.

²⁰ Interview with Montseny, August 7, 1972.

lasting effect on Montseny. Her parents, both teachers, personally instructed Federica in the rudiments of reading and writing. As anarchists, they believed that given the opportunity, an individual would seek knowledge and wisdom; and that true instruction encouraged, expanded, and complemented the natural preferences expressed by the individual. Montseny’s lifelong commitment to learning validates her parents’ methodology. She developed a broad acquaintance with, and a deep understanding of, literature and social and political theories. With nearly equal enthusiasm, she studied the fine arts: the drama of Eleonora Duse and the dance of Isadora Duncan. Her primary interest centers on the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, particularly figures like Romain Rolland, the French novelist and pacifist, who is reknowned for his *Jean-Christophe* trilogy; Emile Armand and Elisee Reclus, the French anarchists; and the Americans, Henry David Thoreau and Noam Chomsky.³ Montseny is also familiar with major works from earlier periods — she especially likes the Greeks. The heroic in the arts, politics, and philosophy always has appealed to her.

In addition to her anarchist upbringing, Montseny’s rural environment strongly influenced the development of her ideas. She states that she was raised by the earth and the sun in harmony with the seasons and in communion with the family’s animals. Her constant individualism, her self-sufficiency, and her search for naturalness in human relationships might well be rooted in the independence and self-reliance which developed in the freedom of her rural childhood. She returned to the rhythm, order, and peace of nature when, as an adult, she sought alternatives for the

³ Federica Montseny to Shirley Fredricks, Letter, July 27, 1971; “The Future of the Spanish Woman: an interview with Federica Montseny, the Minister of Health of the Spanish Government,” *Die Seite der Frau*, April 4, 1937, p. 1, translated from German by Karen Albrethsen Blackwell; and Federica Montseny, “Spain 1936: The Acts and the Men,” *Espoir*, July 21, 1974, pp. 1–2, translated from the French by Jeanne P. Leader.

economic exploitation, political oppression, judicial inequities, and sexual discrimination which she saw rampant in Spanish society. Montseny's childhood provided her with the independence of judgment necessary for a career as critic, novelist, radical political leader, and theoretician.

During the early years of her maturity, Montseny spent a great deal of time writing novels and essays specifically designed to instruct the common people in anarchist philosophy. She wanted to guide their aimless discontent into anarchism, which she considered to be a path with principles. Even before she earned her reputation as an anarchist leader, she had achieved minor fame as a novelist with strong political commitment. Her unrelenting social criticism describes the extreme injustices permeating Spanish society.

Of these injustices, the discrimination against women concerns her the most. As shadows of late afternoon lengthened across the red tiled roofs beyond her office window, I listened while Montseny said:

I have had two periods in my life. The first one was my youth, a time in which generally we are preoccupied with ourselves and with our personal problems. At that time my biggest problem was freedom for women and the possibility of living a free life. Afterwards ... I hit upon the idea of joining this anarchist idea [the freedom of women] to propagandist action by means of the novel, and thus began the second period. Mine became novels that dealt with problems shocking to the mentality of Spain ... I considered that it was a revolutionary task to fight against all the prejudices that limited women's freedom.⁴

⁴ Interview with Montseny, August 5, 1972.

North Africa. Also Hitler and Franco were pressuring the Vichy government to prevent any further Spanish migration out of Europe; the Allies were equally reticent about accepting European refugees, particularly of radical persuasion. So the circumstances of war obliged the Montsenys to stay in Toulouse where they remain today.

Federica Montseny, now seventy-one, has resided longer in France than she lived in her homeland of Spain. She writes and speaks with equal facility in French, in Spanish, and in Catalan. Though she did not know French when she left Spain, she now writes weekly articles for the anarchist newspaper, *Espoir*, and coedits a bimonthly journal, *Cenit*, both published in Toulouse.

To realize that Montseny retains much of the fiery conviction that made her Spain's leading anarchist theoretician and which now makes her the matriarch of the Spanish community, one merely has to read her articles in *Espoir*:

The Spanish Revolution had neither a Robespierre, a Danton, nor a Lenin. But it possessed this invaluable good: a generation formed in struggle, nourished on revolutionary projects. We believed that we could change the world, because we were all young and enthusiastic and because we had the strength of numbers.¹⁷

At the end of our discussion I asked Federica two questions. Does she think that she will ever return to Spain? "Possibly," she answers, "but only if things change greatly within Spain."¹⁸ She did not return as long as Franco lived. She has not and will not accept the "blanket" amnesty that Franco eventually extended to all the Civil War exiles, for to accept anything from Franco seems to her to be the greatest betrayal of her convictions.

¹⁷ Montseny, "Spain 1936:" *Espoir*, July 21, 1974, p. 2.

¹⁸ Interview with Montseny, August 7, 1972.

the first place, Montseny continued to work to unite the forces opposing Franco. Increasingly, however, her concern was directed toward keeping her family fed. The situation in the Republican sector had so deteriorated by the fall of 1938 that she was most thankful to receive food parcels from a friend in Amsterdam. To add to her worries, she feared that the Franco forces might bomb her home as raids on Barcelona came with ever greater frequency that fall. Early in 1939, the *Franquistas* broke the Catalan Front. In the depths of winter the members of the Montseny household, including a baby, escaped northward into France taking with them the barest necessities. On this torturous journey, Montseny's mother died, Montseny felt, from a broken heart at the thought of being forced from her beloved Spain.¹⁵

Thus began Montseny's exile in France. Initially she lived near Paris where she and her compañero, Esgleas, actively worked to relocate the many refugees who fled Spain after Franco's victory. During this period life was precarious: hunger, cold, disease, and imprisonment precluded relocation for many. The Montsenys debated going to Switzerland, Mexico, or England; but Federica felt a moral obligation to resolve the refugee problem with the French government before leaving France herself. Even as they debated the alternatives for the family's exile, the Nazis swept into northern France. The Montsenys fled southward one night. Eventually they took up residence in Toulouse. Shortly thereafter, Franco requested the French fascist government to extradite Federica. But she was pregnant with Blanca and even the Vichy government would not send an unborn child to certain death by honoring Franco's demands. "In this way it could be said that Blanca saved my life."¹⁶

They made a last attempt to leave France in 1942. The Montsenys prepared to go to Mexico where many of their friends had relocated, only to find their way blocked by the wartime situation in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Federica Montseny to Shirley Fredricks, Letter, July 27, 1971.

She further insists that any program for revolutionary social change that does not achieve equal respect and rights for women represents no change at all.

Her ideas about equality for women are inextricably bound up in her theory of anarchism. At the core of Montseny's anarchism is the notion that any institution, social more, or public opinion that inhibits the natural development of an individual's potential is wrong. She states her belief that the survival and progress of humanity rests with creative, striving individuals who will break the bonds of conformity and mediocrity, and pull human society to a higher plateau of spiritual and/or creative fulfillment. Montseny defines an anarchist as an arch individualist in constant rebellion against the masses for the sake of a truly human community based on one-to-one relationships between individuals.

Federica states that nowhere is suppression of this kind of individualism more pronounced than in the lives of Spanish women. She adds, by way of partial explanation, "One must not forget that in Spain the Arabs remained for 700 years and left many attitudes influencing the male's conception of himself and of women. That is why the majority of my novels deal with the freeing of the woman in her opposition to men and of elevating her onto a par with men."⁵ Despite this focus, one must never forget that Montseny does not desire a blanket extension of equality for women, but rather, the right for each and every individual to be his or her most natural self. In her thinking, this right cannot be secured through suffrage, which deludes women into believing that they have equal rights. It cannot be legislated nor adjudicated. Equality does not mean gaining men's rights or acquiring their masculine ways. Montseny wants a truly social revolution, one that produces people who judge individuals on their merits alone, a revolution which will create a society in which the individual's potential is a primary objective.

⁵ Ibid.

For Montseny the suppression of female individualism in contemporary society is centered in the institution of marriage.⁶ For this reason, she seeks to redefine the relationship between the sexes.⁷ Montseny insists that a woman have the right to choose when, or if, she wishes to marry; when, or if, she wishes to have children; and then, how many she wants and can afford to have. She insists also on a woman's right to choose the father (or fathers) of those children. She maintains that pregnancy is solely a woman's responsibility (contrary to much feminist thinking today) and that a woman is obligated to know and to understand how her own body functions in order to control her pregnancy. Montseny says that the prime responsibility for the care of children falls inevitably and naturally on the mother, a pattern she observed among animals during her childhood. Therefore, a woman must be trained to provide adequately for her offspring through an education, skill, or profession by which she can earn an honorable living. However, if Montseny holds strong views about the rights of maternity, she also firmly believes that the right of paternity is equally sacred and natural: she is against vasectomy, for example, as it eliminates a male's ability and right to produce children.⁸ The crux of the matter is knowledge about reproduction and responsible use of that knowledge.

⁶ One has but to read any of the autobiographies of Spanish women (no matter what class or political conviction) to realize the validity of this Montseny conviction; e.g., Margarita Nelken, *La condición social de la mujer en España* (Barcelona: Editorial Minerva, S.A., n.d.); Isabel de Palencia, *I Must Have Liberty* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1940); and Constanca de la Mora, *In Place of Splendor: the Autobiography of a Spanish Woman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939).

⁷ The most detailed development of Montseny's ideas on this subject is found in her essay, "El problema de los sexos" (Toulouse: Ediciones 'universo', n.d.) and in three of her longer novels, *La victoria* (Barcelona: Costa, 1925), *El hijo de Clara* (Barcelona: Costa, 1927), and *Heroínas* (Barcelona: La Revista Blanca, n.d.).

⁸ Federica Montseny, "Dos palabras sobre la vasectomía," *La Revista Blanca*, 72 (15 de mayo de 1926), 24–25.

More specifically, for Montseny, a most significant and necessary effort of the revolution was to change the social position of women. To this end, as Minister of Health and Public Assistance, Montseny actively aided the efforts of the anarchist women's organization, *Mujeres Libres*, which set up schools and nurseries for the children of mothers who had replaced militia men in the factories, or for women who "put on militia caps and took up infantry guns, as a number of young women of the avant-garde did do."¹³ Montseny encouraged the organization's efforts to train women for useful, skilled, and honorable employment, a huge task that needed to be done almost instantly. She fought against prostitution which she defined as the worst form of economic and social exploitation, a classic example of sexual inequality, a lack of human dignity, and a thwarting of individual potential.

Federica encouraged the *Mujeres Libres'* efforts to teach women about health and sanitation and to provide medical care and homes for orphans and unwed mothers. Her close friend and fellow anarchist, Juan Garcia Oliver, Minister of Justice, worked long hours during the early months of the Civil War on legislation to legitimize children of unwed mothers.

Although the political machinations of the Communists finally forced her resignation from the cabinet in May, 1937, it must be conceded that Montseny had handled the immense task with amazing success.¹⁴

Upon leaving the cabinet, and despite criticism by fellow anarchists for betraying her principles by joining the government in

¹³ Interview, *Die Seite der Frau*, April 4, 1937, p. 1.

¹⁴ The best sources for detailed information about Montseny's activities as Minister of Health and Public Assistance are in her letters to Max Nettlau found in the Nettlau Archives at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam and in Montseny's essays: *La incorporación de las masas populares a la historia. La Comuna, Primera revolución consciente* (Barcelona: Oficinas de Propaganda CNT-FAI, n.d.), *El anarquismo militante y la realidad Española* (Barcelona: CNT, 1937) and *Mi experiencia en el ministerio de sanidad y asistencia social* (Valencia: Comisión de Propaganda y Prensa del Comité Nacional de la CNT, 1937).

Spain, universal fascism would be the result. [But we lost in Spain and] the War came right after and with it the occupation of almost all of Europe by German and Italian Fascism.¹²

Montseny constantly urged the various factions of the Republic to unite and work if they hoped to win against the reactionary forces led by General Francisco Franco.

So when the anarchists did resolve to join the Popular Front government in the fall of 1936, Montseny's appointment to the cabinet was a logical one: who else had fought so long against the elements which sought to destroy the social revolution? That she became Minister of Health and Public Assistance seemed equally logical: from what other post could she better have worked to effect change in the areas of her prime concern?

The task she had assumed, however, was just short of impossible. Casualties from the front caused an almost unbearable pressure on hospital personnel and facilities. The war produced extensive population dislocation. The refugees who fled from the war zones into eastern Spain placed an additional burden on the already depleted stores of food and medical supplies. The problem of orphaned children was nearly overwhelming. These conditions rapidly over-taxed sanitation facilities which in turn threatened to pollute the water supply and to cause epidemics. Demands from the front for medical supplies, fear of fascist attacks, political dissension within the Popular Front, the endless difficulties placed in the way of securing needed materials from abroad — all this worked against the programs that Montseny initiated as Minister of Health and Public Assistance. To make matters worse, there were absolutely no Spanish precedents or machinery for what Montseny sought to do, as she was the first minister to hold this newly created cabinet position.

¹² Ibid.

At the heart of Montseny's ideas on the relationship between the sexes is individual responsibility not societal sanctions. If individual uniqueness is honored, and if artificial institutions and oppressive mores are removed, two people naturally suited for each other will find each other. The union most likely will be for life because their attraction would be based on mutual respect and equality, admiration and sharing, complementary characteristics, and a voluntary commitment. With time, experience, and change, the two individuals may wish to dissolve their commitment. If, however, both partners were equally free to grow, and if the initial choice were a responsible one, the two people should grow together and thus wish to stay together. Montseny does believe in free love, but she insists that freedom of any kind is impossible without responsibility.

Anarchism without the emancipation of women is thus impossible. Emancipation of women on the other hand is impossible until both women and men are willing to accept the responsibility of their own freedom. Finally, women are obligated to take freedom if it is not given to them. As Montseny says repeatedly, "The problem of the sexes is a human problem, not a feminine problem." As many women agree today, Montseny insists that the emancipation of women means freedom and independence for both sexes. Only when that freedom is gained can men and women be bound together through the "communication of souls and through mutual respect" possible between equals — never between a master and a subordinate. "True feminism" she says, "ought to call itself humanism."⁹

Her beliefs about emancipated women are exemplified by the "arrangement" which she entered into with Germinal Esgleas. This commitment lasted a lifetime. From this "natural union" rooted in mutual love, respect, independence, and responsibility come

⁹ Federica Montseny, "La tragedia de la emancipación femenina," *La Revista Blanca*, 38 (15 de diciembre de 1924), 20.

Montseny's three children — Vida, Germinal, and Blanca — all of whom were wanted and dearly loved.

It occurred to me that Montseny undoubtedly is the heroine of her most important novel, *La victoria*. When I asked, she replied with a degree of modesty that "Everyone places in his writings a little of himself... At the end [of the novel] I am with a friend, who is the friend whom I now have and whom I thought was most capable of respecting me and of leaving me free."¹⁰ Montseny never saw a conflict of interest between her maternity and her career, nor did Montseny's and Esgleas' commitment to each other limit their independence in their labor for anarchism and the Spanish people, particularly after the advent of the Second Republic in 1931.

The Second Republic legitimized anarchist organization. For Montseny the new government represented the first step toward the long-sought social revolution. Her enthusiasm soared. "We hoped that the Republic of April 14 might be a federal, socialist Republic which might give much more than indeed it did."¹¹ Charged with this hope, Montseny vowed to push the new government into effecting greater and greater change on behalf of the people. She labored tirelessly to organize local, regional, and national meetings to consolidate anarchist strength and to enunciate its demands. She spoke from one end of Spain to the other: from Galicia to Andalusia, from Madrid to the Balearics, from the Río Tinto mines to the Asturian mountains. She spoke about social injustice, the need for worker unity, the evils of the government, and always about rights for women. She cheered the people's efforts to form a new society.

Everywhere she went she was received lovingly, often boisterously, although not always with understanding. Her listeners knew that she lived what she believed, that she was, insofar as one could

¹⁰ Interview with Montseny, August 5, 1972.

¹¹ *ibid.*

be, the new woman she wanted for the new Spain that she so fervently advocated.

Often her untraditional ways were disturbing even to anarchists. It was not proper for a woman to be unchaperoned. Nevertheless Montseny continued traveling alone, going out at night to rallies with the male speakers, and frequenting cafes with her male friend. She chafed under withering glances, but because her convictions were strong, she could stand firmly by her actions.

When the conservative forces within the Second Republic won the elections in 1933, Montseny feared that the rising tide of European fascism would envelop Spain. (Hitler recently had taken over in Germany and Mussolini was entrenched in Italy.) Hence, Montseny gave tacit support to the liberal elements which united as the Popular Front for the spring election of 1936. But before the Popular Front, successful in that election, could consolidate its position, the Generals' Revolt broke out in July, 1936. Spain was locked then in the deadly struggle that Montseny had long predicted, the struggle between the forces of revolution and of reaction. Montseny immediately began working to support the Republican Popular Front government, despite the apparent contradiction with her fervent anarchist convictions. Today she judges it as a necessary action.

The polemic of the time was that we had sacrificed the successes of the anarchists for a united anti-fascist front, that we had ceded ground and that we had accepted participation in the government and military to uphold the anti-fascist front, and that we considered more important the unity and the fight against fascism than the defending of our ideas [of anarchism]. But our point of view was that if fascism triumphed there would be no ideas that could be saved. The main thing at that moment was to make battle against fascism and that it not triumph, because if it triumphed in