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Mujeres Libres: Lessons on Anarchism and
Feminism from Spain's Free Women

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In Civil War-era Spain, amidst widespread political mayhem, a group of anarchist women disillusioned with the sexist and hypocritical attitudes of their male comrades created an organization that had women's best interest at heart. It was an organization that would rescue the fight for gender equality from the margins of the mainstream anarchist movement and place it at the center, striving to liberate women by means completely independent of the state. These women called themselves *Mujeres Libres*, meaning "free women" in Spanish, and their organization grew to mobilize tens of thousands of women during the three short years it was active. Today, a severe lack of literature exists on the movement, and it has faded into near complete obscurity in both academic and non-academic circles, especially those situated outside of Spain. In writing this paper, I aim to add to the small amount of accessible, existing literature on *Mujeres Libres* by arguing that this organization was a successful example of both anarchism and feminism in practice, and that contemporary feminists should see the framework and philosophy of *Mujeres Libres* as something to model their own women's liberation movement after. This paper is organized into three sections: 1) a brief historical background of *Mujeres Libres*; 2) the key features of *Mujeres Libres* that made this organization extremely effective in mobilizing 20,000 women in just three years and creating a community of action and inclusion; and 3) why *Mujeres Libres* and their practice of anarchy-feminism is pertinent to contemporary feminists and feminist movements. These sections will be followed by a brief summary of the arguments and concluding thoughts on the legacy of *Mujeres Libres*.

***Mujeres Libres*: A History**

It is rather important to understand the context in which *Mujeres Libres* emerged, since no social movement happens in a vacuum. *Mujeres Libres* was born out of the Spanish Civil War, beginning as a result of the fall of the Spanish monarchy in 1931 which was "replaced by a

democratically elected government dedicated to major social reforms.”¹ This new government promised a better life for the Spanish working class but was rebelled against by the political right, whose power it sought to decrease (the aristocracy, Catholic Church, militarists, the newly emerged fascists, etc.).² In 1936, the Nationalists, led by Francisco Franco, began military uprisings throughout Spain.³ The two main anarchist factions that arose within the working class effort to keep the Nationalists from seizing power were the anarcho-syndicalist group Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI), which formed as a way “to guard against reformism within the CNT, as well as to maintain its opposition to any ‘infiltration’ by other political forces.”⁴ Before the start of the Civil War, the CNT had already established anarchist organizations and programs designed to cater to the various needs of the Spanish working class, and by 1936 they “boasted a membership of approximately 850,000 members, organized into non-hierarchically structured unions, federated both by industry and by region.”⁵

Both the CNT and FAI consisted of male and female members, but female participants quickly recognized that they were not welcome in what was starting to seem like a boy’s club. Mercedes Comaposada, a former member of Mujeres Libres interviewed by Martha A. Ackelsberg for her book, *Free Women of Spain*, had been an active member of the CNT after she moved to Madrid to pursue her studies.⁶ At one point, when *compañeros* from the CNT invited

¹ "Spanish Civil War," The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, accessed March 18, 2016. <https://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/glossary/spanish-civil-war.cfm>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Geoff Bailey, “Anarchists In the Civil War,” International Socialist Review, accessed March 18, 2016. http://www.isreview.org/issues/24/anarchists_spain.shtml.

⁵ Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Free Women Of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40.

⁶ Ibid. 8.

her “to give a series of classes at the local union hall, she was appalled at the ways in which they treated the women.”⁷ Together, Comaposada and a fellow female CNT member, Lucia Sánchez Saornil, committed themselves “to educating and enculturating women, encouraging them to develop their full range of potential,” and within a few years, Mujeres Libres was born.⁸ The following section of this paper will discuss the aspects of Mujeres Libres that made it so successful in mobilizing women and creating a movement that was grounded in communitarian anarchist ideals.

Mujeres Libres and Mass Mobilization

Although Mujeres Libres was relatively short-lived, its ability to mobilize 20,000 women in just three years is a massive accomplishment.⁹ Although the reasons behind this outstandingly successful mobilization are numerous, there are three main ways in which this was achieved and sustained. The first is the organization’s efforts to raise the revolutionary consciousness of women and empower them through education. This education came dressed as a set of programs specifically for women, which consisted of two separate but equal goals: *capacitación* and *captación*.¹⁰ *Capacitación* referred to the concept of preparing women for revolutionary engagement, or “the content of the organization’s activities” while *captación* signified actively incorporating women into the liberation movement, or the ideological context of *capacitación*.¹¹ These programs could be described as a sort of consciousness-raising, although they went a bit further than the second wave United States feminist groups by the same name, helping women learn to read and preparing them to take part in the work force in addition to providing them with

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid. 115.

¹¹ Ibid.

information on motherhood and women's health, among other things.¹² The CNT and FAI both supported *captación* because it meant women's immediate involvement in the larger revolutionary movement, but the women of Mujeres Libres argued that most women were not ready to participate yet and needed *capacitación* before they reached that point.¹³

These programs were crucial in mobilizing women, for they provided them with the tools, skills, and knowledge they would need in order to take charge of their own empowerment. By imbuing women with the resources they needed to exit the realm of second-class revolutionaries and enter the larger anarchist movement knowing how to "struggle for themselves,"¹⁴ as former member Suceso Portales said in an interview with Ackelsberg, Mujeres Libres successfully resisted the tendency of male anarchists to sideline women's liberation as an achievement to be made after the revolution. Decades later, American radical feminist theorist and activist Roxanne Dunbar would level the same criticism towards the tendency of leftist radical men to marginalize women's liberation, writing "men make revolutions; women help."¹⁵ The women of Mujeres Libres were well versed in this unfortunate fact, and attempted to change it by creating a class of revolutionary women empowered by knowledge and able to "experience themselves as competent historical actors."¹⁶

The approach to oppression and struggle that Mujeres Libres took was also a major factor in how successful they were at mobilizing women. As opposed to isolating one cause responsible for the subjugation of women that occurred both inside and outside the anarchist movement, the women of Mujeres Libres saw an interdependent relationship between different means of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 116.

¹⁴ Ibid. 2.

¹⁵ Roxanne Dunbar, "Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution," accessed March 16, 2016. <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00087320/00001/1x>.

¹⁶ Ackelsberg. 115.

subordination.¹⁷ In this way, they leaned toward an intersectional approach, specifically one that is a way of “thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power,” as Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall wrote in 2013.¹⁸ While other radical movements have focused on patriarchy or class divisions as the root of oppression, or women’s oppression specifically, the women of Mujeres Libres “saw hierarchy, formalized authority, as an equally crucial problem.”¹⁹

While some intersectional approaches have been criticized for being too identity-focused and unintentionally divisive and static as a result,²⁰ the focus on power as opposed to identity allowed Mujeres Libres to acknowledge and respect differences between women, while still uniting them and mobilizing them under one organization. As Ackelsberg describes it, “this perspective led them to address people in a variety of contexts, including rural communities and urban barrios, as well as in workplaces.”²¹ This approach was so successful in part because it did not place one form of oppression above another, which has had an isolating effect in other feminist movements. For instance, during feminism’s second wave in the United States, radical feminists identified patriarchy as the main force behind women’s oppression.²² Unfortunately for women of color, this perspective did not take race into account, which they argued was an identity inseparable from that of ‘woman’ for them.²³ Radical black women’s movements and organizations like the Combahee River Collective were a result of this exclusion, making their

¹⁷ Ibid. 12.

¹⁸ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Leslie McCall. “Towards a Field of Intersectionality Studies,” *Signs* (2013): accessed March 9, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/publisher/ucpress>.

¹⁹ Ackelsberg. 12.

²⁰ Cho et al. 787.

²¹ Ackelsberg. 12.

²² *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, film. Directed by Mary Dore. Executive Producers: Pamela Tanner Boll and Elizabeth Driehaus. 2014.

²³ Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Theorizing Feminisms*, ed. Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. (Oxford University Press, 2006) 412.

priority the “development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.”²⁴ Because the women of *Mujeres Libres* took a similar approach to the one these black feminist groups took years later in the United States, they avoided making any women feel as though the oppression they experienced was not as important as someone else’s, relating them all back to the issue of power imbalances as a result of a hierarchically ordered society and unifying women under that shared struggle.

The third major way in which *Mujeres Libres* was successful in mobilizing so many women to join the revolution was a focus on the consistency of the means and ends in terms of achieving revolutionary goals. In other words, “there can be no hierarchy structured into the process of social change. The way to create a new society is to create a new reality.”²⁵ The women of *Mujeres Libres*, as well as participants in the larger anarchist movement, created groups and organizations like the *ateneos libertario* (storefront cultural center), which functioned as a school, recreational group, and a youth group for the younger working class.²⁶ These groups and this construction of a new reality were all grounded in the concept of direct action, meaning “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.”²⁷

This was an alternative to lobbying the government that allowed people to work in communities which were set up in the way that they would ideally be arranged after the revolution: horizontally and decentralized. By practicing their ideals instead of simply preaching them, *Mujeres Libres* and the rest of the Spanish anarchists were able to prove to themselves, and to everyone watching, that their revolutionary goals were possible to achieve. The *ateneos*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ackelsberg. 32.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

created “a community of people who believed that they could affect change in the world,” thus mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to take part in a movement that would not be easy, and even eventually endanger their lives as they fought in the war,²⁸ but one which they believed would (and could) create a better world grounded in egalitarianism, community, and gender equality.²⁹

Although these features of *Mujeres Libres* sustained it, and the larger anarchist movement, for some time, the organization unfortunately met its end as the Spanish Civil War came to a close. However, it is undeniable that *Mujeres Libres* was highly effective in mobilizing women to join in the anarchist revolution, empowering them through the educational processes of *capacitación* and *captación*, taking an intersectional and power-focused approach to understanding oppression which helped support inclusivity, and keeping the means and ends consistent by creating a new reality for participants in the movement. As part of my argument for the relevance of *Mujeres Libres* to today’s feminists, it is crucial to address the question of why anarchism matters as well. Is it not possible to accomplish the same impressive feats that *Mujeres Libres* did, without an anarchist influence? In the following section, I will discuss the crucial importance of anarchism in making *Mujeres Libres* as successful a women’s organization as it was, and why an anarchist perspective is valuable for feminism today.

The Inseparability of Anarchism and Feminism

Mujeres Libres would not have been as successful as it was if not for the fact that it was rooted in anarchist philosophy. While it may seem possible to take bits and pieces from *Mujeres Libres* and apply them to a contemporary feminist movement, in order to truly emulate their success there must be, at the very least, a strong anarchist critique or anarchist principles

²⁸ Ibid. 84.

²⁹ Ibid. 63.

providing the foundation. Anarchism, by definition, is critical of hierarchy and power, and rests on the belief that “freedom is grounded in the refusal of the individual to exercise power over others, coupled with the opposition of the individual to restrictions by any external authority.”³⁰ This critique benefited Mujeres Libres in that it allowed for a focus on the intersecting ways in which power affects women’s lives instead of the way their identities do, which had a positive effect on mobilization as mentioned in the previous section. Beyond mobilization, however, because “the feminist movement, with its central concern [being] the liberation of women, does not contain within itself the larger critique of power that is basic to anarchism,”³¹ an anarchist perspective could help make a contemporary feminist movement as effective at mobilizing, unifying, and making gains for women as Mujeres Libres was.

For instance, as L. Susan Brown writes in her book, *The Politics of Individualism*, using power to achieve feminist goals, or promoting the idea of a matriarchy as opposed to a patriarchy, is not inherently inconsistent with feminism. Well-known feminist theorists like Catharine MacKinnon have argued for this very solution, believing that simply turning the tables will bring about a better world for women.³² On the contrary, Mujeres Libres’s anarchist grounding made it so that simply altering who is in power was never a question, leading to the creation of the *ateneos* and other horizontally organized representations of the reality they wanted to build as opposed to more permanent, vertically organized institutions.³³ The women in Mujeres Libres as well as the larger CNT and FAI anarchist organizations believed that “hierarchies make some people dependent on others, blame the dependent for their dependency,

³⁰ L. Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* 184.

³³ Ackelsberg. 20.

and then use that dependency as a justification for the further exercise of authority.”³⁴ These organizations were established and run independently of the state, embodying the anarchist principle that real liberation will happen autonomously from the government, any government, as opposed to trying to make feminist gains through legal means such as reform or new legislation, or by replacing the men who currently hold political power with women.

Additionally, the importance *Mujeres Libres* placed on direct action was also heavily influenced by anarchist theory. While direct action is usually meant to describe protests and demonstrations, *Mujeres Libres* and the larger anarchist movement used direct action to describe the creation of the aforementioned independent, voluntary, and horizontally organized groups, which served the people’s interests and not the state’s.³⁵ To them, this was the most effective form of protest possible, especially in the context of the war and the political chaos in Spain. Indeed, one of the main reasons the *viejas* of *Mujeres Libres* did not get along with the new generation of Spanish feminists at the time of Ackelsberg’s study was because the *jóvenes* did not understand the significance of direct action and were unwilling to organize anything similar to what *Mujeres Libres* did.³⁶ The anarchist principle of working outside of the state and existing hierarchical structures by way of direct action, combined with a focus on women’s liberation, made up the core of *Mujeres Libres*. Therefore, the organization cannot be understood or emulated without a strong anarchist basis.

This is where the philosophy of anarcha-feminism becomes particularly relevant to our understanding of *Mujeres Libres* and what it has to offer contemporary feminists. Although it is a challenge to give anarcha-feminism a concrete definition, due to the lack of literature on the

³⁴ *Ibid.* 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 3.

subject, it is, as Marta Iniguez de Heredia puts it, “ultimately, a tautology.”³⁷ By this, she means that anarcha-feminism is essentially anarchism that attempts to put gender equality and women’s liberation at the forefront of the anarchist movement, forcing it to be more consistent with the theory it stems from.³⁸ Because anarchism is already critical of any and all hierarchical power structures, in theory it would also be critical of women’s inferior position to men in society. However, as we have seen, this is not usually the case in practice. So, in order to avoid the usual habit of “leaving these issues to be dealt with in the aftermath of the revolution,” anarcha-feminism keeps ‘feminism’ in its name and in its practice in order to make women’s liberation a pre-revolutionary priority, much like Mujeres Libres did with their *capacitación* programs.³⁹

Although it would seem that Mujeres Libres was a feminist organization by nature according to this definition, it is important to understand and respect that these women did not identify as feminists, who were perceived by members of Mujeres Libres as wanting to work against men and to substitute patriarchy with matriarchy.⁴⁰ Suceso Portales, as well as other women in Mujeres Libres, believed that “it’s necessary to work, to struggle, *together*, because if we don’t, we’ll never have a social revolution.”⁴¹ Though it is arguably a misconception that feminism, in any form, precludes women working with men to achieve liberation, this belief is nevertheless an important aspect of Mujeres Libres that must be acknowledged.

Even still, it is clear that Mujeres Libres is an example of anarcha-feminism at work, embodying anarchist ideals while putting women’s liberation as the first step to a revolution.

³⁷ De Heredia, Marta Iniguez. "History and Actuality of Anarcha-feminism: Lessons from Spain." Libcom. June 25, 2012. Accessed March 18, 2016. <https://libcom.org/library/history-actuality-anarcha-feminism-lessons-spain-marta-iniguez-de-heredia>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ackelsberg. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Despite disbanding at the end of the Spanish Civil War, *Mujeres Libres* left behind a template through which we can see the benefits of a feminism grounded in anarchism, and an anarchism held accountable for its claim of absolute equality by feminism. While contemporary feminists should look to *Mujeres Libres* for possible solutions to the problems of inclusivity, mobilization, and taking direct action, they should not separate the feminist goals from the anarchist ones. For, as is the case by definition, feminism is inherent in anarchism, and anarchism without feminism is simply incomplete.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Libertad

Today, years after the founding members of *Mujeres Libres* have passed, another large-scale feminist movement has emerged in Spain. This movement, whose members call themselves *los indignados*, came as a response to a structural adjustment in which education, health care, and various social services were subject to cutbacks.⁴² Despite its different origins, the movement echoes *Mujeres Libres* in several ways, one of which being its diverse composition. “Green tides (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages), yellow tides (education) violet tides (equality and gender equity),” and several other groups related to social services, culture, forced migration, and even bike pickets all joined together under the name *indignados*.⁴³ Their direct action comes in the form of protests and civil disobedience, blocking the Catalan Parliament on the day in which the first cutbacks were scheduled to be made in 2011.⁴⁴ In 2013, feminists of all genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and classes “situated a feminist vision at the heart of their resistance to austerity, embodying their claims and proposals in a body crisscrossed by

⁴² Joana García Grenzer, “Indignant Feminisms in Spain: Placing the Body before Patriarchal and Capitalist Austerity,” *Signs* (2014): 60, accessed March 18, 2016.

<https://www.instructure.com/courses/1005200/files/?preview=34473912>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

inequalities.”⁴⁵ In what feels like a direct quote from any member of Mujeres Libres, the battle cry of *los indignados* is, “The revolution will be feminist, or it will not be.”⁴⁶

Though by no means a fully anarchist movement, there is certainly something remarkable about the parallels that can be drawn between *los indignados* and Mujeres Libres. Regardless of whether or not *los indignados* are trying to emulate Mujeres Libres, their ability to mobilize and include a diverse range of people, in addition to their call for a revolution that prioritizes feminism, is reminiscent of the 20,000 dedicated anarchist women who arguably fought harder for women’s liberation in Spain than anyone else at that time. Presumably, though the *viejas* interviewed by Ackelsberg were disapproving of the feminist movement of the *jóvenes* at the time, if they were alive today they might feel differently about *los indignados*.

Ultimately, the story of Mujeres Libres is one of optimism, not failure. This organization paved the way for movements like *los indignados*, demonstrating extraordinary creative capacity and the ability to turn what most people dismiss as unrealistic into reality. It is a shame that their remarkable success at mobilizing women and creating a community of inclusion, action, and empowerment goes largely unrecognized by the world outside of Spain today, as these are features of any strong, effective social movement. Despite its brief existence, contemporary feminist activists cannot afford to brush aside the accomplishments of this phenomenal organization and the model they left us to learn from any longer. Mujeres Libres showed the world that feminism is not only compatible with anarchism, but a necessary part of it. Maybe it is time for us to acknowledge that the reverse might be true as well.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid.