

# **History and actuality of anarcha-feminism**

**lessons from Spain**

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Anarcha-feminism is, ultimately, a tautology. Anarchism seeks the liberation of all human beings from all kinds of oppression and a world without hierarchies, where people freely organise and self-manage all aspects of life and society on the basis of horizontality, equality, solidarity and mutual aid. Consequently, such a struggle necessarily entails working to change hierarchical relationships between the sexes, that is, anarchism is a specific type of feminism.

Anarcha-feminism, understood in this way, raises several questions: Does anarcha-feminism really exist? Does the term have anything to contribute to anarchism? How can it be useful for us today? What can be improved?

In what follows I will argue that there has long been an anarcha-feminist movement. In particular, I will discuss the contribution to this movement of *Mujeres Libres* (FreeWomen), an anarcha-feminist group active during the Spanish civil war, from 1936–1939. Although many anarchists, including *Mujeres Libres*, rejected a feminist label because feminism was understood to be an ideology of the bourgeoisie,<sup>1</sup> and although I do not call myself an anarcha-feminist because I purport that anarchism is what best describes my feminism, I argue that anarchafeminism is useful as both a term and in practice in both anarchist and feminist movements. With regards to the former, anarcha-feminism can serve to ‘mainstream’ gender and feminist struggle, thereby making anarchist practice more consistent with anarchist theory. With regards to the latter, anarcha-feminism can contribute to other feminist critiques of and struggles against gender oppression.

Spain offers a good case study of the history and current relevance of anarcha-feminism. Spain has seen three periods of intense gender consciousness-raising both in the Spanish male-dominated anarchist movement and the broader public. In the first period, the late nineteenth century, anarchists developed a critique of patriarchy though this critique was often relegated to the peripheries of anarchist movement. The second period, which spanned the early twentieth century, can be considered the cradle and climax of anarcha-feminist movement. This is when *Mujeres Libres* were active. Finally, the third period, the post-dictatorship period until today, reveals a pattern within anarchist movement of disregarding the importance of fighting gender oppression here and now. This pattern points to the continuing importance of anarcha-feminism. In the first two periods, anarchists referred to the ‘woman question’ whereas today they speak of gender oppression and patriarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Although language has changed over time, these three periods share three themes: a critique of the restriction of women’s role in society to that of reproduction; a critique of women’s second-class position both in mainstream society and in the anarchist movement; and, most importantly, a strategy of empowering women to participate fully in anarchist struggles. *Mujeres Libres* referred to this empowerment process as *capacitación* — something that I will return to later.<sup>3</sup> *Capacitación* was part of a process that I will call ‘gender mainstreaming’. Mainstreaming literally means to incorporate something or someone into ‘the dominant trend’.<sup>4</sup> This ‘dominant trend’ in anarchism is nothing close to conventional or conservative but rather the struggle against capitalism and the state. A struggle committed to end all forms of oppression, including racism, homophobia and patriarchy. Thus, in the context of anarchism, gender mainstreaming means

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–98. See also Margaret Marsh, ‘The Anarchist-Feminist Response to the “Woman Question” in Late Nineteenth-Century America’, *American Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 533–547.

<sup>3</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Mainstream’ in *Macquarie Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 2005), 865.

to make the fight against gender oppression, to go hand in hand with the struggle against capitalism and the state. It may sound awkward to use the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ in this context, considering its use by liberals, reformists and conservatives in the halls of the United Nations (UN).<sup>5</sup> The term, however, was developed by feminist critiques of UN policies since the mid 1970s, demanding that gender oppression be more central in the making of UN policies and that women be empowered to participate in working against gender inequalities.<sup>6</sup> If we understand gender mainstreaming in these terms, the term is useful to understanding the demands of anarcho-feminists.

This article attempts to contribute both to a relatively small amount of anarcho-feminism literature as well as to the more general anarchist and feminist literature. For instance, Ackelsberger’s *Free Women of Spain* a ground-breaking study published in 1991, does not mention anarcho-feminism, not even in its attempt to analyse the legacy of *Mujeres Libres* in contemporary anarchism.<sup>7</sup> Years later she contributed to a volume on political thought with her *Anarchism: the Feminist Connection*. This reluctance to talk about anarcho-feminism openly resembles the classical anarchist position of identifying feminism as already included in the word anarchism. In addition, reference books on anarchism, such as Woodcock’s *Anarchism* and Marshall’s *Demanding the Impossible*, do not attempt to recognize the existence and contribution of anarcho-feminism.<sup>8</sup> Contributing to recent studies of anarcho-feminism from Heighs, and the more specific ones of Maroto this paper also argues for anarcho-feminism’s relevance today.<sup>9</sup> Addressing the history, present and lessons of anarcho-feminism is a necessary task that would enhance our current and future struggles. In what follows, I will first present an overview of anarchist principles and will argue that anarcho-feminism is not a separate body of theory but rather integral to anarchism. I will then present a brief history of anarcho-feminism in Spain based on those three periods mentioned above. Finally, from my own experience, I will discuss why anarcho-feminism remains relevant today as a critical tool in the struggle for a new world.

## **Anarchism and anarcho-feminism**

Anarchism is more than an ideology. It is a philosophy and a practice of life, illustrated by its tendency of filling up the streets before the bookshelves. Baldelli states that ‘[a]narchism has

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<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the concept of mainstreaming has served several purposes in history. Its first and most common meaning relates to the area of education where it is used to refer to the incorporation of students with disabilities or other special needs into normal classes, ie: the ‘mainstream’. See *Ibid*, 865. Also Hilary Charlesworth, ‘Not waiving but drowning: Gender Mainstreaming and Human Rights in the United Nations’, *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, vol. 18. no. 1. (Spring 2005): 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*. 2; See also Karen Morrow, ‘Not so much a meeting of minds as a coincidence of means: Ecofeminism, gender mainstreaming and the United Nations’, *Thomas Jefferson Law Review*, vol. 28. no. 185 (Summer 2005): 189–191. See also Carolyn Hannan, ‘Empowering Women: Ten Years After the Beijing Conference’, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 7. (Summer/Fall 2006): 175.

<sup>7</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women*.

<sup>8</sup> George Woodcock, *Anarchism: a history of Libertarian ideas and Movement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962); Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Howard J. Ehrlich, (ed.) *Reinventing anarchy, again* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996); Maria Angeles Garcia-Maroto, *La Mujer en la Prensa Anarquista* (Madrid: Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, 1996); Maria Angeles Garcia-Maroto, ‘Razones para un anarcofeminismo’, *Tierra y Libertad*, no. 176, March 2003; available from [www.nodo50.org/tierraylibertad/176.html](http://www.nodo50.org/tierraylibertad/176.html); accessed 2 May 2007; Maria Angeles Garcia-Maroto, ‘Feminismo y Anarquismo’, *Tierra y Libertad*, no. 189, April 2004; available from [www.nodo50.org/tierraylibertad/189](http://www.nodo50.org/tierraylibertad/189); accessed 15 August 2007.

always been anti-ideological, insisting on the priority of life and action to theory and system'.<sup>10</sup> Anarchism has developed outside academic circles, forging itself through different struggles; thus the existence of different kinds of anarchism.<sup>11</sup> I will focus on what is commonly referred to as collective anarchism, which has arguably been practiced by most anarcho-feminists.<sup>12</sup> Collective anarchism, also called communist or social anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism, broadly holds that the free organisation of individuals into collectives that work collaboratively and without hierarchies is not only the key to revolution but also a guide to the organisation of society in the future.<sup>13</sup> Many core anarchist arguments can be traced as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno of Citium, the stoic, who envisaged an ideal cosmopolitan society, where love would foster harmonious relationships, and where state laws and money would not be imposed upon individuals.<sup>14</sup> Some have also suggested that elements of traditional Chinese thought have had a 'kind of protoanarchist social vision' long before the Greeks.<sup>15</sup> In the sixth century BCE, Lao Tse denied the legitimacy of rulers; two centuries later, Zhuangzi criticised private property, the unequal distribution of wealth, class hierarchy and the existence of rulers.<sup>16</sup> Some have also seen traces of anarchist practice and organisation in traditional African societies and culture.<sup>17</sup> Woodcock, in his critique of Kropotkin's study of the free symbiotic arrangements throughout history and across species,<sup>18</sup> argues that these claims have weak historical foundations and are a mere 'mythology created to give authority to the movement'.<sup>19</sup> However, it is important to recognise that anti-authoritarian ideas have an important historical legacy though these ideas might not have been developed by individuals, organisations or movements that claimed to be anarchist or that in any way created, per se, anarchist organisations as we know them today. It was not until the nineteenth century that anarchism began to develop into a cohesive set of ideas that sparked an anarchist movement conscious of its own existence, and it is not until then that we find traces of anarcho-feminism. Anarchist ideas flourished at this time in response to the evolution of the modern industrial state and as an expression of the desire for a free and equal society, an aspiration that continues to be relevant today. Woodcock similarly argues that 'nineteenth-

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<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Baldelli, *Social Anarchism* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1972), 10

<sup>11</sup> A concise account of the different trends can be found in Marshall, 6–11. For a discussion of the different methods and approaches within anarchism and, for a more nuanced argument concerning the development of anarchism from practice rather than from literature, see David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 15–20.

<sup>12</sup> Goldman, *Mujeres Libres* and contemporary anarcho-feminist groups demonstrate this statement.

<sup>13</sup> See Marshall, 6; Baldelli; Alexander Berkman, *The ABC of Communist Anarchism* (Chicago: The Vanguard Press Inc., 1929). Anarcho-syndicalism follows the same ideas, emphasising the need to organise federatively through workers unions in order to fight for the future society and set the basis for it. See Rudolf Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, 1938* (Melbourne: Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation ASF-IWA, 2001); Mikhail Bakunin, 'The Policy of the International, 1869' in Samuel Dolgoff, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by The Activist-Founder of World Anarchism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1973), 160–175; Juan Gómez Casas, *Historia del Anarcosindicalismo Español* (Madrid: LaMalatesta Editorial, 2006), 44–57 and 85–113.1

<sup>14</sup> A. C. Pearson, *The fragments of Zeno and Cleanthes* (London: C.J. Clay and Sons-Cambridge University Press, 1891), 198–210.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* (Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey, *African Anarchism: the history of a movement* (Tucson: See Sharp Press, 1997), 27–54.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution, 1914* (New York: University Press, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> Woodcock, 36.

century anarchists developed particular conceptions of economic equality and classless liberty in reaction to an increasingly centralized and mechanized capitalist state'.<sup>20</sup>

Authors like Godwin, Proudhon (despite controversies<sup>21</sup>), Kropotkin and Bakunin, all of whom wrote around the nineteenth century, are considered by many to be the founders of anarchism.<sup>22</sup> They, in addition to Goldman, Malatesta, Rocker and Berkman, amongst others, contributed to forging a collectivist tradition of anarchism.<sup>23</sup> For Goldman: Anarchism really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. [...] Anarchism is not [...] a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration [and does] not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Kropotkin stated that anarchism is: The name given to a principle of theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government –harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.<sup>25</sup>

While Kropotkin and later Goldman elaborated specifically on women's emancipation, not all anarchists were equally committed to women's liberation.<sup>26</sup> Proudhon's story is worthwhile commenting on here briefly. His anarchism was put into question by many of his contemporaries such as Déjacque and Léo for denying the need for women's liberation and claiming that a woman's role was to be her husband's slave.<sup>27</sup> However, other anarchists, such as Déjacque and Léo stated firmly that 'one cannot be an anarchist without being a feminist'.<sup>28</sup> Anarchism can be interpreted through a series of principles that are common to all these thinkers. These include anti-authoritarianism, direct action, solidarity, mutual aid, freedom and the making of means consistent with ends. Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide a complete analysis of these principles here, but a brief discussion of them is necessary to an understanding of anarchism and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>21</sup> Godwin's his individualism, leant towards a type of liberalism as he was prepared to tolerate some form of minimum temporary government. See William Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice*, 1793 (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1992). Proudhon's misogyny clearly undermined his anarchism, as will be noted later in the paper. See also, note 28.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is property? An enquiry into the principle of right and of government*, 1840 (New York: H. Fertig, 1966). Robert Alexander, *The anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, vol 1 (London: Janus Publishing Company, 1999), 6 -7. Anthony Masters, *Bakunin: the father of anarchism* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1974).

<sup>23</sup> Martha Ackelsberg, 'Rethinking anarchism/ rethinking power: a contemporary feminist perspective' in Mary Shanley and Uma Narayan (eds.) *Reconstructing political theory: feminist perspectives* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 158.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Goldman, 'Anarchism: what it really stands for' in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1970), 63.

<sup>25</sup> *The Encyclopædia Britannica: a dictionary of arts, sciences, literature and general information* (New York : Encyclopedia Britannica Co., 1910–11), 'Anarchism' vol.1.

<sup>26</sup> Petr Aekseevich Kropotkin, *The conquest of bread*, edited by Paul Avrich (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), 139–144; Emma Goldman, *Living my Life*, vol. 2, 1931, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1970), 552–557; Emma Goldman, 'The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation', in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (Dover Publications: New York, 1969), 213–225.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Granier, 'Peut-on être anarchiste sans être féministe?', *Le Monde Libertaire*, no. 1344, January-February 2004; available from [monde-libertaire.info](http://monde-libertaire.info) 30 July 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

anarcha-feminism.<sup>29</sup> Anarchist anti-authoritarianism is normally identified with the rejection of the state and government as authoritarian institutions. However, anarchism is broader in that it rejects the organisation of society on the basis of any hierarchy and thus rejects all hierarchical institutions. Direct action is the principle of acting for oneself. It is strategic, as a 'method of immediate struggle by the workers'<sup>30</sup> and the practice of emancipation.<sup>31</sup> It also contains an ideological component in that direct action assumes individuals, capable of acting for themselves without the intervention of intermediaries, be they institutions or other individuals. This principle has been extensively used to enable people to struggle for themselves and to reject figures of authority that remove from people's hands their capacity to do and speak.

Solidarity refers not only to the ability to empathise with other people's oppression but also to a willingness to act accordingly to support their needs and struggles.<sup>32</sup> Anarchism rejects charity and even the term 'help'; it promotes solidarity on the basis that the wellbeing of others is ultimately our wellbeing. Mutual aid was a principle developed extensively by Kropotkin.<sup>33</sup> While mainstream evolutionary theories argued for a competitive evolutionary process, Kropotkin held that evolution was a process of cooperation and, especially in regards to humans, of socialisation. Anarchists, therefore, also opposed liberal conceptions of freedom, which posit that a person's freedom ends where another's starts.<sup>34</sup>

Instead, they argued that one's freedom is enhanced and expanded with another's freedom.<sup>35</sup> Anarchist understanding of freedom differed from liberal conceptions of freedom in other ways. More than the ability to own property or to sell one's labour, freedom was the liberation from all forms of oppression, the capacity to realise one's self fully, and the ability to enter into equitable relationships with others. Freedom, seen from a collectivist point of view, also incorporates the idea that the individual and the collective are complementary.

Finally, the principle that means must be consistent with ends has consistently guided anarchist struggles. Thus, in the pursuit of a non-hierarchical cooperative society, anarchists strive to organise themselves horizontally and on the basis of the principles outlined above. The 'revolution', for anarchists, starts here and now, especially with one self. Anarchism ultimately does not provide a narrow path to follow but instead aspires to achieving the time when people make their own choices and work in collaboration with others.

Anarchism, as opposed to other feminisms or other single-issue struggles, promotes a comprehensive struggle that incorporates political, economic and social change. Unfortunately, within the anarchist movement, while gender norms have been challenged, they have not been eliminated. Despite political development, within the anarchist movement people tend to replicate

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<sup>29</sup> The literature is extensive in this sense, considering the books on general political thought, contemporary movements and ideologies, apart from the specific literature on anarchism. Aside from the good reference books on this matter already noted (Woodcock and Marshall), a general overview of anarchism and bibliography can be found in Matthew Festenstein and Kenny Michael, 'Anarchism' in *Political ideologies: A reader and Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 353–79; Jeremy Jennings, 'Anarchism' in Roger Eatwell and Anthony Wright, *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), 131–51.

<sup>30</sup> Rocker, 2531.

<sup>31</sup> Bakunin, 167.

<sup>32</sup> See also a chapter on the concept of solidarity in Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Melbourne: Pelican Books, 1972), 82–93.

<sup>33</sup> Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*.

<sup>34</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty' in Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 122–123.

<sup>35</sup> Bakunin, cited in Dolgoff, 5.

the same behaviours that a broader society imposes on us. As a result, one of the first leitmotifs for the emergence of anarcha-feminism, especially in Spain, was the rejection of patriarchal attitudes that discouraged women from participating in the struggle. These came from mainstream society as well as from the male dominated anarchist movement. Anarcha-feminism, developed in response to this inconsistency between anarchist thought and practice, for if means must be consistent with ends, patriarchy must be fought here and now. Anarcha-feminism demanded feminist solidarity of anarchists. Equally important, anarcha-feminism, unlike other feminisms, provided what Brown calls 'an intrinsic critique of power and domination per se', linking struggles against patriarchy to struggles against all other oppressive institutions.<sup>36</sup>

## Brief history of anarcha-feminism in Spain

The history of anarcha-feminism is part of the history of anarchism. With regards to Spain, anarchism seems to have had a precedent in the milenarist movement against the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church.<sup>37</sup> Again, the argument here is not that there was an anarchist movement at this time, but that anarchist ideas are rooted in a fertile ground of generations of struggle against arbitrary power and social injustice. It is during the nineteenth century that we see the emergence of an anarchist movement, as such. Garcia-Maroto argues that the feminist movement had a bourgeois and suffragist origin but that these ideas provoked anarchists in late nineteenth-century Spain to focus on the 'woman question'.<sup>38</sup>

However, the feminism that emerged from the anarchist movement does not follow the path set by liberal feminists of previous decades; instead, it retained anarchist challenges to liberal conceptions of freedom and the relationship between the individual and collective as well as anarchist principles of solidarity, direct action and consistency between the means and the ends. What is more, as Granel points out, 'anarchism contributed to the development of a feminist consciousness'.<sup>39</sup> Granel argues that anarchism was able to identify multiple relations of domination. In turn, anarchists posited that human emancipation required, not just economic reform, but social transformation. Anarchist analyses of society included an analysis of interpersonal relationships, creating the space for attention to female subordination within them. The result was twofold: the development of an anarchist critique of sexual politics and of the important role of family and sexual life in the (re)creation of the social order; and a conviction that sexual reform and women's emancipation were essential to the process of social revolution.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> L. Susan Brown, 'Beyond Feminism: Anarchism and Human Freedom' in Ehrlich, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Xabier Paniagua, 'Milenarismo y Anarquismo' paper presented at Historical Congress for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the creation of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Guadalajara, Federación Anarquista Ibérica, 2002). This movement, which was not exclusive to the Iberian Peninsula, came from and spread all across Europe and the Middle East and was encouraged a great deal by women and women's groups. For a very good account of this topic see Norman Cohn, *En Pos del Milenio: Revolucionarios Milenaristas y Anarquistas Místicos en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Alianza, 1993). For an interesting reading on how women self-interpreted, resisted and survived in early modern Spain see Lisa Vollendorf, *The lives of Women: a New History of Inquisitional Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Garcia-Maroto, 'Feminismo y Anarquismo'.

<sup>39</sup> Helena Andrés Granel, 'Mujeres Libres, Una Lectura Feminista' (Zaragoza: X Feminist Research Prize Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2007): 3; available from [wzar.unizar.es](http://wzar.unizar.es); accessed 20 April 2007.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Principles of conscious reproduction and free choice in the formation of personal relationships have been central tenets of anarchism since its beginnings. This enabled anarchists, more so than Marxists and socialists, to identify the link between gender and the reproduction of oppressive institutions such as the state and capitalism. Marsh and Golden argue that anarchists' critique of gender norms also enabled anarchists to act in solidarity with what would later come to be called 'queer' struggles.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the anarchist movement that emerged out of the industrial revolution and the workers' movement in Spain as well as in America and the rest of Europe<sup>42</sup> included a strong gender consciousness. In the US, women such as Helena Born, Marie Ganz, Mollie Steimer, Voltairine de Cleyre and later Emma Goldman 'embraced anarchism [...]to restructure society as a whole, but they also wanted to transcend conventional social and moral precepts as individuals in order to create for themselves independent, productive and meaningful lives'.<sup>43</sup>

In Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Mexico, anarchists also promoted anarcho-feminism very early on.<sup>44</sup> In France, Flora Tristan, considered one of the mothers of so-called 'utopian' socialism, devoted her life to fostering an international workers movement in which both sexes and all races would unite.<sup>45</sup> Also in France, Déjacque and Kropotkin, in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, called on anarchists to include women in the struggle for the emancipation of humankind. They attacked the subjugation of women to men, the family as an institution that oppressed women as well as men, and repressive sexual morals.<sup>46</sup> In Spain, a few circumstances facilitated the introduction and development of anarchist ideas. Very significant were the formation of the Ateneo Catalán in 1861 and the introduction of Bakunin's work by Fanelli.<sup>47</sup> In 1898, Teresa Mañé and Juan Montseny founded the magazine *Revista Blanca*, which became amongst the most progressive spaces for political discussion on topics ranging from politics to the environment and which placed special emphasis on gender and sexuality.<sup>48</sup> As Cleminson states, 'the *Revista Blanca* can be used as a gauge for the discussion of such matters in the Spanish anarchist movement and especially as an indicator of the extent to which foreign ideas penetrated in Spain, either through the anarchist movement or outside of it'.<sup>49</sup> With the turn of the century, multiple other anarchist specific magazines, periodicals and organisations, such as the journal *Estudios*, the cultural and educational spaces called *Ateneos Libertarios* and the *Regional Workers Federation*, flourished.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Margaret Marsh, *Anarchist Women: 1870–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 22 and 75. See also Golberg.

<sup>42</sup> Please note that I am referring here to physical continents and not to political boundaries.

<sup>43</sup> Marsh, *Anarchist Women*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson Méndez, *Mujeres Libres de España 1936–1939: Cuando florecieron las rosas de fuego* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example Flora Tristan, *Peregrinations of a pariah, 1833–1834* (London: Virago, 1986); Flora Tristan, *The worker's union* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983). For a guide to Flora Tristan's work see Máire Cross, *The letter in Flora Tristan's politics, 1835–1844* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Granier.

<sup>47</sup> Gómez Casas, 25–26.

<sup>48</sup> Equipe de Recherche Associée au Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, *Els anarquistes educadors del poble: "La Revista Blanca" (1898–1905)* (Barcelona : Curial, 1977); *Revista Blanca*, archived at the National Library of Spain; available from [www.bne.es](http://www.bne.es) 15 August 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Cleminson, 'Male Inverts and Homosexuals: Sex discourse in the Anarchist *Revista Blanca*' in Gert Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley (eds.) *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left* (London: The Haworth Press, 1995), 262.

<sup>50</sup> Cleminson, 260; Gomez Casas, 25–57.

Unfortunately, women remained a minority within a patriarchal anarchist movement.<sup>51</sup> Despite their rejection of the word feminism, Spanish anarchists attempted to address specifically women's cultural, social and economic subordination. They put a special emphasis on birth control, sexual liberation and literacy. Their attempts were also apparent in the formation of two anarcho-sindicalist organisations, the Regional Federation of Workers and its successor, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT). Both organisations, founded in 1908 and 1910 respectively, were designed as tools for the working class to fight capitalism and the state and to provide a foundation for a future anarchist society. Both stated purposefully their intentions to organise women in the unions in order to facilitate women's emancipation, to promote equal pay and to include women in the running of the organisations themselves.<sup>52</sup> The extent to which they were successful was limited by the prevalence of gender norms that inhibited the ability of both men and women to challenge women's subordination. In the 1930s, anarchists organised both to combat the fascist uprising and to realise their dream of emancipation.<sup>53</sup> In the midst of this organising, a number of women, including Lucía Sánchez Saornil, Mercedes Camposada and Amparo Poch, formed the group *Mujeres Libres*.<sup>54</sup>

This second period proved to be a landmark in what can be called anarcho-feminist history, although the term anarcho-feminism was not used. In the 1930s in Spain, there was already an unspoken clash between different feminist perspectives. Liberal feminism was identified by *Mujeres Libres* coming from the middle and upper classes and focused on giving women the same rights as men whilst ignoring a capitalist system that made some men subordinate to others. Another strand of feminism developed out of anarchist critiques of class and social and political oppression, arguing for social revolution and not just for political reform. The women of *Mujeres Libres* participated in the group not because they saw flaws in anarchist theory but rather in the practices of male-dominated anarchist groups, practices that excluded women and ignored gender oppression. This was obvious in the CNT unions. Despite their efforts to address the 'woman question', membership in these unions remained majority male and the issue of gender oppression marginal.<sup>55</sup> The anarcho-feminism of *Mujeres Libres*, then, was not an attempt to elaborate

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<sup>51</sup> Andrés Granel, 10; Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 52–55; Garcia-Maroto, 'Feminismo y Anarquismo'.

<sup>53</sup> The Second Spanish Republic, declared in 1931, suffered from civil unrest fuelled by the social, economic and political crises of the previous regime. In addition, as a traditionally monarchical state, the Republic did not receive the support of the right wing bourgeoisie nor of most of the military or of the still strong feudal owners. On 18 July 1936 General Francisco Franco, who had managed to organise part of the army and support from Moroccan soldiers (still a Spanish protectorate during this period), revolted against the Republican Government. On 19 July, the people took up arms to confront this uprising to realise their desires for freedom, aligning themselves with different political groups, most significantly, the Republicans from the government, the Communists and Socialists under the Communist Party, the union Unión General de Trabajadores and the Anarchists, principally under the CNT umbrella. At a time of fascist uprisings in Europe, Franco gained the support of Hitler and Mussolini, though France, England and Russia offered their support belatedly. For a detailed account of this period please see Alexander; and George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with Secker & Warburg, 1966).

<sup>54</sup> Although anarchists would always say that no body is necessary and every body is important in order to highlight that in the anarchist movement there are no leaders, it is nevertheless necessary to emphasise the amazing task that these women undertook and achieved.

<sup>55</sup> CNT and *Mujeres Libres* came to function as sister organisations. They provided support for each other, though *Mujeres Libres* always emphasised their need for autonomy and their determination to make their own decisions in the struggle. Not everyone saw the creation of *Mujeres Libres* as positive. One of the common criticisms was the need to address women's subordination from within already existing groups. Other critics including, significantly, Federica Montseny, argued that women's subordination could not be solved through organising but only by changing

new theories against patriarchy, but to put into practice many of the ideas that activists in the previous years had been developing and to emphasise the necessity of women's *capacitación* for the social revolution taking place. *Mujeres Libres* used the term '*capacitación*' to talk about the process of women's emancipation. *Capacitación* is more than 'empowerment' and should not be confused with mainstream feminist calls to 'take the power'.<sup>56</sup> The *capacitación* of women meant a process of developing the skills and confidence that would enable them to fight for their emancipation. It included (and still includes) education and the development of independent judgement and critical thinking.<sup>57</sup> *Mujeres Libres* was formed 'as a feminine conscious force to act as the vanguard of the revolution and progress, aiming at the emancipation of women from the triple slavery: slavery of ignorance, slavery of women and slavery of production'.<sup>58</sup> To fight the 'slavery of ignorance', they published magazines and journals, established schools and organised public forums.<sup>59</sup> To fight the 'slavery of women', they promoted women's sexual, religious and moral liberation, created health centres, opened political discussion about sexuality and free love, and criticised strongly the values of Catholicism, the family, and female chastity.<sup>60</sup> To end the 'slavery of work', they promoted women's critical and self-confident participation in the CNT and the enabling of women to struggle against capitalism.<sup>61</sup> Overall, as *Mujeres Libres* stated, their intention was: [T]o enable (*capacitar*) women to make of themselves individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organization.<sup>62</sup> *Mujeres Libres*, ultimately, took the anarchist principle that means must be consistent with ends to mean that patriarchy, along with capitalism and the state, must be fought in a nongendered, self-managed and horizontal manner 'here and now'. Despite anarchist movement on an unprecedented scale, Spain was to suffer forty years of dictatorship under General Francisco Franco. The severe repression imposed by this regime not only trapped Spain in a retarded industrial economy but also, and more importantly, it provoked a regressive cultural movement. As a result, it was not until the dictatorship was exhausted, in the 1960s and 1970s, that Spain saw another wave of feminism. From the 1960s on, political activism in Spain was fuelled by Franco's weakening as well as the second wave of radical feminism, the events of May 1968 and the anti-war and anti-colonial movements. The radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s coming from the United States, also clearly influenced Spanish feminists. Those women from *Mujeres Libres* that still survived, as well as many younger women, identified with Robin Morgan when she complained in the late 1960s about the 'revolutionary practice', which still displayed patriarchal and patronising attitudes against women, encouraging the development of a whole movement of autonomous women's-only groups across not only the United States, but also in Europe and, as such, in Spain.<sup>63</sup> The feminist message 'the

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the dominant culture, starting with women's self-esteem. See Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 87–114. For accounts of these criticisms, see specifically 90–2.

<sup>56</sup> See Miller Gearheart, cited in Brown, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 115–42.

<sup>58</sup> *Mujeres Libres*, *Estatutos* (Madrid, *Mujeres Libres*: 1937), 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women*, 118–22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 128–40.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 122–28.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 116

<sup>63</sup> Ana De Miguel, *Los feminismos a través de la historia* (Mexico D.F: *Creatividad Feminista*, 2002); available from [creatividadfeminista.org](http://creatividadfeminista.org) 11 April 2007.

personal is political' and feminists' promotion of horizontal organisation and equality of group members were received warmly in anarchist circles.<sup>64</sup>

The anarchism that re-emerged after years of clandestine activity was initially strong in advocating gender equality and sexuality liberation. Following Franco's dictatorship, disappointingly but unsurprisingly, Spain became a liberal democracy, founded on the three oppressive pillars of capitalism, the state and the normative family. In a revealing book about the Spanish transition to democracy, analysed from the perspective of the grassroots radical anti-authoritarian movement, Jose Ribas discusses the 'ascension and fall of the anarchist movement' between 1976 and 1978.<sup>65</sup> Ribas states that 'the annihilation of anarchism is the great secret of the transition'.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the 1980s witnessed the start of about 20 years of decline in CNT membership, as well as in the numbers of the re-established *Mujeres Libres* and the *Ateneos Libertarios*, and, in general, in participation in the vibrant political debate that took place in the previous decade.<sup>67</sup> Today, there is still a reluctance to use the term anarchy-feminism. In fact, in all my activist years, I have only heard one woman, Maria Angeles Garcia Maroto, an anarchy-feminist author, openly call herself anarchy-feminist and claim the relevance of anarchy-feminism.<sup>68</sup>

All my female and male counterparts in the anarchist organisations I have been in still argue that there is no need to include the word 'feminism' in the word 'anarchism' because anarchism already promotes the abolition of patriarchy. Overall, these three periods of political discussion and activism, the intensity and diversity of which this paper has only touched upon, illustrate how anarchy-feminism, without being a different or oppositional current within anarchism, attempted to make anarchist practice consistent with anarchist principles through a sort of mainstreaming of those issues that were too often deemed secondary. While the success of those first anarchy-feminists is irrefutable, it was not total, and it remains worthwhile to provide a critical analysis of anarchism and anarchy-feminism in the present.

## **Critical assessment of anarchy-feminism from and for an activist perspective, my experience**

This section attempts to outline some recommendations for more effective anarchy-feminist activism or a more consistent anarchism. Drawing upon my own experience, I emphasise that we need to develop formal strategies to challenge patriarchal, racist and homophobic behaviour both within anarchist organisations and society more broadly. Crucially, we need to create spaces in which discussion of the meaning and methods of struggle against patriarchy can occur.

This discussion would be enriched, firstly, by a generational transmission of experience and knowledge, as well as by a dialogue with other feminisms so that we may mutually challenge each

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<sup>64</sup> For a more extensive discussion about the connection between this form of radical organisation and anarchism see Peggy Kornegger, 'Anarchism: The Feminist Connection' in Ehrlich, 160–161.

<sup>65</sup> Jose Ribas, Review of *Los 70 a Destajo: Ajoblanco y Libertad* (Barcelona: RBA, 2007); available from [www.los70adestajo.com](http://www.los70adestajo.com) 15 August 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Jose Ribas cited in Luis Alemany, 'La aniquilación del anarquismo es el gran secreto de la Transición' *El Mundo*, 12 May 2007; available from [www.elmundo.es](http://www.elmundo.es) 15 August 2007.

<sup>67</sup> See Gómez Casas, 368–93, for an account of the reconstruction of the CNT and the crises it suffered in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I have been a witness to the decrease in membership during the 1990s, followed by an increase in the 2000s.

<sup>68</sup> Garcia-Maroto, 'Razones'.

other and grow politically.<sup>69</sup> I have been active in the anarchist movement for a decade. During this time, I have come to realise that anarchist women face similar barriers in their attempts to combat patriarchy as they did two generations ago. Patriarchy, along with racism, homophobia and environmental destruction, are all part and parcel of our well-nurtured hierarchical, capitalist, state-organised world. These issues, however, are often not seen as important as demanding better working conditions or creating anarcho-syndicalist unions. What the everyday militancy in anarchist organisations believes is that leaving these issues to be dealt with in the aftermath of the revolution is to condemn the society we dream of to suffer from the same evils we confront today.

I first joined Madrid's anarchist ateneo and later became a CNT member. This put me in contact with other anarchist organisations such as *Mujeres Libres*. Time spent with members of *Mujeres Libres* was eye-opening for me in regards to women's oppression. Through engagement with these women, anarchism offered me the tools with which to critique gender and the gendered relationships around me. I began to question an often unitary emphasis on the struggle of workers against the state and became aware of a number of patriarchal attitudes and behaviours around me. It was not that the men in the union were sexist but rather that men and women in the union uncritically performed normative gender roles. While these behaviours were at times challenged as part of the process of educating ourselves, these challenges remained a sort of self-discipline as opposed to an explicit strategy in the organisation.<sup>70</sup> Despite the almost fifty years that separated me from *Mujeres Libres*, I found myself identifying with the experiences of the women who were active in the group. Though the CNT, as an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, emphasised the importance of self-representation and equal participation, many male members stayed at the union offices everyday until late, thus delegating their home responsibilities to their partners who could therefore not participate fully in the organisation's activities.<sup>71</sup> I thus felt compelled to remind these *compañeros* that the revolution takes place at home as well as in the workplace.

I also felt compelled to challenge certain assumptions about the meaning of sexual liberation. Frequently, men assumed that as anarchist women we were sexually liberated and that, in turn, we were sexually available to them. Those women who refused this definition of liberation were accused of being 'frigid'. Noting the gendered nature of participation, I questioned distributions of work that consistently left food preparation to women and more technical and visible tasks to men, and I placed special attention on encouraging my female *compañeras* to speak up in meetings, to inform themselves, develop their own opinions and undertake skill-development trainings.

This path of confrontational but constructive criticism has not been always an easy one. At one point, another *compañera* and I considered forming a sex workers' union section within CNT. We were shocked by what we unearthed. We encountered three responses to our proposal: prostitution was not work and therefore should not be unionised; prostitution should be abolished because it is a form of gender oppression but this was not the union's priority; and, expressed exclusively by men and the most unexpected, the presence of female sex workers in the union would make men lose concentration and the union would degenerate as a whole.

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<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of this topic see Brown.

<sup>70</sup> Self-discipline indicates here the personal commitment to anarchist struggle and philosophy.

<sup>71</sup> On Anarcho-syndicalism please see footnote 14. Originally published in *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*

As young women still in the process of developing our feminism, we took the position that regardless of our individual opinions about prostitution, sex workers were a neglected sector of the working class population and that we, as an anarcho-syndicalist union, could provide for them a platform from which to make their demands heard and fulfilled. As anarchists, we also felt that the abolishment of prostitution was something that should be achieved by sex workers and not imposed upon them. Of course, arguments that portrayed prostitutes as a threat to the stability of the union merited only critical responses, if any. In the end, after several months of speaking to prostitutes we came to the conclusion that they did not want to form a union and that was, for us, the end of the story. The sexist arguments that the issue raised remained unchallenged.

Our failure to mainstream gender within the anarchist movement made it difficult to respond constructively to challenges posed by feminists who were not anarchists, feminists who we nonetheless strove to act in solidarity with.

To illustrate, CNT-Madrid normally attends International Women's Day rallies organised by radical feminists. During one rally, which I attended with both male and female CNT members, a battle nearly ensued. Women from some of the other organisations started to spit at my compañeros and to hit them with their banners and flag sticks. They argued that it was a women's day and that there should be no men in the rally. Some CNT men and women responded that women and men need to struggle together against women's oppression whilst others agreed that the day was women's day and that, without discouraging men from joining their struggle, the rally should be a women's only event. Unfortunately, this issue was never discussed formally in the union, nor there was a common position held by women in the union. In subsequent years more and more CNT men decided not to attend the rally so as not to be abused and this discouraged some women in the CNT from supporting the rally. I feel this confrontation resulted from a lack of debate between organisations and amongst ourselves.

After more than ten years of activism in anarchist as well as non-anarchist organisations, I believe that a form of anarcho-feminism or gender mainstreaming is fundamental to the pursuit of a free society. I have also come to understand that the same applies to issues such as racism, homophobia and environmental degradation. We cannot assume that these issues will self-evaporate with the 'arrival' of the new world. I have also learnt that anarchists active today need to know the history of anarchist thought and struggle so as to understand that anarchism is a comprehensive struggle against all oppressions.

Anarchism, being fundamentally a practice of ideas, does not necessarily need to be read in order to be understood and embraced as a philosophy of life and as a political strategy. However, as a movement with such a wealth of experience, it is necessary that we share our skills and experience as part of a strategic struggle. In particular, this sharing needs to be intergenerational. If people like me had more opportunity to learn about this history, we would perhaps make fewer mistakes. It is time to review the tactics used by Mujeres Libres and other anarcho-feminists and put those that remain useful into practice once again.

Finally, I think there needs to be more dialogue between anarcho-feminism and other feminisms so as to enhance both our political thought and our practice. Conclusion Anarchists have historically placed special emphasis on analysing and fighting patriarchy. While anarcho-feminism is a tautology, anarchists have felt compelled to 'mainstream' gender within anarchist movement. Mujeres Libres and other anarcho-feminists have contributed to women's emancipation in ways that, for instance, Marxism, Socialism, and liberal democracy have not been able

to. Marxism and Socialism have not elaborated on the specific power relations between sexes and too often reduce power relationships to economic relationships based on class. Liberal democracy has only provided a narrow path for reform, a strategy that the capitalist elites might find useful in terms of accessing so-called positions of responsibility or power, but that essentially leaves behind a majority of women and men suffering from the evils of multiple other forms of oppression. In addition, these theories have failed to provide participatory ways of fighting that is consistent with their ideas of equality.

As an anarchist, I do not accept that liberation can be achieved through oppressive and hierarchical structures and institutions such as political parties, representation-based politics and the state apparatus. Both men and women are oppressed. Because anarchism provides a critical analysis of power, anarcho-feminism gives us the tools to address all forms of oppression and to act in solidarity with the oppressed, thus avoiding a reductionist understanding of power based on class or gender. It also enables us to work in solidarity and mutual aid despite our differences, for though our experiences of power might differ, illegitimate power is our common enemy. Anarcho-feminism has been and still is a tool to make of our lives and our political struggles a place where we not only fight against the public face of violence and oppression but also the private side of it, in the home and the family. This process of mainstreaming gender oppression can act as a model for mainstreaming a struggle against racism, and homophobia and environmental destruction. The 'revolution' entails the creation of new structures to organise society and production as well as different ways of relating to each other and to the world. Whilst anarcho-feminism strives to make anarchist thought and practice more consistent, it also calls on feminists everywhere to struggle not just against patriarchy but against all oppression, to realise that until there is no one oppressed in the world we will not be free.

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