

Mujeres Libres: Women in the Spanish Revolution

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"When the Republic came, many people went to storm the prisons, to free the prisoners, and I went too. There was some guy there shouting "down with the civil guard", "down with politics" all sorts of things. And I thought "ahah, here is an anarchist" This was my first encounter with an anarchist- and he did not look like he was a terrible person. He had a good face." (Soledad Estorach)

People would say to us "Were you children baptised?" and we would say to them, "We weren't baptised". "How terrible, what girls! such beautiful children, because we were six handsome children (I mean from the standpoint of health) and one brother -"being brought up without God, you are like dogs"

And we would say, "No you are the ones who are like dogs, that you need a master"

The women who founded Mujeres Libres were all active within the anarchist movement, in the CNT or in the FIJL, however as women they were in a minority and found it difficult to incorporate more women into the activist core, either because of the sexism of the men, or because of the reluctance of the women or a combination of both. They complained that their male anarchist comrades did not treat women any differently in the home or even worse did not treat women seriously on the public arena. Girls attending Juventudes meetings would be laughed at even before they began speaking.

Azecena Fernandez Barba grew up with two parents deeply committed to the movement. She and her sisters and brothers helped found the ateneo Sol y Vida in Barcelona, but as she says of the anarchist men she knew;

"They struggled, they went out on strike, etc. but inside the house, worse than nothing. I think we should have set an example with our own lives, lived differently in accordance with what we said we wanted. but no. [for them], the struggle was outside. Inside the home [our desires] were purely utopian."

These attitudes reflected the variety of views on women that existed in Spain, from a Proudhans acceptance of women's secondary status to Bakunin's insistence that women were the equal of men and should be treated as such in all social institutions.

2. How Mujeres Libres began

Two groups set up independently, one in Barcelona and while one in Madrid set up the journal Mujeres Libres. The first copy appeared on May the 2th 1936. The two groups had slightly different focus, the Barcelona group wanted to encourage greater activism on the part of women who were already members of the CNT, whereas Mujeres Libres wanted to raise consciousness among women general.

The Barcelona group, recognising their common interests and affiliated under the name Agrupacion Mujeres Libres.

Their early work was a combination of consciousness raising and direct diction. They created networks of women anarchist, in order to gain mutual support. They attended meetings with one another , checking out reports of sexist behaviour and strategising about how to deal with it.

They set up flying day-care centres in efforts to involve more women in union activities. As Soledad said"

”When we got there, we’d do some ‘propagandising’. We’d talk to them about comunismo libertario and other subjects. Poor things, they’d be at meetings, and then come home to be lectured by us! Sometimes, by then, their husbands would come home and join in the discussions”

3. What sort of articles did the journal carry

Initially the journal did not identify itself as anarchist, though all the articles were clearly libertarian, as they were afraid of alienating women. However after the revolution it aligned itself with the CNT. It was distributed and advertised via existing anarchist networks. Initially they were frustrated by the anarchist press ignoring it, however many anarchist men did offer to help with its distribution, and offered to contribute articles. The latter they politely refused as they felt it was important that the journal be written by women, for women..

They organised women to report on the reality of what work women were actually doing, women reported on strikes or life as an agricultural worker. Consciousness raising was important, every issue had an article about exceptional women, and they also published a column in other anarchist magazines.

A number of the pieces they carried were explicitly political commentaries: a letter from Emma Goldman describing the openness of Welsh workers to anarchist ideas, a critique of the League of Nations and the international worker’s organisations [failure] to take effective action against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and a analysis of the law as subordinating of women.

In addition the journal printed articles on cultural themes; on education , a review of Charlie Chaplins ‘Modern Times’ and essay on the value of sport or an article on the life of agricultural workers.

Finally there were articles that would have been seen in any women’s magazine, on the value of gas, on child care, on fashion.

Latter on books and pamphlets would supplement the journal.

4. what did they believe in

Mujeres Libres rejected both feminism, which they saw as a theory which fought for ”equality of women within an existing system of privileges”, and the relegation of women to a secondary position within the libertarian movement.

”We are not- and were not then feminists

We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It’s necessary to work, to struggle, together because if we don’t we’ll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves.”

They said;

We are aware of the precedents set by both feminist organisations and by the political parties... We could not follow either of these paths. We could not separate the

women's problem from the social problem. not could we deny the significance of the first by converting women into a simple instrument for any organisation, even.. our own libertarian organisation.

The intention that underlay our activities was 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 organisation."

4. What sort of work did Mujeres Libres do

Mujeres Libres had a two pronged strategy, of 'capacitacion' or preparing and 'captacion' or incorporation/participation.

They supplied food to the militia men, set up popular dining rooms. They travelled through Catalonia and Aragon helping to establish rural collectives. Many women went with representatives of the CNT and FAI with makeshift loudspeakers calling on peasants to "come over to our side". Others organised convoys of food and supplies to be sent to Madrid.

They sent up literacy programs, technically oriented classes and classes in social studies, as well as institutes (see page 119). Between 600-800 women were attending classes each day in Barcelona in December 1938. Propaganda work was carried out via radio broadcasts, travelling libraries and propaganda tours.

This is Pepita's description of her experience on propaganda trips

"We would call the women together and explain to them... that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women's should not lose their independence, but that a women can be a mother and a companera 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 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"

In co-operation with the unions they sent up apprenticeship programs.

They organised support for women soldiers setting up shooting ranges and target practice classes for women.

They set up a school for nurses and an emergency medical clinic to treat those injured in the fighting. Teresina, despite here lack of experience in the medical field was named administrators; Here she speaks with pride of her role

"I remember how many times fathers would come up to me in the clinic to request something, and I would say. "Please, here all of us are equals" And they would say to me, "Here, you really have made the revolution." I had such satisfaction from this. Because I administered the whole thing without any education... What I believed, that's what I put in practice there...and that's what I can tell you of what I did for the revolution. The rest , I did what everyone else did. But this was something I did."

In Barcelona they ran a lying in hospital, which provided birth and postnatal care for women, as well as classes on child and maternal health, birth control and sexuality. An institute of Maternal and Child care named after the French anarchist, Louise Michael was set up in Barcelona in February 1938.

5. What was the reaction of the anarchist movement?

In 1937 they travelled to Valencia and asked to get recognised and were told to go away and get organised. This provided the impetus for calling the first national conference in August 1937, during which, Mujeres Libres established a federal structure. They decided to ask could they send observers to committees of the CNT and FAI and would they send observers to Mujeres Libres meetings. They decided not to ask for voting status as they were afraid that this might compromise the autonomy of Mujeres Libres. One statement argued

”[Mujeres Libres] could have converted itself into an appendage of the union movement with respect to feminine preparation, transforming women into a receptacle of anarcho-syndicalism..It could have converted itself into an annex of a 'Women's Section' of the FAI..but it didn't do this either

”Since those of us who were it's 'prime movers' were anarchists, we could not accede to a situation in which, within this specific organisation, there would be individuals without a social formation: not could we as anarchists, convert those individuals into blind instruments without contradicting our own anarchist principles”

Mujeres Libres insisted on having speakers in the podiums, and this was granted. Much of the anarchist press was supportive if not enthusiastic. The CNT local unions supported them by participating in the apprenticeship programs and allowing Mujeres Libres speakers into the factories, stopping the assembly lines while they spoke.

”Groups of us would go to collectivised factories, and stop the lines for fifteen or twenty minutes, sometimes up to an hour, and talk to the workers, have little classes. This of course we did only with the approval of the workplace council so we had the support of the unions. We did this throughout Barcelona-in war industries, textiles, transport, light power, metallurgy and wood- and also in some pueblos. Some days we went to as many as fifty different places.”

The CNT provided food, meeting places, support and financial contributions. However all was not rosy. Mujeres Libres comrades encountered sexism from some anarchist men (p151) and felt they weren't being taken seriously and weren't being given enough money.

FIJL

Organisational rivalry broke out when the youth movement, the FIJL set up a women's section which seemed to replicate the work being done by Mujeres Libres (p153). They argued that they represented young women while Mujeres Libres represented adult women, however ML felt it was a drain on resource.

The frustration Mujeres Libres felt was compounded when they did not receive official invitations to the Libertarian Movement Congress in Oct. 1938. (p156)

Pura Perez Arcos reports

”We sailed from the port of Alicante on the afternoon of October 7th, in a small English boat. The group included people from Madrid, Valencia and a variety of places in Andalusia. Our tiny Mujeres Libres delegation was inspired by the great hopes and expectations we had of the congress...to make a trip in those days was very risky, and we all knew it. The harbours were being bombarded every night, and we were totally illegal travellers on this British boat, which had to sail right by Franquista ships. We were due to arrive the next morning, but as we neared the harbour, we could hear the explosions of the fascist bombing of the port. The captain headed north, and we sailed around all that day and night, finally arriving in Barcelona, exhausted and hungry on the morning of the 9th. We were tremendously excited and ready to argue the case for Mujeres Libres on the floor of the congress. But they would not even allow us into the meeting”

Coincidentally Emma Goldman was also trying to get in. While she was given full access, the congress floor only allowed Mujeres Libres into discussions that primarily affected them.

Mujeres Libres tried to get official recognition but this was never put to the vote, as delegates argued that this had not being on the pre-conference agenda and so they had not consulted their groups and so could not vote on it. Instead a motion offering solidarity and support to Mujeres Libres was passed.

Much of the opposition to Mujeres Libres seemed to be around the issue of autonomy, the main objections seem to be

1) that anarchism admitted of no difference by sex and therefore that an organisation oriented only to women could not be truly a libertarian organisation

In response to this they said

”our self-determination cannot be opposed on grounds that Anarchism doesn’t admit of sex differences, because then it would be necessary to conclude that, as of now, our Libertarian Organisations are not deserving of that name, because whether by choice or by necessity, it’s militants are almost exclusively men!”

2) that Mujeres Libres was causing confusion because it was engaging in work done by the unions.

3) that Mujeres Libres should not be functioning as an autonomous organisation but should be operating within the unions and cultural centres.

In response to these two points, Mujeres Libres argued that the organisation was working both within and outside the unions, and their work needed a much broader and multifaceted approach than any of the existing organisations were capable of. They were active in the unions where the unions had not defended women with appropriate vigour. They were not a separatist organisation and opposed separate women’s unions, arguing that women should join with men in existing union organisations.

However these issues were never resolved, as was to be the last conference before the end of the war.

The first time that Mujeres Libres were to be called to a libertarian meeting as an equal member of the libertarian family, was sadly also to be the last;

I quote Conchita Guillen:

” On the very day of the evacuation of Barcelona [January 24, 1939], when the fascists were practically at the gates, we were called to a meeting of the libertarian movement: CNT, FAI, JJLL and Mujeres Libres. Jacinta Escudero and I attended as delegates of the Local Federation of Mujeres Libres. It was a meeting of some importance, because it was a crucial moment: we had either to resist, or to abandon [Barcelona]...we put ourselves at the disposition of the movement; they thanked us, but said it would be a useless sacrifice, since they had no strength at all, and we should get out as quickly as possible”

Conclusion

For me proved living example of many important aspects of Anarchist theory. Firstly the importance of the relationship of the individual to the collective, how the collective is only as strong as the individuals that make it up.

Secondly, the importance of direct action and self activity, in both making a revolution and in making revolutionaries.

Direct democracy is more difficult, and more messy in the short term, but in the long term more successful, because the process of negotiating, convincing and organising created revolutionaries and revolutionary communities in a way that giving orders from above never can.

Thirdly, the relationship between idea's and action. The debate on the role of women in Spain, was never a sterile one. It was seen as an ongoing process. Mujeres Libres arose out of the experience of women in struggle, and they emphasised the importance of women learning through work in the factories, the communities and in libertarian movement. Out of these actions, new idea's arose.

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