

No God, No Boss, No Husband

The world's first Anarcha-Feminist group

Anarcho

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The world's first explicitly anarchist-feminist group was created as part of the thriving nineteenth-century Anarchist movement in Argentina. It produced the first anarcha-feminist newspaper, **La Voz de la Mujer**. Sadly, the history of anarchist-feminism in Argentina has rarely been acknowledged, at best mentioned in passing, at worse ignored or forgotten.

La Voz de la Mujer was published in Buenos Aires only nine times, beginning on January 8, 1896 and ending almost exactly one year later on New Year's Day. Its donors included "Women Avengers Group," "One Who Wants to Fill a Cannon with the Heads of the Bourgeois," "Long Live Dynamite," "Long Live Free Love," "A Feminist," "A Female Serpent to Devour the Bourgeois," "Full of Beer," "A Man Friendly to Women." Most of it was written in Spanish, with only occasional items in Italian. This is not surprising, as it was primarily from Spain that anarchist feminism came to Argentina. Even the feminist material in the Italian press was written largely by Spanish authors. Another version of the paper and bearing its name was published in the provincial town of Rosario (its editor, Virginia Bolten was the only woman known to have been deported in 1902 under the Residence Law, which gave the government the power to expel immigrants active in political organizations). Another **La Voz de la Mujer** was published in Montevideo, where Bolten was exiled to.

La Voz de la Mujer described itself as "*dedicated to the advancement of Communist Anarchism.*" Its central theme was that of the multiple nature of women's oppression. An editorial asserted, "*We believe that in present-day society nothing and nobody has a more wretched situation than unfortunate women.*" Women, they said, were doubly oppressed – by bourgeois society and by men. Its feminism can be seen from its attack on marriage and upon male power over women. Its contributors, like anarchist feminists elsewhere, developed a concept of oppression that focused on gender oppression. Marriage was a bourgeois institution which restricted women's freedom, including their sexual freedom. Marriages entered into without love, fidelity maintained through fear rather than desire, oppression of women by men they hated – all were seen as symptomatic of the coercion implied by the marriage contract. It was this alienation of the individual's will that the anarchist feminists deplored and sought to remedy, initially through free love and then, and more thoroughly, through social revolution.

La Voz de la Mujer was a paper written by women for women, it was an independent expression of an explicitly feminist current within South America's labour movement and was one of

the first recorded instances of the fusion of feminist ideas with a revolutionary and working-class orientation. As with Emma Goldman, Louise Michel and Voltairine de Cleyre, it differed from the mainstream feminism by being a working class movement which placed the struggle against patriarchy as part of a wider struggle against economic and social classes and hierarchies. It was not centred on educated middle-class women, whose feminism was dismissed as a “bourgeois” or “reformist.”

Anarchist feminism emerged in Buenos Aires in the 1890s, where the growth of the economy increased the demand for labour which was satisfied through immigration on a vast scale. The largest ethnic group were the Italians, followed by the Spaniards and French. It was among these immigrant communities that the group producing **La Voz de la Mujer** arose and was active. As with elsewhere in the Americas, Anarchism was originally imported by immigrants from the European countries in which there was a strong Anarchist movement – Italy, Spain, and France. Anarchist groups and publications first emerged in the 1860s and the 1870s and, due to the social conditions in Argentina, found fertile soil. Like the immigrant communities they were part of, the anarchists formed an integral part of the working class movement in Argentina and shaping its ideas and struggles. The anarchists helped form some of the first unions, organising strikes and demonstrations. In the 1880s and 1890s there were sometimes as many as 20 Anarchist papers being published at any one time, in French, Spanish, and Italian.

La Voz de la Mujer appeared after half a century of continuous Anarchist activity. It was part of the communist-anarchist tradition and was dedicated to the overthrow of the existing society and the creation of a new, just, and egalitarian social order organized on the principle of “*from each according to ability, to each according to need.*” As was the case elsewhere, a distinctive feminist current developed with the main impulse for anarchist feminism coming from Spanish activists (however, Italian exiles like Errico Malatesta and Pietro Gori gave support to feminist ideas in their journals and articles). Equal pay for women was raised as a demand and supported by a significant number of labour unions in the Argentine Workers’ Federation in 1901.

La Voz de la Mujer militant anti-reformist stance aroused response among women workers in the cities of Buenos Aires, La Plata, and Rosario, as it lasted a year and printed between 1,000 and 2,000 copies of each issue, a respectable number for an Anarchist paper of its time. Its editors were drawn from the large Spanish and Italian communities and identified themselves with the women of the working class. Its distinctiveness as an Anarchist paper lay in its recognition of the specificity of women’s oppression. It called upon women to mobilise against their subordination both as women and as workers. Its first editorial was a passionate rejection of women’s lot:

“fed up as we are with so many tears and so much misery; fed up with the never ending drudgery of children (dear though they are); fed up with asking and begging; of being a plaything for our infamous exploiters or vile husbands, we have decided to raise our voices in the concert of society and demand, yes, demand our bit of pleasure in the banquet of life.”

Its appearance received a mixed response from the rest of the Anarchist movement, ranging from silence and hostility to praise. One paper gave it a particularly warm welcome, stating that “*a group of militant women have unfurled the red flag of anarchy and intend to publish a magazine for propaganda among those who are their comrades both in work and in misery. We greet the valiant initiators of this project, and at the same time we call on all our comrades to support them.*” This was

unsurprising, as a substantial section of the Anarchist press was sympathetic to feminist issues at this time. The mid-1890s in Argentina saw increasing coverage of issues relating to women's equality and in particular to marriage, the family, prostitution, and the domination of women by men. Some papers even published special series of pamphlets devoted to "*the woman question*." **La Questione Sociale**, the Italian-language paper founded by Malatesta when he came to Argentina in 1883, published a series of pamphlets "*especially dedicated to an analysis of women's issues*." The journal **Germinal**, which first appeared in 1897, was particularly concerned with the "*woman question*" and carried several articles under the general heading of "*Feminism*," and it defended "*the extremely revolutionary and just character of feminism*" against the charge that it was merely a creation of "*elegant little ladies*." Much if not all of the feminist material in the Anarchist press appears to have been written by women.

Yet this apparent sympathy for feminism in principle within the Anarchist ranks was matched by substantial opposition in practice. The first issue of **La Voz de la Mujer** seems to have aroused considerable hostility, because in the following issue the editors attacked the antifeminist attitudes prevalent among men in the movement in no uncertain terms. As they put it:

*"When we women, unworthy and ignorant as we are, took the initiative and published **La Voz de la Mujer**, we should have known, Oh modem rogues, how you would respond with your old mechanistic philosophy to our initiative. You should have realized that we stupid women have initiative and that is the product of thought. You know – we also think ... The first number of **La Voz de la Mujer** appeared and of course, all hell broke loose: 'Emancipate women? For what?' 'Emancipate women? Not on your nelly!' ... 'Let our emancipation come first, and then, when we men are emancipated and free, we shall see about yours.'"*

The editors concluded that women can hardly rely upon men to take the initiative in demanding equality for women, given this kind of hostile attitude. The same issue contains an article entitled "**To the Corrupters of the Ideal**" in which men are warned, "*You had better understand once and for all that our mission is not reducible to raising your children and washing your clothes and that we also have a right to emancipate ourselves and to be free from all kinds of tutelage, whether economic or marital*." The editorial in the third issue emphasised that they were attacking not male Anarchist comrades in general but only those "false Anarchists" who failed to defend "*one of Anarchism's most beautiful ideals – the emancipation of women*."

The editors' outrage was justified given that Anarchism advocated freedom and equality for all humankind, not just men. As women were oppressed by patriarchy they, as an oppressed group, could rightly demand support from fellow Anarchists in their struggle for emancipation. However, for many male anarchists such issues could be ignored until "after the revolution" a position the editors of **La Voz de la Mujer** rightly rejected as self-serving. Unsurprisingly, Anarchism, more than other schools of socialism with their emphasis on economic exploitation, was able to accommodate the struggle against patriarchy. However, this theoretical support for feminism was more often than not associated with sexism in practice.

It is not difficult to see why feminists were attracted to Anarchism and why they were so rightly opposed to male anarchist hypocrisy. Its key ideas stress the struggle against authority, including the power exercised over women in marriage and the family. All anarchists should be seeking freedom within relationships. The Anarchist emphasis on oppression and on power

relations opened up a space within which women could be seen simultaneously as the victims of class society and as the victims of male authority. As **La Voz de la Mujer** expressed it in its fourth issue: “*We hate authority because we aspire to be human beings and not machines directed by the will of ‘another,’ be this authority, religion, or any other name.*” Its aim is best summed up when one of its supporters signed herself “**No God, No Boss, No Husband.**”

For more information see Maxine Molyneux’s “*No God, No Boss, No Husband: Anarchist Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Argentina*” (**Latin American Perspectives**, Vol. 13, No. 1, Latin America’s Nineteenth-Century History, Winter, 1986) on which this article is based.

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