



THE WOMEN  
of  
SPAIN

ANARCHISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR  
THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Martha A. Ackelsberg

IISG/EG Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis,  
Amsterdam, Emma Goldman Archive  
IISG/FAI Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis,  
Amsterdam, Archivo FAI-CP  
NYPL-EG New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts  
Division, Emma Goldman Papers  
NYPL-RP New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts  
Division, Rose Pesotta Papers

Puño en alto mujeres de Iberia  
hacia horizontes preñados de luz  
por rutas ardientes,  
los pies en la tierra  
la frente en lo azul.

Afirmando promesas de vida  
desafiemos la tradición  
modelemos la arcilla caliente  
de un mundo que nace del dolor.

¡Que el pasado se hunda en la nada!  
¡Que nos importa del ayer!  
Queremos escribir de nuevo  
la palabra MUJER.

Puño en alto mujeres del mundo  
hacia horizontes preñados de luz,  
por rutas ardientes  
adelante, adelante  
de cara a la luz.

Fists upraised, women of Iberia  
toward horizons pregnant with light  
on paths afire  
feet on the ground  
face to the blue sky.

Afirming the promise of life  
we defy tradition  
we mold the warm clay  
of a new world born of pain.

Let the past vanish into nothingness!  
What do we care for yesterday!  
We want to write anew  
the word WOMAN.

Fists upraised, women of the world  
toward horizons pregnant with light  
on paths afire  
onward, onward  
toward the light.

Mujeres Libres' Anthem  
Lucia Sanchez Saornil  
Valencia 1937

# I

## ANARCHIST REVOLUTION AND THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN

When the Republic came, many people went to storm the prisons to free the prisoners, and I went, too. There was some guy there shouting, "Abajo la politica! [Down with politics!] Abajo la Guardia Civil! [Down with the Civil Guard!] . . . all sorts of abajos." And then he yelled, "Viva la anarquia!" [Long live anarchy]. And I thought, "Aha, here is an anarchist." This was my first encounter with an anarchist—and he did not look like he was a terrible person. He had a good face.

—Soledad Estorach

People would say to us, "Were you children baptized?" and we would say to them, "We weren't baptized." "How terrible, what girls! Such beautiful children"—because we were six handsome sisters (I mean from the standpoint of health) and one brother—"being brought up without God, you are like dogs!" And we would say, "No, you are the ones who are like dogs, that you need a master."

—Enriqueta Rovira

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

### ABBREVIATIONS

- AIT Asociación Internacional de Trabajadores (International Workingmen's Association), Anarchist International
- AJA Asociación de Jóvenes Antifascistas (Antifascist Youth Association), sponsored by the Communist Party
- AMA Asociación de Mujeres Antifascistas (Antifascist Women's Association)
- BOC Bloc Obrer i Campesol (Workers' and Peasants' Bloc)
- CENU Consell de l'Escola Nova Unificada (New Unified Educational Council)
- CNT Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labor), anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation
- FAI Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
- FIJL Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias (Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth), anarchist youth organization
- JLL Juventudes Libertarias (Libertarian Youth), another name for FIJL
- PCE Partido Comunista de España (Spanish Communist Party)
- POUM Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers' Party of Marxist Unity), Trotskyist
- PSOE Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)
- PSUC Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña (Catalan Unified Socialist Party)
- SIA Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista (International Antifascist Solidarity), anarchist-affiliated international relief organization
- UGT Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union), Socialist-affiliated trade union federation
- AHN/SGC-S Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Guerra Civil, Salamanca
- AMB Archivo Municipal, Barcelona
- AMHL Archivo, Ministerio de Hacienda, Lérida
- IISG/CNT Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam, Archivo CNT

ing class," their own identity as working-class women disappeared. Similarly, when black or Jewish women in the United States are forced to choose between a loyalty to their ethnic-cultural group or by other women) cultural group, their own identities are denied. It is not surprising in this context that many working-class or ethnic minority women in the United States are wary of "the feminist movement," even though they may express support for many feminist goals. Individualist appeals deny or demean the bonds that working-class or ethnic minority people feel toward one another. It appears that the promise of individual achievement and fulfillment is to be won at the cost of abandoning group identity and solidarity.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, these appeals divide working-class women (whether white or of color) from middle-class white women by denying the separate reality of each situation.

No one should be forced to choose among aspects of her or his identity as the price for political or communal belonging. We are each whole beings, capable of multiple commitments to a variety of collectivities. Those commitments enrich our lives and empower us. Although, as in the case of *Mujeres Libres*, they are often labeled "divisive," they need not be so. In fact, multiple commitments are divisive only in the context of communities that make claims to exclusive loyalty. If we can move away from prevailing hierarchical patterns, in which one sort of commitment is conceived as primary or superior, and acknowledge that each of us has a variety of commitments of different intensities to different groups—the importance of which may change over time—then we can begin to create communities that recognize those commitments and do not make exclusive claims on our loyalties. Perhaps we can then claim for ourselves the legacy *Mujeres Libres* struggled so hard to create.

We took the first steps . . . toward emancipation, first steps that have been taken up by women's liberation movements of today. They were first steps; we couldn't take the "giant steps," because of the war and the exile, which cut our struggle short. . . . Now, the world has changed. . . . Our children have to be the pacesetters for the future. But our memories, such beautiful memories, of that struggle so hard and so pure. . . . Is it possible that it has been of some use?<sup>42</sup>

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 labor 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 recognizing 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.<sup>43</sup> 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-sindicalist movement both to challenge the movement to fulfill 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-sindicalist theory and practice. In this chapter, I examine the works of Spanish anarchist writers and others in the “communist anarchist” tradition who provided the theoretical grounding of the Spanish anarcho-sindicalist 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—the 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 contextualization 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-sindicalism at the time and constituted both a critique and extension of Spanish anarcho-sindicalist theory and practice.

I focus here on Spanish anarcho-sindicalist 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-sindicalist 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.

### Domination and Subordination

Anarchist visions are politically, socially, and economically egalitarian. Politically and socially, an anarchist society is a society without govern-

United States, for example, many of the collective strategies the women proposed to address the isolation and discrimination they experienced as women were open only to other middle-class women like themselves. They ignored the extent to which their programs relied on the continued exploitation of working-class women.<sup>39</sup> Over time, feminism came to be identified with the goal of access to, rather than fundamental restructuring of, existing hierarchies of privilege.

In the contemporary United States, protest groups have argued that prevailing conceptions of politics are biased not only along class and gender lines but also along lines of racial-ethnic identity, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. The “universal citizen” of liberal democratic theory is not only an upper-class male, but also a white, able-bodied, heterosexual family head.<sup>40</sup> In treating all people as mere bearers of interests, liberal democratic individualism masks structures of power and, in particular, relations of domination and subordination that affect people (and structure their “interests”) as members of subnational collectivities.

At the same time, the individualist paradigm provides little or no place for the conscious articulation of interests and perspectives deriving from differing cultural, ethnic, religious, or gender backgrounds. That paradigm treats these either as generating different “interests” around which individuals may gather or, more commonly, as occasions for oppression or discrimination, on the basis of which members of particular groups are denied equal access to social goods. But being a part of a collectivity is not simply a matter of experiencing oppression as a member of that collectivity. To say that blacks, women, gays, Jews, Muslims, or the disabled are discriminated against (or disadvantaged) in a system that takes the normative citizen to be a white, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied male should not deny that there are positive characteristics and values that members of those groups have developed—even if they have developed them partly in response to their oppression. Liberal individualism would “wash out” all those differences in the name of universal citizenship. Marxist socialism would wash out all but those based on class in the name of the workers’ revolution. Similarly, some radical feminists would wash out all but those based on gender, in the name of “sisterhood.” But those who are now finding strength in their identities as members of one or more of these collectivities are rightly unwilling to abandon them as the price of fully inclusive citizenship.

The challenge is to develop a conception of politics and political life that moves beyond both individualism and a narrow class or gender analysis. Such a reconceptualization must recognize people not as bearers of interests, but as participants in a variety of communities that contribute important components to their identity. When French socialist women were forced to choose between “women” and “the work-

cultural struggle and community-based organizing. Much current protest politics in the United States, beginning with the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1950s and 1960s and including education, tenant organizing, ecological, and antinuclear protests, has been based on nonunion organizational forms: neighborhood or community groups, racial-ethnic cultural communities, and coalitions formed around shared political/social concerns.

Feminists have added another dimension to this critique of liberal democratic politics, pointing out that our conceptions (and practices) of politics have gender as well as class encoded into them. When "the political" is defined as those matters which take place in some public sphere, allegedly separate from (and superior to) the private or domestic sphere, the concerns of many women and men are defined as outside of politics; the political nature of their activities is denied or made invisible. Carole Pateman has noted in *The Sexual Contract*, for example, that the subordination of women was not problematized in liberal political theory. Since, she argues, the assumption of these theories is that women are related to society through men, women's exclusion from the social contract has barely been noticed. Her claim, I believe, is related to my earlier one that when women are seen totally in terms of their "specificity," the actual concerns of real women are often neglected. Entire dimensions of human concern and collective action are thus devalued, and the community as a whole is diminished.<sup>38</sup>

In highlighting the collective nature of the oppression that both men and women experienced as members of the working class, Mujeres Libres insisted that liberation from oppression required collective action and could only be evaluated according to collective norms: success could not be defined as individual women making it in the political or corporate world. Hierarchical structures had to be abolished, and women had to be involved both in that process and in the creation of the new society. Issues of class and gender must be addressed simultaneously.

Many feminists (both in Spain and elsewhere in Europe and in the United States) share an aspect of that insight, arguing that women are oppressed as a group and can redress their grievances only through collective action. The class component of the analysis, however, has all too often been neglected. This neglect resulted in feminism becoming identified with the efforts of women to achieve favored positions in existing hierarchical institutions and organizations. There have been exceptions, of course—working-class women's suffrage organizations in Great Britain, efforts to organize socialist feminist groups in France. "material feminists" in the United States who attempted to assert control over the so-called domestic sphere. But many of these were ultimately unable to sustain the joint focus on gender and class issues. As Dolores Hayden argues with respect to material feminists in the

ment, without institutionalized hierarchical relationships or patterns of authority. Anarchists claim that people can organize and associate themselves on the basis of need, that individuals or small groups can initiate social action, and that centralized political coordination 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 nondominating 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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. Organization, 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.<sup>4</sup>

Anarchists argue in response that formal hierarchies are not only harmful but unnecessary and that there are alternative, more egalitarian ways in which to organize 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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 civilization which, by educating men and women separately and distinctly, makes of the woman a slave and of her compañero a ferocious tyrant."<sup>8</sup>

Spanish anarchists, like contemporary feminists, argued that the exercise of power in any institutionalized form—whether economic, political, religious, or sexual—brutalizes 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.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the exercise of power by some disempowers others.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

Anarchists, therefore, oppose *permanente* 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."<sup>14</sup>

United States? Although *Mujeres Libres'* explicit focus vis-à-vis other leftist movements was gender, its experience offers us the model of an independent, but nonseparatist, strategy for dealing with diversity.

Specifically, beyond a focus on empowerment and on the incorporation of differences, the history of *Mujeres Libres* points to the importance of a community of orientation in the process of consciousness-change. Feminists and socialists, as well as anarchists, have argued that truly meaningful political participation can take place only within a more or less egalitarian, mutually respectful political community. But the question remains, What kind of community meets those criteria? *Mujeres Libres* identified itself not with other women's organizations, but with the libertarian movement.

Feminists, workers, and people of color have argued repeatedly in the contemporary context that we need subcommunities of people like ourselves in order to feel validated and valuable in our specificity.<sup>35</sup> *Mujeres Libres* insisted that however important and necessary these subcommunities might be, they are, in the end, insufficient and partial. No one group by itself can provide the sole basis for a movement to transform society. A movement must incorporate many such collectivities under a larger umbrella that respects the differences among them, values the particular contributions each group has to offer to the whole, and can take advantage of the power that comes from unified action. Concepts of difference and diversity can provide us with new ways of thinking about the constitution of empowering communities. I will end by focusing on two related aspects of *Mujeres Libres'* legacy: the challenge to the gendered and class-biased construction of "the political" and the beginnings of a conceptualization of a politics of diversity.

Critics of liberal democratic politics point to the class bias built into the structure and very conceptualization of politics. As E. E. Schattschneider once put it, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."<sup>36</sup> Poor and working-class people are disproportionately underrepresented among those who participate in politics, and they are fundamentally disadvantaged in the outcomes. As generations of critics have noted, the "rules of the game" of liberal democracy—the emphasis on isolated individuals with independently constructed interest profiles—benefit those already in power and prevent others from recognizing their differing needs, let alone articulating and struggling for them in the political arena.<sup>37</sup> Politics, as both Marxists and anarchists insist, is not simply about the distribution of positions in a "political opportunity structure." It is about the structuring of power in the society as a whole. Thus Marxists and, more especially, anarchists have insisted on the practice of widespread popular participation in a variety of forums. Marxists focused primarily on unions and workers' parties; Spanish anarchists added

While the variations among these groups are significant, we can see them contributing to the development of an emerging perspective on difference. Such a perspective rejects the notion of woman (or person of color, or worker) as "other," insisting that we must de-center the dominant definitions, understandings, and institutions and make room to claim and validate a variety of perspectives. It insists on locating women within collectivities, while recognizing that many, if not most, women are located within a variety of collectivities, not just one. It therefore refuses the choice so many political women have had to confront between solidarity with other women and solidarity with their class or racial-ethnic group. At the same time it affirms the multilayered character of women's (and of all people's) identities. It would replace a politics of difference, in which all are defined relative to one norm, with a politics of diversity, which recognizes and validates distinct ways of being without ranking them according to some hierarchically defined norm.<sup>33</sup> Those in *Mujeres Libres* who affirmed the importance of a "women's perspective" in the anarchist movement, and those of our own day who insist on hearing women's "different voices," all urge women to value their particular strengths. At the same time, they insist that society as a whole would be better off if many of those characteristics were more widely shared.

We must challenge the hierarchical ranking of the dominant value system and begin to conceptualize a society (or movement) in terms of diversity, rather than of differences from one particular norm (however it may present itself as "universal"). Such a perspective underlies the calls by Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Frye, and others for feminists to confront racism, heterosexism, and class oppression within the women's movement and within the society at large.<sup>34</sup> It is also one way to understand what *Mujeres Libres* was attempting in its insistence on a separate status. One approach to de-centering the male-defined norms of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements, they seemed to be arguing, was to incorporate into that movement another organization with a different set of valued characteristics.

*Mujeres Libres'* very existence, then, was a form of direct action. The incorporation of *Mujeres Libres* into the libertarian movement as a fully equal organizational partner would have challenged the normativeness of male-defined visions, not only of women and their capabilities, but also of the range of human nature and, more generally, of the possibilities of a truly egalitarian society.

### Toward a New Conception of Politics

What lessons can we draw from *Mujeres Libres* that might contribute to contemporary feminist and participatory democratic politics in the

### 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 organize 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 coordination, to sexuality and male-female relations, and to those ongoing systems of education and socialization that make it possible for a society to perpetuate itself over time.

In place of inequality as a basis of organization, 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 nonauthoritarian 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.<sup>15</sup> Yet Spanish anarchists were firmly rooted in the *communitarist*-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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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 nonhomogeneous 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.<sup>19</sup>

The limits of the Spanish anarchist vision become clear as we examine their understandings of the basic constituents of social organization. Most Spanish anarchist writers located economic relationships at the center of their vision, insisting that the basic principle of social organization must be economic, rather than political. Economic relationships must be as nonhierarchical 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 labor is collaborative and it is virtually impossible to assign value to an individual's contribution to a collective task.<sup>20</sup>

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 organization of that society might look like. For communalist anarchists, society was best conceived as a series of voluntary associations that, while recognizing individual autonomy, could still provide for the overall coordination essential to freedom and justice. Social order was to be achieved through the voluntary cooperation of locally based, decentralized 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, that functioned efficiently to provide services to people without the intervention of some higher authority.<sup>21</sup>

This central focus on economic structures, however, particularly in a society characterized by a sharp sexual division of labor, raised serious questions for women. How would women be involved? Would a new societal challenge and overcome the sexual division of labor? 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 organization effectively belied the anarchist insistence

anarcho-syndicalist movement could only be enriched by incorporating it.

Mujeres Libres demanded of its members that they see themselves as fully capable social beings and act accordingly. Its programs of education, consciousness-raising, and apprenticeship provided opportunities for women to educate themselves and to develop skills in organizing, public speaking, and building self-esteem—skills they would need to act effectively in mixed-sex organizations. Female solidarity as a context for changing consciousness was essential to the capacitacion for which they aimed. The separation Mujeres Libres insisted on was strategic and temporary—necessary only until sufficient numbers of women had developed the requisite skills and self-confidence that they could then rely on their numbers and the force of their arguments and personalities to influence the mainstream organizations from within. Until then, Mujeres Libres would stand as a kind of direct-action reminder of the significance of gender to the movement.

#### From "Difference" to "Diversity"

This review of Mujeres Libres' analysis and experience returns us to an earlier question: What difference should differences make? Neither Mujeres Libres nor contemporary feminist theorists have articulated a methodology for distinguishing between those differences which are temporary, socially constructed manifestations of women's social and political subordination and those particularities which, although they might now be rooted in relations of domination, are worth valuing and retaining in a future society, either as special characteristics of women or as characteristics of both men and women. The early feminist tendency to deny the significance of differences has, in fact, been replaced more recently by a counter-tendency to emphasize them, although feminists have never agreed on what those differences might be.

A number of significant common themes emerge from contemporary feminist efforts to deal with differences. Feminists inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and literary deconstructionists have focused on patterns of cultural dominance and subordination, as well as the resistance expressed in "submerged discourses."<sup>22</sup> They suggest that we resist to attend not only to differences between women and men, but also to different orientations to life and politics that are captured under the rubric of gender and then ascribed differentially to women and men. Others focus on the particular life and social circumstances of women (or members of the working class) that generate different orientations to politics and social life.<sup>23</sup> Still others have adopted methodologies focusing on the development (or blocks to development) of subnational collective or communal identities, which may generate cultural and political perspectives different from the dominant norm.<sup>24</sup>

the new justice. There cannot be a just society unless masculine and feminine are present in equal proportions.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the writer seemed to be discussing the incorporation of a special perspective that women bring to political/social life. Another article in the same issue, which addressed problems of food distribution in the republican zone, made the case even more explicitly:

The bars and restaurants of the rich and propertied must be controlled by workingmen (*obreros*) or, better, by working women (*obreras*) because it is women and mothers who know what it is not to have milk for a weak or sick child, meat for a husband tired out from hard work in war industries. . . . Control of food must be in the hands of community women.<sup>28</sup>

Such arguments can easily slide into, or reinforce, assumptions about some "eternal female" characteristics. *Mujeres Libres* was not completely immune to such constructions, despite the anarchist insistence on the social construction of personality and of sexuality. Many articles in the journal seemed to presume the existence of some timeless notion of "femininity," omitting any reference to its social construction. Others focused on the particular hardships women faced as mothers, and took it for granted that women would be the ones most affected by what happened to their children.

As an organization, *Mujeres Libres* did not articulate a definitive position about the differences between men and women, what their sources were, or which of them ought to be retained and revalued in the revolutionary society. At times, *Mujeres Libres* seemed to agree with Emma Goldman and Federica Montseny, who had ridiculed feminist claims that women were morally superior to men. Given the opportunity to exercise power over others, Goldman and Montseny had insisted, women would be just as likely as men to abuse it. Their writings, and those of Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Amparo Poch, implied that any existing differences in attitude or perspective between men and women were rooted in societal oppression and would disappear in a more egalitarian society.

More commonly, however, *Mujeres Libres* seemed to assume that women were somehow different from men, that those differences had not found full articulation in the existing oppressive society, and that a fully egalitarian anarchist society would incorporate the female along with the male. Although *Mujeres Libres* did not develop an analysis of these differences comparable to that which has since been articulated by contemporary feminist "difference theorists,"<sup>29</sup> the group attempted both to revalue those differences and to develop a strategy for incorporating them into a newly organized society. Whatever the source of women's higher levels of concern for children and for morality in the social-political arena, they argued, that perspective was valuable. The

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 organizations 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.<sup>22</sup> Unions would be coordinated 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 nonworkers (including children, the unemployed, old people, the disabled, and nonworking 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 coordinating 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 assume that they would be the basis for organization and coordination in a transformed economy: "There are workers because there are bosses. Work-erism will disappear with capitalism, and syndicalism with wages."<sup>23</sup> 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 socialization of the land and of all the means of production, placed in the hands of producers."<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, these two women who argued for a more community-focused organizational 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 organizational focus on community as opposed to workplace. As we will see in chapter 2, community-based organizing strategies were often more successful than workplace-based ones in addressing issues of concern to women and in galvanizing 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 favor 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-