

Chronicling women's struggle within the social revolution that accompanied the Spanish Civil War, *Anarchist Revolution and the Liberation of Women* focuses on the importance of women's communities and gender-specific experiences as the basis for working class women's self-empowerment that would allow them to take their places in the revolution and in the free society.

Founded in 1936 by groups of women in Madrid and Barcelona, *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) was an organisation dedicated to the liberation of women from their "triple enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as producers."

This pamphlet is the first chapter out of Martha Ackelsburg's book *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, which is highly recommended to any person struggling for a new and better world.

**FRONT COVER:**

Cover of *Mujeres Libres* (Journal) issue "8<sup>th</sup> month of the Revolution."

Caption reads "By work and with arms we women defend the people's freedom."

# *Anarchist Revolution and the Liberation of Women*

**mujeres  
libres**



Con el trabajo y con las armas, defendamos  
las mujeres la libertad del pueblo



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# ANARCHIST REVOLUTION AND THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN

*by Martha A. Ackelsburg*

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to come from men, she insisted that "a *compañero* never ought to say to a woman, 'liberate yourself, and I'll help you.' A woman has to liberate herself. It's all right for men to help, but the *initiative* must come from the woman. It must be her issue."

That the debate sounds so contemporary should not be surprising. It was taking place among people who, while they did not grow up with the contemporary feminist movement, had obviously been influenced by it. Nevertheless, the issues they raised and the particular ways in which they discussed them echoed the written debates of the early part of this century. In 1903, José Prat had urged women to take responsibility for their own emancipation. Some years later, Federica Montseny had insisted that one way for women to work toward the abolition of the sexual double standard was for them to take themselves seriously, to stand up and punish the men who had seduced and abandoned them, rather than to cower in shame. And Soledad Gustavo, echoing Emma Goldman's claims about internal emancipation, insisted that if there were to be a new order of sexual equality, women would have to "demonstrate by their deeds that they think, are capable of conceiving ideas, of grasping principles, of striving for ends."

The question they were all addressing was precisely that of empowerment and the overcoming of subordination: how best to accomplish them consistent with a commitment to recognise both the impact of cultural conditioning and the potential for autonomy of each person. Nevertheless, the question of the *significance* of women's subordination and of its place within the anarchist project was far from resolved, whether in the theoretical writings of Spanish anarchists or, as we shall see, in the activities of the movement. Debates continued within the movement throughout the 1930s and led ultimately to the founding of *Mujeres Libres*.

# ANARCHIST REVOLUTION AND THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN

Domination in all its forms - whether exercised by governments, religious institutions, or through economic relations - is for anarchists the source of all social evil. While anarchism shares with many socialist traditions a radical critique of economic domination and an insistence on the need for a fundamental economic restructuring of society on a more egalitarian basis, it goes beyond Marxist socialism in developing an independent critique of the state, of hierarchy, and of authority relations in general. Where socialists have traced the roots of *all* domination to the division of labour in the economy, anarchists have insisted that power has its own logic and will not be abolished through attention to economic relations alone.

Anarchism aims to abolish hierarchy and structured relations of domination and subordination in society. It also aims to create a society based on equality, mutuality, and reciprocity in which each person is valued and respected as an individual. This social vision is combined with a theory of social change that insists that means must be consistent with ends, that people cannot be directed into a future society but must create it themselves, thereby recognising their own abilities and capacities. In both its vision of the ideal society and its theory of how that society must be achieved, anarchism has much to offer contemporary feminists. The anarchist analysis of relations of domination provides a fruitful model for understanding the situation of women in society and for relating women's condition to that of other oppressed groups. A theory of social change that insists on the unity of means and ends and on the strengths of the oppressed provides a striking contrast to many existing theories - and most existing practice - of social revolutionary movements.

Furthermore, some nineteenth century anarchist writers and activists, both in Spain and elsewhere in Europe and the United States, specifically addressed themselves to the subordination of women in their societies and insisted that full human emancipation required not just the abolition of capitalism and of authoritarian political institutions but also the overcoming of women's cultural and economic subordination, both inside and outside the home. As early as 1872, for example, an anarchist congress in Spain declared that women ought to be fully the equals of men in the home and in the workplace.

Yet neither the theory of anarchism as it developed in Spain and elsewhere in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries nor the practice of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain was egalitarian in the full sense of the word. Although many writers seemed to acknowledge the importance of women's emancipation to the anarchist project and the importance of women to the movement, few gave those

concerns top priority. As was the case with socialist movements throughout Europe, many anarchists treated the issue of women's subordination as, at best, secondary to the emancipation of workers, a problem that would be resolved "on the morrow of the revolution."

The founding of *Mujeres Libres* represented an effort by women within the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement both to challenge the movement to fulfil its promise to women and to empower women to claim their places within that movement and within the larger society. At the same time that the founders were frustrated by the failure of the movement to adequately incorporate women and issues of concern to women, they nevertheless remained convinced that the movement provided the only context for achieving a true liberation of women.

My aim in this book is to make clear just what *Mujeres Libres'* vision was and to explore its relevance for contemporary feminists and social change activists. But in order to do so, we must first locate it - as did the women of *Mujeres Libres* themselves - in the context of anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice. In this chapter, I examine the works of Spanish anarchist writers and others in the "communalist anarchist" tradition who provided the theoretical grounding of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement. My aim is to highlight their approaches to the understanding of women's subordination, their critiques of hierarchy and domination, and their understanding of the process of fully integrating a concern with the subordination of women into a theory of radical social transformation. But I also wish to explore the ambiguities evident in these analyses, the ways that - despite the apparent awareness at the core of anarchist theory that relations of domination were manifold and complex - attention to the subordination of women was repeatedly given lower priority than the oppression of male workers. This contextualisation of *Mujeres Libres'* program and activities should lay the basis for a demonstration of the ways *Mujeres Libres'* programs effectively addressed the weaknesses of anarcho-syndicalism at the time and constituted both a critique and extension of Spanish anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice.

I focus here on Spanish anarcho-syndicalist analyses of domination and subordination, on the vision of an egalitarian society, and on the process of empowerment, specifically as related to the situation of women. Exploration of these concerns on a theoretical level can then serve as backdrop and counterpoint to the more historical analysis of the roots of *Mujeres Libres* in the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which I undertake in chapter 2. In fact, for anarchists, theory and practice were hardly distinguishable in this sense. The theoretical positions we will be discussing in this chapter were developed in the context of historical struggles, at the same time that they contributed to the development of those struggles. I separate them here only for analytical purposes.

men, to begin behaving in ways that developed their own sense of competence and capacity?

These questions are, of course, crucial ones for any would-be revolutionary movement, since a sense of one's own capacities and powers is precisely what oppressors attempt to deny to the oppressed. But even agreement on the importance of the perspective did not guarantee unanimity on its implications for practice. In fact, the question of how best to address and challenge the subordination of working-class women within Spanish society was never effectively resolved within the anarcho-syndicalist movement. *Mujeres Libres* was created precisely because of a disagreement among movement activists about how to achieve that empowerment.

The issues were played out quite dramatically during the course of interviews I was conducting in 1981. A group of former activists were meeting and reminiscing about their years in the CNT and FIJL. After some discussion of the role of the FIJL and ateneos in opening the minds of young people to new ideas in the twenties and thirties, the conversation turned to the liberation of women. Two different but strongly held positions were put forward. One was articulated by a man who identified himself as a strong supporter of women's emancipation, who was quite articulate about the ways in which even anarchist men tended to take for granted their *compañeras'* subordination to them. He argued that, precisely because of women's cultural subordination, anarchists then had a responsibility to take the lead in changing these patterns. Women's taking paid jobs would not be sufficient: "There are too many men whose wives work and who still do all the housework." After so many years of socialisation, women were all too ready to accept traditional roles. Men, who have the understanding and the sense of their own capacities, he insisted, must take the initiative and encourage their *compañeras* towards greater self-direction and autonomy.

Another position was articulated by a woman who had been an activist in the *Juventudes* during the thirties and whose life had been fundamentally changed through her participation in it. She, too, was committed to the liberation of women. But she strongly opposed her *compañero's* insistence that it was up to men to take the initiative. She argued that his focus on what contemporary feminists call "the politics of housework" was misplaced. The basic problem, she insisted, was not who washes the dishes or cleans the house, but that a woman be able to go where she pleases and say what she pleases. The root of women's subordination was ignorance. In her words, "toda mujer que se cultura un poco desarrolla armas" [every woman who gains some culture (educates herself) develops weapons]. "What matters to me is that a woman be able to open her mouth. It is not a question of cleaning plates." While her interlocutor insisted that a woman's responsibility for all the housework and for the family would prevent her from participating fully in communal activities, this woman insisted that "going to meetings is not the issue. Going to meetings is a kind of sport. What is important is work and reading."

It soon became clear that the fundamental issue between them was not the primacy of work, reading, or housework. It was initiative. While he insisted that, given the weight of cultural subordination that women had to bear, the initiative would have

ideas by union organisers who frequented young people's social gatherings in hopes of attracting young adherents to the cause. Soledad Estorach, who was to be very active both in the CNT and in *Mujeres Libres* in Barcelona, gained much of her initial information about "anarchist communists" by reading newspapers and magazines.

Anarchists had long recognised the interdependence of educational practices, narrowly defined, and participation in ongoing institutions, where social approval and disapproval provided continuing mechanisms of social control. Proudhon's notion of "imminent justice" - the claim that we develop a conception of justice through our relationships with other people - was taken up directly by a number of Spanish anarchist writers. Mella argued that the only proper regulator of society is the sense of justice, which people learn through their participation in institutions that recognise and validate their own worth and the equal worth of others. The collective feeling that develops out of such participation would translate into a sense of justice more powerful and permanent than any imposed on people by church or state. "To practice justice," Proudhon had insisted, "is to obey the social instinct." It is through our patterns of interaction with one another that we learn and experience both who we and others are and what justice is. The best and most effective educational system therefore is society itself.

Another major factor operative in the development of a sense of justice is public opinion, what Mella referred to as "moral coercion" [coacción moral]. Our moral sense develops out of the "exchange of reciprocal influences," which, although it may come initially from outside ourselves, eventually is taken in as a sense of justice and becomes the basis for our own self-regulation. A well-ordered egalitarian society, left to itself, will generate people with the proper sense of justice; anyone who seems lacking in such a sense will be held in check by the opinions of others. Over time, those opinions will have an educative effect; public opinion will be internalised as conscience.

The goal of anarchists, then, was to eliminate those institutions - for example, church, state, judges and courts - which impeded the development of such a moral sense by taking over the responsibility of looking after others and oneself. Once such authorities were eliminated, reciprocity would become a norm of action; simply living in the community - participating in its activities, in the context of an open educational system, and in communal ownership and disposition of property - would be sufficient to foster and safeguard the development of the individual's sense of justice, in turn necessary to sustain the community.

The complexities of this position are revealed quite clearly when we look specifically at efforts to address women's subordination and empowerment. Both those who emphasised a union-based strategy and those who insisted on the broader cultural components of women's subordination recognised that women were devalued and disempowered, culturally and economically. Both accepted the perspective that means and ends are intimately connected. But how were those principles and perspectives to be realised in practice? How were women in early twentieth-century Spain, who thought of themselves (and were viewed by others) as dependent on

## ★ Domination and Subordination

Anarchist visions are politically, socially, and economically egalitarian. Politically and socially, an anarchist society is a society without government, without institutionalised hierarchical relationships or patterns of authority. Anarchists claim that people can organise and associate themselves on the basis of need, that individuals or small groups can initiate social action, and that centralised political co-ordination is not only harmful but also unnecessary. The right or authority to direct or command a situation should not inhere in roles or offices to which some people have privileged access or from which others are systematically excluded. Finally, anarchists are committed to non-dominating relationships with the environment, as well as with people. Anarchists have focused not on conquering nature, but on developing new ways to live (as much as possible) in harmony with it.

Virtually all major social thinkers in the West have assumed that social order requires leadership, hierarchy, and, in particular, political authority. Many argue that social life, especially in a complex society, could not exist without structures of power and authority. "Society means that norms regulate human conduct," and norms require authorities with power to enforce them. In a slightly different vein, social contract theorists have argued that political authority is necessary to create a stable social order, the precondition for moral choice. Theorists of social movements argue that it takes a strong person (or persons) to unite disparate individuals into a coherent unit and give them direction. Organisation, in turn, *requires* that some people be in positions to give orders and that the rest - whether as "good citizens" or as "good revolutionaries" - be prepared to take and follow them.

Anarchists argue in response that formal hierarchies are not only harmful but also unnecessary and that there are alternative, more egalitarian ways in which to organise social life. Most important, along with socialists and, more recently, feminists, anarchists have insisted that human nature is a social construct; the way people behave is more a product of the institutions in which they/we are raised than of any inherent nature. Formal hierarchical structures of authority may well create the conditions they are presumably designed to combat: rather than preventing disorder, governments are among its primary causes. Hierarchical institutions foster alienated and exploitative relationships among those who participate in them, disempowering people and distancing them from their own reality. Hierarchies make some people dependent on others, blame the dependent for their dependency, and then use that dependency as a justification for the further exercise of authority.

Many Spanish anarchists used the existing subordination of women in society as an example to demonstrate the power of social institutions to create dependent persons. While there were many views among Spanish anarchists about the nature of women and about the appropriate role for women in a future society, most anarchist writers seemed to agree that women were severely disadvantaged in Spanish society and that existing inequalities between men and women were largely the product of social conditioning and male power. As early as 1903, for example, José Prat

argued that "women's 'backwardness' is a consequence of the way she has been, and still is, treated. 'Nature' has nothing to do with this.... If woman is backward, it is because in all times man has kept her inferior, depriving her of all those rights which he was gradually winning for himself." Gregorio Marañón and Mariano Gallardo, while acknowledging that there were significant sexual differences between women and men, argued that societal gender inequalities were the result of denying opportunities to women: "Woman's... presumed inferiority is purely artificial, the inevitable consequence of a civilisation which, by educating men and women separately and distinctly, makes of the woman a slave and of her compañero a ferocious tyrant."

Spanish anarchists, like contemporary feminists, argued that the exercise of power in any institutionalised form - whether economic, political, religious, or sexual - brutalises both the wielder of power and the one over whom it is exercised. On the one hand, those who hold power tend only to develop an ever-increasing desire to maintain it. Governments, for example, may claim to represent a "common interest" or "general will." But this claim is false and masks the state's role in preserving and maintaining the economic and political power of the few over the many.

On the other hand, the exercise of power by some disempowers others. Those in positions of relative dominance tend to define the very characters of those subordinate to them. Through a combination of physical intimidation, economic domination and dependency, and psychological limitations, social institutions and practices affect the way everyone sees the world and her or his place in it. Anarchists argue that to be always in a position of being acted upon and never to be allowed to act is to be doomed to a state of dependence and resignation. Those who are constantly ordered about and prevented from thinking for themselves soon come to doubt their own capacities. Along with contemporary feminists, anarchists insist that those who are defined by others have great difficulty defining, or naming, themselves and their experience and even more difficulty acting on that sense of self in opposition to societal norms, standards, and expectations.

Anarchists, therefore, oppose *permanent* structures of authority in which particular people seem to find their "calling," arguing that authority relations in society ought to be more fluid: "People are free. They work freely, change freely, contract freely."

## ★ Community and Equality

Many theorists, of course, have argued that, despite the negative effects of hierarchical structures, domination and subordination (whether in the political, economic, or sexual realm) are necessary for social life. In response, anarchists describe alternative ways to organise society that embody both freedom and equality in the broadest sense. Such visions locate individuals firmly in a communal context and require attention to economic relationships, to mechanisms for co-ordination, to sex-

However paradoxical it may seem, people must be prepared to act spontaneously on their own behalf. Along with Marx, anarchists believed that the best preparation, the best technique for what we call consciousness-raising, was action. "Capitalism is mortally wounded, but its agony will be prolonged until we are ready to substitute for it successfully. And we will not achieve that by pretty-sounding phrases, but by demonstrating our constructive and organising capacity." People would develop a critical, revolutionary consciousness through reflection on the concrete realities of their lives - a reflection often sparked by their own and others' activities.

Attention to the particular needs and situation of women, and to the activities of *Mujeres Libres*, can help to explicate the multidimensional nature of this understanding of the process of consciousness-change and to highlight its relevance to many contemporary debates. I noted above that Spanish anarchists argued that one important context for preparation was participation in working-class organisations, particularly unions. Yet, following Bakunin and breaking with Marx, they had also insisted that urban industrial workers were not the only people capable of coming to a revolutionary consciousness. Rural peasants and members of the urban petit bourgeoisie, as well as industrial workers, could develop a consciousness of their own oppression and join in a revolutionary movement. Many women, in particular, criticised the emphasis of the movement on the male urban industrial proletariat. Emma Goldman, for example, who was to be quite active in support both of the Spanish revolution and of *Mujeres Libres*, had earlier argued that "anarchists agree that the main evil today is an economic one," but as she pointed out, "they maintain that the solution of the evil can be brought about only through the consideration of *every phase* of life, the individual, as well as the collective; the internal, as well as the external phases." It was most obviously true for women, but also true for men, that the workplace is not the only context for relationships of domination, nor is it therefore the only potential context for consciousness-change and empowerment. A fully articulated movement must transform all hierarchical institutions, including government, religious institutions, and - perhaps most dramatically for women - sexuality and family life.

Preparation, then, could and must take place in a variety of social contexts, in addition to the economic. Both Enriqueta and Azucena spoke of imbibing anarchist perspectives more or less unconsciously "with our mother's milk":

My mother taught us anarchism... almost like a religious person teaches religion to her children - but without imposing it on us, as the religious one does... whether by her actions, by her way of expressing herself, and by always saying that they hoped for, longed for, anarchism... It's almost as if she didn't *teach* them, we *lived* them, were born with them. We learned them as you would learn to sew or to eat.

For those who became part of the movement later in life, the learning process was obviously a different one. Pepita Carpena, for example, was introduced to the

raderie... I was always involved in strikes and actions, anywhere. We lived on very little... The men and boys earned somewhat more than we did - but we didn't really resent it... Sometimes, it seemed we lived on air alone." The sense of empowerment was also clear in Enriqueta's recollections: "For the love of those compañeros, and that vision so strong, we would have battled with the Virgin Mary herself!"

Further, direct action not only empowered those who participated in it, it also had effects on others through what anarchists termed "propaganda by the deed." Often, that term meant bomb throwing, assassination attempts, and the like. It had another meaning, however, referring to a kind of exemplary action that attracted adherents by the power of the positive example it set. Contemporary examples of propaganda by the deed include food or day-care co-ops, collectively run businesses, sweat equity housing programs, women's self-help health collectives, urban squats, or women's peace camps. While such activities empower those who engage in them, they also demonstrate to others that non-hierarchical forms of organisation can and do exist - and that they can function effectively.

Obviously, if such actions are to have the desired empowerment effects, they must be largely self-generated, rather than being devised and directed from above. Hence, the anarchist commitment to a strategy of "spontaneous organisation," non-coercive federations of local groups. The aim was to achieve order without coercion by means of what we might call "federative networking," which brought together representatives of local groups (unions, neighbourhood associations, consumer co-ops, or the like). The crucial point was that neither the individual groups nor the larger coordinating body could claim to speak or act for others. Ideally, they would be more forums for discussion than directive organisations. Spontaneous organisation would demonstrate in practice that those who had experienced oppression were still capable of rational thought and action, able to come to know what their needs were and to develop ways to meet them.

## ★ Preparation

Finally, and most important, direct action could take place only within a context of "preparation." In the words of Federica Montseny, "Una revolución no se improvisa" (one doesn't improvise a revolution). Although all people had within them a sense of equality and justice based in their participation in social relationships, that almost instinctive sense was insufficient to lead to revolutionary action. Preparation was necessary both to point out to people the communal nature and context of their plight and to enable them to recognise the possibilities of their collective action. Without such preparation, "revolution" would lead only to the reinstatement of authority in new forms. In fact, many anarchists, writing in the years just after the Russian Revolution, pointed to the USSR as a negative example of how hierarchy was easily re-imposed in the absence of sufficient preparation.

uality and male-female relations, and to those ongoing systems of education and socialisation that make it possible for a society to perpetuate itself over time.

In place of inequality as a basis of organisation, anarchists offer mutualism, reciprocity, and federalism. In place of hierarchy and domination, they propose to empower everyone to achieve his or her full potential, thus obviating the need for social, political, or sexual inequality. I will highlight those aspects of the anarchist theory of revolution that were to be of particular significance for *Mujeres Libres* and through which we will see most clearly *Mujeres Libres'* contribution to the development of the theory and practice of non-authoritarian social change: the social nature of freedom, the vision of an egalitarian society, and the process of consciousness-change and empowerment.

Freedom, or individual liberty, was a basic premise of the Spanish anarchist tradition. "Individual sovereignty" is a prime tenet of most anarchist writing; the free development of one's individual potential is one of the basic "rights" to which all humans are born. Yet Spanish anarchists were firmly rooted in the *communalist*-anarchist tradition. For them, freedom was fundamentally a social product: the fullest expression of individuality and of creativity can be achieved only *in and through community*. As Pilar Grangel (a teacher who was also active in *Mujeres Libres*) wrote, describing the relationship of individuality and community: "I and my truth; I and my faith.... And I for you, but without ever ceasing to be me, so that you can always be you. Because I don't exist without your existence, but my existence is also indispensable to yours." They made frequent appeals to Kropotkin's claim that social life was regulated not by an antagonistic struggle for survival, but by "mutual aid": "Without association, no life is possible." Only in a fully egalitarian society, devoid of hierarchies of economic class, political, or sexual privilege, would everyone be free to develop to the fullest and would individual initiative be able to flourish.

The focus on individuality and individual initiative, and the communal context that nourishes it, provided a potential context for Spanish anarchists to address male-female differences. This perspective generated an awareness - at least on a theoretical level - of human diversity, of the variety of ways people can contribute to the social whole, and of the benefits to the society of the incorporation of different groups. But the working out of this vision, whether in theory or in practice, as related to sexual differences was much more limited. As contemporary feminists and minority activists have made us well aware, it is not always obvious how to ensure respect and equality in non-homogeneous communities. Many supposedly egalitarian social forms have ignored differences between men and women, for example, or assumed they were irrelevant to politics, thus effectively reproducing the subordination of women.

The limits of the Spanish anarchist vision become clear as we examine their understandings of the basic constituents of social organisation. Most Spanish anarchist writers located economic relationships at the centre of their vision, insisting that the basic principle of social organisation must be economic, rather than political. Economic relationships must be as non-hierarchical as possible, with respect both to



the remuneration that people receive and to the structure of work. They differed among themselves as to what ought properly to constitute equality of reward, varying between collectivism (to each according to contribution) and communism (to each according to need). Nevertheless, all agreed that relative equality of reward was essential to the functioning of a just society. This was so both because economic inequalities are easily converted into social or political power and, more basically, because most human labour is collaborative and it is virtually impossible to assign value to an individual's contribution to a collective task.

To say that economic equality must be at the root of a society based in reciprocity and mutuality, however, is insufficient to define what the overall structure and organisation of that society might look like. For communalist anarchists, society was best conceived as a series of voluntary associations that, while recognising individual autonomy, could still provide for the overall co-ordination essential to freedom and justice. Social order was to be achieved through the voluntary co-operation of locally based, decentralised units rather than through formal political structures. They pointed to railways, international postal services, and other forms of communication as models of networks, set up by voluntary agreement, which functioned efficiently to provide services to people without the intervention of some higher authority.

This central focus on economic structures, however, particularly in a society characterised by a sharp sexual division of labour, raised serious questions for women. How would women be involved? Would a new society challenge and overcome the sexual division of labour? Or would it leave that division in place and strive to achieve a kind of "separate but equal" status for women? An emphasis on economic structures as the root of social organisation effectively belied the anarchist insistence that domination and subordination had many facets and that economic issues were not the only ones that needed to be addressed. In fact, as we will see in chapter 2 (\*), debates about the core institutions and structures of the new society were to be quite divisive during the pre-Civil War period, although they rarely focused on the implications of these decisions for women's position or participation.

Most of the debate instead focused on what sorts of organisations would form the basis of the new society. Those who were to become known as anarcho-syndicalists (and who, by 1910, represented the majority position within the CNT) envisioned a society with unions at its base. Unions would be co-ordinated both locally and industrially through federations to which each union (or group of unions) would send a delegate. This vision, however, provided little opportunity to non-workers (including children, the unemployed, old people, the disabled, and non-working mothers) to participate in social decision making.

Others, identified as "anarchists" rather than as anarcho-syndicalists, insisted that unions represented too narrow a base for co-ordinating a libertarian communist society. Soledad Gustavo, Federico Urales, and Federica Montseny, for example, argued that unions are products of capitalism and that it does not make sense to

and the process of consciousness-change by examining their commitment to decentralism and "direct action." Decentralism referred to an insistence that revolution must be, at its core, a local phenomenon, growing out of the concrete realities of people's day-to-day lives. A revolutionary movement develops from people's struggles to overcome their own subordination, and it must speak to the particularities of their situation. Thus, as we will see, one important new institution that Spanish anarchists created was the *ateneo libertario* (storefront cultural centre), which served as a school, a recreational group, and gathering place for working-class young people in the years preceding the war. As Enriqueta Rovira explained, describing one such group,

We were in a group called *Sol y Vida* [sun and life] with both boys and girls... We did theatre pieces, gymnastics, went on trips to the mountains, to the sea... It was both a cultural and a recreational group... There was always a little [educational] talk of some sort. And in that way, ideas got stirred up, they created a sense of being *compañeros* and *compañeras*. True, people went to union meetings and the like, but relations within our group were more intimate, the explanations more extensive. That's where we were formed, most deeply, ideologically.

Direct action meant that the goal of any and all of these activities was to provide ways for people to get in touch with their own powers and capacities, to take back the power of naming themselves and their lives. It was to be distinguished from more conventional political activity even in a democratic system. Instead of attempting to make change by forming interest groups to pressure politicians, anarchists insisted that we learn to think and act for ourselves by joining together in organisations in which our experience, our perception, and our activity can guide and make the change. Knowledge does not precede experience, it flows from it: "We begin by deciding to work, and through working, we learn... We will learn how to live in libertarian communism by living in it." People learn how to be free only by exercising freedom: "We are not going to find ourselves... with people ready-made for the future... Without the continued exercise of their faculties, there will be no free people... The external revolution and the internal revolution presuppose one another, and they must be simultaneous in order to be successful."

Direct action activities that arose from day-to-day needs and experiences represented ways in which people could take control of their lives. As feminists have learned, whether through consciousness-raising groups or in community organising, participation in such activities would have both internal and external effects, allowing people to develop a sense of competence and self-confidence while they acted to change their situation. Engagement of this sort empowered people and fortified them to act together again. Soledad described the effects of active participation in the movement on her life and on her friends: "It was an incredible life, the life of a young militant. A life dedicated to struggle, to knowledge, to remaking society. It was characterised by a kind of effervescence... It was a very beautiful youth, of cama-

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\* i.e. in Martha Ackelsburg's book - see back cover

is, of course, not the same as changing them. The complexities of the anarchist perspective on revolutionary change become clear when we examine the attempts of Spanish anarchists to deal with overcoming subordination in general and the subordination of women in particular. How would it come about that self-interested, disempowered people - and anarchists were quick to admit that people living in capitalist societies were hardly immune to the self-interest that those social and economic arrangements reinforce - would come both to recognise their own capacities and to direct their attentions to the needs of others? How were people to achieve the inner emancipation that would enable them to recognise their own worth and demand recognition from the larger society? How would they develop a sense of justice appropriate to living in an egalitarian society? And how would such a society generate continued commitment to its values? More specifically, if women's subordination is a product of social institutions, and if social institutions disempower those who would attempt to overthrow them, how are those institutions to be changed?

One of the defining characteristics of the communalist-anarchist tradition is the insistence that means must be consistent with ends. If the goal of revolutionary struggle is a non-hierarchical egalitarian society, then it must be created through the activities of a non-hierarchical movement. Otherwise, participants will never be empowered to act independently, and those who lead the movement will direct the post-revolutionary society. In the words of one participant in the civil war experience, "a la libertad sólo se llega por caminos libertarios" [one only achieves freedom through libertarian means]. As Kropotkin had written about the dilemmas of parliamentary socialists, "You thought you would conquer the State, but the State will end up conquering you."

But where existing practices disempower people, how are they to become empowered? The anarchist commitment to an egalitarian, non-hierarchical revolutionary process seems to require that people recognise their own abilities in order to participate. Successful anarchist revolution apparently depends on the prior achievement of what is perhaps the most complex aim of the revolutionary movement itself: popular empowerment.

The solution to this paradox is to be found in anarchist understandings of the revolutionary process. People are expected to prepare themselves for revolution (and for living in a communitarian society) by participating in activities and practices that are themselves egalitarian, empowering, and therefore transformative. There can be no hierarchy structured into the process of social change. The way to create a new society is to *create* new reality.

## ★ Direct action

We can best understand the Spanish anarchist perspective on empowerment

assume that they would be the basis for organisation and co-ordination in a transformed economy: "There are workers because there are bosses. Workerism will disappear with capitalism, and syndicalism with wages." Both Gustavo and Federica Montseny pointed to another tradition with a long history in Spain, the *municipio libre* (free commune): "Especially in agricultural villages, where the syndicalist solution is not appropriate even in a transitional sense, I reserve the right to pursue the revolution from the moment that we proclaim free communes throughout Spain, on the basis of the socialisation of the land and of all the means of production, placed in the hands of producers." Interestingly, these two women who argued for a more community-focused organisational base were also two of the more outspoken supporters of women's emancipation - although, to my knowledge, neither explicitly connected her concern for women's emancipation with this organisational focus on community as opposed to workplace. As we will see in chapter 2 (\*), community-based organising strategies were often more successful than workplace-based ones in addressing issues of concern to women and in galvanising women's participation.

Eventually, most theorists and CNT activists attempted to combine the *municipio libre* with the union, although the terms of the combination still tended to favour the syndical solution. Isaac Puente, for example, argued that the *municipio libre* in cities should actually be the local federation of unions. In rural areas, the town would hold everything within its boundaries as common property; the communal decision-making body would be composed of "everyone who works." The only ones exempted from this requirement would be the young, the sick, and the aged. This resolution, of course, based social and political rights on *economic* productivity, even in the "free commune."

As we will see in the next chapter (\*), to the extent that there was any resolution of questions of organisational structure and vision, it was achieved through the practice of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, rather than through theoretical debates in the press. It is important to note here that the Spanish movement differed from most other European working-class movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the place it accorded to activities and organisations that were not strictly union-based. The differences between the Spanish and other movements took on particular significance in the context of discussions about "woman's place."

Significantly, neither Montseny's nor Puente's discussion of the free commune mentioned women - or, for that matter, unemployed men. As for the latter, we might well be meant to assume that, in a properly ordered society, there would be no unemployment - except of those who refuse to work - and that refusal to participate in the common business would justify deprivation of political rights. Nevertheless, the position of women was much less clear, since these writers did not state whether both men and women would work (they make no mention of arrangements for childcare or child-rearing); whether they would count women's domestic work as work (but, then, would there be a "union" to certify that women are working properly in their homes?); or whether they simply did not expect to recognise women with small chil-

dren as full citizens. While Puente seemed to assume that all women would be workers, Mella addressed women as wives and daughters, rather than as workers: "Workers: your obligation is to throw yourselves into the struggle. Your wives will go with you, as they are no less slaves of the brutality of the bourgeoisie." Marañón argued that motherhood was incompatible with work (since motherhood was, or at least should be, a full-time occupation if done properly). Nevertheless, he argued that work was important for non-mothers, whom he seemed to treat as a special, even possibly abnormal, class of women.

## ★ Sexuality and the Subordination of Women

In fact, the lack of agreement on these issues is evidence of a divergence among anarchist writers not only about the place of women within working-class organisations, but also about the nature of women's subordination and of what would be necessary to overcome it. Mary Nash has suggested that two differing streams of thought about the nature of male-female relationships developed among Spanish anarchists during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One, drawing on the writings of Proudhon (and exemplified in Spain by Ricardo Mella), treated women essentially as reproducers who make their contribution to society in and through their role in the home. According to this view, what was necessary for women's emancipation was the revaluation of women's work in the home; her work outside the home must always be secondary to that of men. The second stream (similar to a Marxist perspective), which found theoretical roots in the writings of Bakunin (and was exemplified, at least in its productivist aspects, in the works of Isaac Puente), insisted that women were the equals of men and that the key to women's emancipation was their full incorporation into the paid labour force on equal terms with men. In this view, if women were to overcome their subordination, they would have to join the labour forces as workers and struggle in unions to improve the position of all workers. The official position of the CNT followed the latter view, though it should be noted that the acceptance of a *theoretical* commitment to women's equality in the workplace was no guarantee that the majority of CNT members would act in accordance with that commitment. As we will see in chapter 2 (\*), the practice of the movement rarely lived up to its stated beliefs in this regard.

Nevertheless, there were also those within the libertarian movement who insisted that organising women into unions - even if it were possible to do so - would not, in itself, be sufficient. In their view, the sources of women's subordination were broader and deeper than economic exploitation at the workplace. They argued that women's subordination was as much a cultural phenomenon as an economic one

stigmatised and vulnerable).

Nevertheless, many writers were not as sanguine as she was. At the very least, they recognised that doctrines of either free love or plural love would be much more complicated to apply in practice than in theory. Many writers, especially women, were quick to point out that few anarchists actually practiced what they preached when it came to equality for women. Soledad Gustavo noted, for example, that "a man may like the idea of the emancipation of women, but he is not so fond of her actually practicing it... In the end, he may desire the other's woman, but he will lock up his own."

In response to criticisms raised of Clara, the sexually emancipated female heroine of her novel *La Victoria*, Federica Montseny argued that the notion of a weak, adoring woman protected by a strong man, though appealing to some male anarchists, was hardly a libertarian vision. Very few women may have been ready to live according to, or even to conceive of, a free and unlimited mutual freedom. But "there [were] even fewer men capable of accepting her."

In Montseny's view, the fact that few Spanish women were morally ready for their emancipation, enslaved as they were by traditional attitudes and beliefs, presented a more serious problem than did male resistance to sexual and economic equality. Emma Goldman had argued that women needed internal emancipation to know their own value, respect themselves, and refuse to become psychic or economic slaves to their male lovers. But, Montseny lamented, Goldman gave no real guidance about how to achieve that liberation.

In the case of familial and sexual relations, as in the economic realm, the ideal was equality with difference. Both women and men should be free to develop and express their sexuality, inside or outside what we might now term a "committed sexual relationship." Both should be free to enter - and to leave - sexual relationships without bringing down on themselves social condemnation or ostracism. Families, too, should be egalitarian institutions - the unquestioned authority of the father ought to be replaced by reciprocity and mutual respect.

These, then, are the major components of the anarchist social vision - a society in which all people are respected equally and mutually, in the sexual as well as the economic and political realms, a society organised around people's contributions to the ongoing life of the community, in which there are no relations of domination and subordination and in which decisions must be made by all and acceptable to all. But how is that society to be achieved? How are the "new anarchist man and woman" to be created?

## ★ Revolutionary Transformation: Consistency of Means and Ends

Recognising the social construction of relations of domination and subordination

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\* i.e. in Martha Ackelsburg's book - see back cover

Malthus had argued, the poor were particularly hurt by unlimited reproduction. But with the availability of birth control, working people could replace "restraint" (of which Malthus did not believe the poor were capable) with birth control, which a conscious working class could use as a component of a strategy toward its liberation. With smaller families, workers' wages could sustain higher levels of health and strength. Limiting births could also lead to a smaller wage force, reduced unemployment, more power for workers, and even an end to wars.

Finally, in addition to making possible the separation of procreation and pleasure in the expression of sexuality, these new attitudes toward sexuality had important implications for anarchist understandings of love and marriage. Many anarchists had claimed that permanent monogamous marriage constituted a form of despotism, which required a virtual renunciation of self on the part of women, and that free love (by which they meant the right of both men and women freely to choose a sexual relationship without benefit of clergy or state and freely to end it when it was no longer mutually satisfying) was the only appropriate manifestation of the natural tendencies of both men and women. Some of these writers assumed that, even in an ideal society, existing differences between men and women with respect to sexuality would continue to exist or that new ones would emerge; others insisted that existing differences were largely the product of social conditioning. But all assumed that, whatever the source of those differences, both men and women would be able to experience their sexuality more fully and more satisfyingly in a society that accorded full equality to women.

Critiques of both chastity and monogamous marriage were common during the 1920s and 1930s, and numerous articles appeared advocating either free love or "plural love" in its place. Beyond arguing for free love, many anarchist writers insisted that monogamy itself was a product of the desire for possessiveness, rooted in private property and in the subordination of women, and that it would disappear in a future anarchist society. Amparo Poch y Gascón, who was to become one of the founders of *Mujeres Libres*, wrote in *Estudios* in 1934 that traditional notions of monogamy made a woman, "whether she was still in love or not, a permanent possession of the man to whom the church or the judge gave her." But, she argued, properly understood, monogamy "does not mean 'forever,' but as long as... the will and feelings of the lovers lasts." Furthermore, if women as well as men held such attitudes, all would be freer and more satisfied."

Maria Lacerda de Moura departed even further from accepted notions of monogamous love and marriage. "Love," she insisted, "has always been in open struggle with monogamy." In a truly egalitarian society, in which men and women were respected equally, monogamy would be replaced by plural love, the only form of sexual expression that would allow all people (in particular, women, who had been denied any sexual autonomy) the full growth, expression, and meeting of their sexual needs. By allowing both women and men to have more than one lover at a time, she insisted, plural love would eliminate most problems of jealousy, allow women to be truly free to choose their mate (or mates), and end prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women (since unmarried, sexually active women would no longer be

and reflected a devaluation of women and their activities mediated through institutions such as family and church. Thus, in an article revealing her understanding of the process of revolutionary change as it affected male-female relations, "Javierre" commented on reports from *Pravda* on the numbers of "new Soviet men" who had abandoned pregnant women: "Politics, alone, cannot make men morally ready for a common life... [These men] no more learned to be a man by Marxist baptism than they did by Christian baptism." Furthermore, at least some Spanish anarchist writers located woman's subordination in her reproductive role and in the double standard of sexual morality. These, too, would have to change - through the adoption of a new sexual morality and the widespread use of birth control - if women were to be fully equal partners in a revolutionary society.

Even this broader understanding was not without ambiguity. Kyralina (Lola Iturbe, the journalist who was to become an active supporter of *Mujeres Libres*) insisted on the need for an analysis and practice that took into account broader cultural phenomena. Yet her article "Anarchist Communism Will Liberate Women" reveals a belief, common to anarchist cultural critics early in the twentieth century, that the abolition of private property will lead to free love and the emancipation of women: "Only the reign of libertarian communism can provide a humane solution to the problem of women's emancipation. With the destruction of private property, this hypocritical morality will fall by the wayside, and we will be free... We will experience love with the complete freedom of our appetites, respecting all the various forms of amorous and sexual life."

For many anarchist writers and activists, a reorganization of sexual and family life and a reconstitution of women's roles were essential components of the revolutionary vision. In this attention to the "private" relations of family and sexuality, Spanish anarchists shared much both with nineteenth-century utopian socialists and with contemporary feminists. But there was more than one way to apply an anti-authoritarian analysis to sexual and familial relations. What was to be the structure and nature of families and family relations in a new anarchist society? And how was woman's social participation to relate to her familial or reproductive roles? Was the unquestioned authority of the husband/father in the family to be preserved, as Proudhon and his followers advocated, or was that authority, too, to be abolished and replaced with voluntary egalitarian relationships? Some Spanish anarchists apparently agreed with Proudhon; others advocated asceticism, opposed the use of alcohol and tobacco, and advocated monogamy or sexual chastity. The majority of writers who addressed this topic in the early years of the twentieth century, however, advocated gender equality and free love. This last group insisted that true freedom meant the full expression and development of all human capacities, including the sexual. To them, prevailing social ideals of chastity, monogamy, and fidelity reflected a legacy of Christian repression and would be replaced in an ideal anarchist society by free love and egalitarian family structures.

This latter position gained strength and legitimacy during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly as the works of Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and other sexologists began to be known. By the 1930s, Spanish anarchists - writing in such journals of

cultural criticism as *La Revista Blanca* and *Estudios* - were combining Freudian psychology, neo-Malthusian rhetoric, and doctrines of free love to develop a broad picture of the importance of sexuality and sexual emancipation to human development and, ultimately, to social revolution.

A plethora of contributors to *Estudios* during the 1930s argued for a new sexual ethics, one based on the positive value of sexuality and opposition to the double standard of sexual morality for men and women. These writers ridiculed anarchists who advocated chastity and the repressing of sexual urges. They insisted, to the contrary, that enforced abstinence led not only to the classic double standard (resulting in prostitution and the oppression of women) but also to stunted lives and, at worst, criminal behaviour. They argued, following Freud, that sexuality was a basic life force and an important component of both psychic and social health. Rather than repress sexual feelings or divert them into prostitution, the writers concluded, people should learn more about sexuality - and practice birth control.

Dr. Felix Marti-Ibáñez, the "dean" of anarchist writers on psychosexual health matters, outlined a new perspective on the place of sexuality in human life. First, he insisted on the importance of genital sexuality - for both men and women - as a component of human growth and development and of successful marriages. His articles rejected the church's view that marriage existed only for the perpetuation of the species, and he insisted, instead, that marriage must be understood as a way of life, voluntarily chosen by two people. Whether in a marital or a non-marital context, sex involved not just procreation, but recreation. Successful sexual relationships (whether marital or not) required a valuing and respecting of sexuality for both partners and a recognition that sexual union and satisfaction could be an end in itself, not just a means to produce children. Consequently, successful marriage would involve knowledge and use of birth control. His articles were intended both to articulate this new view of the place of sexuality in human life and to make information about birth control available to the proletariat.

Marti-Ibáñez further argued that a new understanding of sexuality was necessary. For too long, he said, sexuality had been confused with genitality. He criticised the practice of enforced chastity, arguing that it denied important human needs. At the same time, he insisted that sexual energy could be channelled in a number of different directions and need not necessarily be expressed through genital contact: "Let us recognise that *the genital-erotic impulses, the sexual act - is but one small part of the sexual, and that apart from this aspect, sexuality has many others (work, ideals, social or artistic creation, etc.)... Sexuality can express itself either erotically or through work in its various forms. Nevertheless, he asserted, if efforts to redirect sexual energy were not successful, neither young women nor young men should hesitate to have sexual experiences - as long as they did not assume that sex must be linked with love or that it required a woman to give up her sense of self or her sense of self-respect!*

Despite their calls for new and freer attitudes toward sexuality, however, virtually all these writers identified "normal sexuality" with heterosexuality. This identification was usually implicit rather than explicit - their discussions of sexuality assumed and

asserted the "normal" or "natural" attraction between people of the opposite sex. In his series on "Eugenics and Sexual Morality," Marti-Ibáñez did address himself explicitly to the question of homosexuality. In an article focused primarily on the history of attitudes toward homosexuality, he attempted to distinguish between "sexual inversion" ("congenital homosexuality") and "sexual perversion" (that practiced "voluntarily, out of snobbery or curiosity, or for utilitarian ends"). Despite his efforts to delineate the two types, the article acknowledged that it is often difficult to determine which cause is primary. Finally, he asserted that there was nothing immoral about homosexuality and, therefore, that homosexual behaviour should not be punished (any more than we would find it appropriate to punish a kleptomaniac who cannot help stealing!). At the same time, however, he made clear his belief that homosexuality was deviant and that homosexuals were "victims" of "sexual inversion."

Many writers recognised the potentially liberating impact of new attitudes toward sexuality for women. Abandonment of traditional attitudes toward chastity (which had always bound women much more strongly than men - apparently even in anarchist circles) would free women to explore and express their own sexuality. More specifically, many writers - both men and women - had viewed women's reproductive activity as the key to their subordination. As long as married women were subject to their husband's sexual desires (an aspect of marital relations that was apparently only rarely questioned at that time) and as long as there was no way to regulate fertility, women would be subject to the emotional, physical, and psychic drain of repeated childbirths and the managing of a large household. The disabilities fell most dramatically on women of the working class. The control of fertility, then, could be particularly liberating for women. Maria Lacerda de Moura, a frequent contributor to *Estudios* on issues of women and sexuality, criticised anarchist men who opposed the dissemination of birth control information among the working classes: "For them, a woman is just a fertile and inexhaustible womb, destined to produce bourgeois soldiers or, more accurately, red soldiers for the social revolution." On the contrary, she insisted, birth control could become a fundamental arm of the struggle for the liberation of women.

As had feminists and birth control advocates in the United States and in a variety of European contexts, Lacerda, Marañón, and other Spanish anarchists argued that both working-class families and individual working-class women suffered from the production of more children than a family could properly maintain and that the emancipation of women must also involve the choice of whether, when, and how often to become a mother. But they also insisted on the benefits of birth control for individual women: it could relieve women, both married and unmarried, of the fear of pregnancy and thus allow them to enjoy sexual relations more fully.

Some analysts took these arguments further, linking Malthusianism, birth control, and class analysis to articulate an anarchist neo-Malthusianism. Dr. Juan Lazarte argued that the meaning and consequences of pregnancy and birth varied with social class. Frequent pregnancies could be disastrous to a woman's health and also to the health and stability of a family already strapped for resources. And the more children a family had, the higher the rates of infant mortality. In short, as