

Unit 16

Spain: Culture, education, women and sexuality

This Unit aims to

- Examine attitudes toward women in 1930s Spain.
- Look at the approaches of the anarcho-syndicalists to women's emancipation.
- Review the anarcho-syndicalist approach to culture, education and sexuality.
- Highlight the importance of the social dimension to the revolutionary struggle in Spain.

Terms and abbreviations

CNT: Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour) Anarcho-syndicalist union.

FRE: Federaci3n Regional Espa1ola (Spanish Regional Federation).
The Spanish region of the First International

FTRE: Federaci3n del Trabajadores Regional Espa1ola (Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region)

Introduction

As introduced in Unit 15, social and cultural issues were at the core of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain, right from the start of the first anarchist unions in the early 1870s. The level of discussion - and disagreement - on topics such as education and sexuality was high around the turn of the Century, as Spain took the first faltering steps towards modernisation. Anarcho-syndicalists were outspoken in their opposition to both the intransigent traditionalist right, often backed by the Catholic Church, and the liberal bourgeois lobby, which held education as the basis for modernising the country. By the 1930s, the CNT had developed an integrated and sophisticated revolutionary culture of free expression, along with an impressive number of local social and educational facilities.

The task was massive. For several hundred years leading up to the late 19th Century, it was the Church that held the stranglehold on Spain's education system. It preached that liberalism - let alone socialism or any type of egalitarianism - were the works of the Devil, a sin to be avoided at all costs. The moral position and educational stance of the Catholic Church was so important that any movement that tried to alter educational provision incurred its full wrath. As a major landowner and source of great wealth and power, this meant very considerable consequences for anyone who questioned its authority, teachings or methods.

In 1899, a group of Spanish bishops declared that political liberalism, pluralism and the questioning of Catholic doctrine were questionable if not downright demonic, stating:

"We repudiate all those liberties of perdition, offspring of the so-called new rights, or liberalism, the application of which to the government of our fatherland is the source of so many sins, and which leads us to the brink of the abyss".

The Catholic Church was still hankering after a unified empire, was steeped in nationalism and patriotism, and was in constant fear of ultimate decline into some vague notion of liberal, leftist chaos. As Spain stumbled on through an early 20th Century peppered with coups and experiments with parliamentarianism (see Unit 15), the Church expanded its attack to include an ever wider repertoire of social malaises.

A Catholic Action document of 1929 declared:

“The diocesan committees shall procure: 1. The destruction of the social evils of ignorance of Christian doctrine, indifference and irreligiosity; blasphemy, both spoken and written; the profanation of feast days; evil publications; insubordination; indecency in dress, cinemas and other entertainments; pauperism and emigration. 2. The promotion of social well-being by the careful nurturing of religion, morality, obedience to the Church; respect for authority; charity towards the poor; religious instruction of the populace. The local committee shall stimulate the zeal of priests, religious and lay people to: 1. The extirpation of social evils everywhere. 2. The defence of the sacred interests of religion, the family, authority, private property and the poor.”

As the pressure for change grew, the Church clung closer to strict hierarchy: the question of the indissoluble nation was increasingly critical to maintaining the sacred unity of Spain under strict Catholicism. The Catholic monarchy had ‘unified’ Spain, and this had led directly to the conquest of America from 1492 onwards. As they saw it, Spain was therefore defined by Catholicism, and would be lost completely without it. Certainly, it is no exaggeration, to state that the power of the Church in all areas, including education and social mores, was immense. This also covered areas of sexual morality, as we shall see below.

Women, liberation, and early anarcho-syndicalism

Women’s emancipation struck a chord with anarcho-syndicalists, liberals and radicals alike from the late 18th Century. Certainly, for the anarcho-syndicalists, this interest never waned, quite the opposite. Ideas developed and became steadily more complex and intricate, especially in the first three decades of the 20th Century, as anarcho-syndicalists built mass organisations and enrolled women in them.

The topics and ideas developed were wide-ranging and, by contemporary Spain’s standards, extremely radical. Not only were the rather more economic issues of women’s liberation discussed, but also questions of free love, monogamy, sexuality and women’s empowerment were debated from early on, as criticisms developed of society’s unequal treatment of the sexes. The commonly held ideas on the supposed inferiority of women were sharply attacked. For example, one contemporary anarchist, writing in the 1910s, criticised the male sense of superiority and declared that *“[t]his desire to believe that woman is seen as inferior to man is not acceptable in the times that we are approaching”*. He also criticised the false morality whereby men could entertain sexual relationships with more than one woman but not vice versa.

A lot of discussion on the subject of gender roles was also undertaken in the context of issues of the workplace, especially as the ideas of anarchism were put into practice in the growing anarcho-syndicalist organisations from the beginning of the 20th Century. This drew partly on the growth of feminism in Spain from the mid-1800s. Early feminism was mainly bourgeois, however, and reflected the concerns of other middle-class feminists in the United States and Britain. For example, a demand, which was often voiced by early feminists, was the desire to gain the right to vote, an objective that anarchists did not deem to be of capital importance beyond the general principle of ‘equality’. In addition to making this basic democratic demand, which was, nevertheless, fiercely contested, many Spanish feminists displayed values which were conservative and which did little to attempt to adjust the order of male supremacy. Early feminists were careful to assure their opponents and those who were concerned about the demands of feminism that the ‘new woman’ would not be any less respectful, no less feminine and no less delicate. As one historian has put it, they insisted that man should not be afraid;

“he will not lose his rights, his prerogatives, no-one will dispute his commanding position. Quite simply...if the woman is more educated, their children in the long run will gain from it as will men.”

While conservative and liberal feminists fought for the right for women to education and to the vote, the early organisations of the International fought on a different level. Seeing the right to vote as a mere cosmetic solution, the anarchist-influenced FRE and FTRE (see Unit 15) all attempted to assess the roots of capitalist social relations which produced inequality between men and women. Rather than relying on a corrupt parliamentarian system, they then demanded extensive change in all walks of life.

The FRE (Federación Regional Española) was in part constituted by some women’s groups such as that from Cadiz, from its initial founding Congress in 1870. However, at this point, the development of a libertarian perspective on women’s liberation still had some way to go. For example, a motion was passed at the Congress whereby the organisation agreed that “everything would be done in order to free the woman from all work which was not domestic”, an objective that was not at all radical. One delegate claimed he was happy to see so many women present in the congress but also stated:

“I believe that woman has not been born to work but that she has a moral and hygienic mission to fulfil in the family, bringing up the children and bestowing upon the family her talents and love. In present-day society, if she works in the workshops, she competes with men, so increasing poverty from which corruption and prostitution are born. Our oppressors ignobly take advantage of this.”

Another delegate argued that women and children had been employed by the bourgeoisie as an attempt to exploit workers further. This apparent inability of the FRE to break completely and consistently with the sexual culture of the time is unfortunate. However, the solution to this rather shaky start lay within the ideas and tactics of the early anarcho-syndicalists, and they were able to revise their stance in the light of experience.

Already, by the following year, the September 1871 FRE conference agreed a vision of the family based on “love, liberty and equality”. The discussion was preceded by an article in the paper “La

Emancipación”, which criticised the double standards of the bourgeoisie in affording men sexual excursions outside marriage but not women. The tone of debate within FRE was now certainly progressive, although still participating in ideas current in the period, about women “fulfilling the function that nature has assigned to her”, and being “head of the family, in charge of seeing to the moral education of children, of forming their hearts, and of sowing in their hearts the fecund seed of love”.

At this point, there was widespread agreement within the FRE over the problems, such as the bourgeoisie making women and children work. However, there was apparently still little agreement on the role of women in the future society. For some, the capitalists had fleeced the workers of any sense of family because women were working in factories, and it was difficult to see what would be the position of women and the desirability of them working in the future. For others, however, there was recognition that it was not the act of women working *per se* that had caused the problems. One commented:

“From the time when a woman earns her own wage, things are not like they were in the old family when she was a being who should fit in with the demands of her lord and master. She will be able to impose her own conditions and make her own contract and will be a free and independent companion”.

By 1877, the FRE agreed to “recommend to all its sections to seek the adherence of all those women who are in agreement with our principles and statutes”. But still, no advance was made on whether women should work or not. It was only later that women themselves began to participate openly in these debates, which had hitherto been the province of male activists.

As the participation of women increased, so further progress was made on women’s liberation. By the 2nd Congress of the FTRE (which grew out of the demise of the FRE in 1881), significant developments were being made. In September 1882, as a result of the speeches and activities of two women textile workers, a motion, which stated that the FTRE would facilitate the means for women workers in the organisation to form their own sections, was passed. Consistent with this, the first women’s textile union was affiliated to the FTRE in 1884.

This new impetus does seem to have entailed considerable success. There may have been no more than 2 female sections in the FRE between 1870 and summer 1874. In the first 3 years of the FTRE (1881-4), there were 19 women's sections in Andalusia and 3 in Catalonia/Valencia. The organisation of women in the anarcho-syndicalist ranks was now starting to get underway in earnest.

The early 20th Century

By the turn of the Century, anarcho-syndicalism was slowly beginning to mature into an integrated social-economic movement (see Unit 15). This provided fertile ground on which ideas around women's liberation could develop. At least one review magazine, "Salud y Fuerza" (Health and Strength, 1904-1914), regularly contained articles and comments on issues such as free love, women's emancipation, maternity and freedom. It was produced by a group of anarchists in Catalonia and its message was clearly directed towards the working class as a whole. The ideas expressed bore close similarities to those of some later anarchist journals that held education and sexuality as a prime area of debate (such as "Generación Consciente" and "Estudios"). The fundamental aim was for a conscious and freely educated population, where people were capable of making informed choices themselves on subjects such as sexuality, venereal disease and maternity.

Both female and male writers encouraged a strong independent position for women. A succession of articles stated that women's bodies belonged to women themselves and that they should be mothers only when they wished, after which this idea was continually reasserted. Some declared that women should decide the moment of conception, others that maternity must be consented to by the woman rather than imposed by the male. Thus, for those anarchists writing on the subject of maternity, emancipation of women was intrinsically tied up with freedom of choice to have children when women wanted. This was expanded to women's control over their own bodies, while 'economic emancipation', which often meant earning a wage, was not particularly discussed. The more economic basis for women's freedom had, as we have seen, been discussed in the FRE and FTRE and would return to anarchist circles in 1910, with the formation of the CNT.

Many anarchists and syndicalists, in contrast to the more economic Marxists (both in Spain and elsewhere), realised that 'economic emancipation' would not necessarily lead to the complete liberation of women. For anarcho-syndicalists, an alteration in attitudes and a general empowering of women were recognised, from their earliest experiences, as being as vital as economic change.

1930s; cultural revolution

By the 1930s, ideas around freedom, women's emancipation and control of one's own body were becoming interlinked in an intricate fashion. Moreover, the importance with which such ideas were held is indicated by their incorporation into the ever-widening politics of anarcho-syndicalism. For example, all-encompassing solutions (or several solutions) were now being advanced to provide a model for a new kind of relationship and sexuality between men and women. Anarcho-syndicalists were now advancing and practicing ideas on the emancipation of women, love and motherhood, which were to profoundly influence European socialist movements in the longer term.

The growth of such ideas within and around the CNT was rapid from its inception in 1910, but it grew exponentially in the 1930s. Literally, hundreds of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist journals and papers now existed, dealing with education and cultural change, embracing topics as diverse as vegetarianism and nudism.

A key component of anarchist culture was the production of small pamphlets and novelettes that professed anarchist ways of living and relating to others without authority and domination. Issues such as marriage, free love, maternity and chastity were dealt with. To give just one example, the Revista Blanca publishers under the series heading "Novela Ideal" produced a series of novelettes. Hundreds of anti-religious short stories were published, often focussing on love and sexuality, and they were extremely popular in libertarian circles. According to the editor of the "Novela Ideal" series, between 10-50,000 of these novelettes were published every week and; "according to the Francoists (they) poisoned three generations of Spaniards". By any stretch of the imagination, they had an extremely important counter-cultural role.

One of the most notable characteristics of the now rapidly growing anarcho-syndicalist movement, was not just the fact that revolutionary cultural ideas were developed, but that the means were created to put counter-culture into practice. Essential to this process were 'ateneos' or libertarian meeting houses, which grew up in most cities and towns (see Unit 15). Here, anarchist publications would be received, classes would take place and discussions would be held. Indeed, for one anarchist woman, the ateneo was the place "where we were formed, most deeply, ideologically". She was not alone. The importance of these cultural and educational centres is difficult to

overstate. They provided the building blocks for organised community politics of empowerment, where education and discussion were viewed as essential for the development of free people who would be capable of taking on the construction of a new society according to anarcho-syndicalist principles. The "ateneos" represented a unique forum where local people could come together to solve problems and broaden their horizons – in every sense.

A major attempt to create a new culture in place of the prevailing one was organised into a total programme for the reform of mentalities and material conditions. This anarcho-syndicalist cultural project was firmly placed within the basic libertarian principles of freedom and the right to act without the coercion of Church or state. In a society where the Church was omnipresent and omnipotent, anarcho-syndicalists believed that it was essential to create their own morality outside of bourgeois moralistic structures. This alternative moral system was seen as a mechanism for the subversion of existing structures of power and domination. Thus, not only was the acquisition of knowledge seen as important, but its application on a 'personal-political' level was recognised as vital.

Sex, love and relationships

Within and around the Spanish CNT, intertwined with radical positions on education, eating habits, religion and culture, extensive attention was paid to how people should relate to one another, including showing love and practising sexual relations. While in this short space it is impossible to document the breadth and extent of anarcho-syndicalist attitudes to sexuality, it is nevertheless possible to pick out the main tenets of these ideas and illustrate the changes that the CNT championed after July 1936.

From the days of the FRE and FTRE, libertarians in Spain had severely criticised the moral code of the bourgeoisie, for example, on its support for compulsory marriage and attitudes towards sex. Anarcho-syndicalists, for the most part, rejected marriage by the Church as unnatural, restricting and authoritarian. They saw marriage as support for a society, which was based on inequality and power relations, and as the power of one sex over the other. Many anarcho-syndicalists attempted to live as a couple without being married, which, in a society riddled with rigid concepts of propriety and 'decency', was daring. Such behaviour was viewed with near horror by the Church, as was the use of contraceptives, whether used as a method of preventing venereal disease, or as a form of contraception - they indicated a means of enjoying sex for pleasure.

The promotion of 'free love' as opposed to the marriage contract was seen as a way of living out anarcho-syndicalist ideals under capitalism. Hence, it was an important part of the process of creating the new society within the shell of the old. Love, they believed, should be given freely or not at all, and marriage merely offers the possibility of sterilising love and sex into an oppressive relationship for both sexes. In addition, marriage was viewed as a bastion of capitalist society, mirroring the power of men over women and creating a kind of authoritarian mini-state in the worker's own hearth. Anarcho-syndicalists were also opposed to the oppressive and exploitative conditions, which caused prostitution, and which they saw as demeaning and exploitative for both participants.

Parallels can be detected in the way anarcho-syndicalists developed their views on love, with their faith in the role of culture and science. Love was even promoted as a factor that could help solve society's problems. Equally, in a future society without hate, exploitation, and competition, people living naturally and in harmony with nature would love in a fulfilled and fulfilling manner.

Martí Ibáñez was an example of the anarcho-syndicalist and sexologist rolled into one. He gave several courses on sexuality in the mid-1930s and wrote many articles on sex reform. To capture the flavour of his writing we reproduce translations of some of his articles. Some may sound a little quaint and over-lyrical, but they do reflect the way in which many libertarians wrote during this period. It was a period when everything seemed possible, including simultaneous revolution in economics and people's sex lives. In a 1934 article, he likened the revolution to an opening of the floodgates, a force which was supposed to sweep away old forms of existence. But the sexual problem, after the revolutionary events, was still present and had not been solved. This was because the solution to such a complex problem was a gradual one, and necessitated a change in mentalities as well as a material change in the way society was organised:

"The war-like rumours which the last few days have brought still linger in the air. The disturbing severity of these days is clear to us all, as we assess them more calmly from the sad haven of their epilogue. Compared to the uniform unfolding of gently monotonous time, they appear to us with their jagged profile which spouts forth agony yet radiates lessons.

But the spiritual life of Spain is so lowly and superficial that we will soon consign these tragic days to memory; the days in which some confronted death in the name of the Ideal. Nevertheless, we need still more time to be able to judge these days without passion, before History places upon them the seal of its inevitable verdict. However, let us open the doors to our spiritual curiosity and attempt to extract some lessons from those burning hours that we can apply to sexual morality.

Can a revolution change the flow of things? In the case of sexual morality, is it possible to alter its course through a revolutionary process, as a sailing ship alters course with a single touch on the tiller?

I have posed this problem in articles and conferences, aiming to increase my and others' torrents of concern and to kindle that of those spirits which have not yet concerned themselves with this matter.

We are still under the rule of the old sexual morality. A sector of the Spanish population is waking up to our cries, but there is still a large

group of men who consider themselves advanced thinkers, who are victims of the web of sexual prejudice which the Church since its origins has cast over Humanity (...)

The sexual question cannot be resolved by a revolution, at least by a rapid, theatrical, ostentatious revolution. The sexual revolution must be begun now, it must forge itself systematically and without interruption (...) Sexuality cannot be dominated and channelled by some hastily written decree, drawn up on the barricades of victory; it needs to be preceded by an evolutionary process (...)

The sexual revolution, the supreme liberation of collective sexuality, should be the humble silent task of a phalanx of tenacious fighters, who by means of the book, the article, the conference and personal example, create and forge that sexual culture which is the key to liberation (...)

We have in our hands the soft clay of new generations, with which we need to mould the figures of new people, to blow into that clay the breath of freedom and the understanding of the duties it brings with it. It is only in this way that we shall lift love out of the mire which surrounds it nowadays, so that it can raise itself in elegant flight towards the bright light of freedom."

The idea that sexuality is an indomitable biological force, to be thwarted at one's peril, became increasingly common amongst anarcho-syndicalists in the 1930s. In particular, the throwing off of the chains of the current culture, and 'giving in' to the desire to have sexual contact, was particularly pertinent to women - simply because they were the main victims of the repressive Church-led norms of the time. Another literary service which Martí Ibáñez performed, was responding to letters to "Estudios" asking for advice on sexual matters. His reply to 'Iris' in February 1935, addresses her worry over the dilemma of satisfying her sexual impulses, without being married. She is 'terrified by the existing social prejudices', her youth is fading away, and it is more than necessary to decide on the course of action to take. The lengthy advice offered includes the following:

"Forced chastity, woven into repression and monotony, which suffocates and oppresses, is no solution; it is a betrayal of Nature which is paid for with the deep sadness of a life which exudes dark anxieties. Live no more in this falsehood, my friend. Break resolutely

the bind which links you to your past of sexual repression and launch yourself in full sail off into the sea of sincerity."

Despite the 'pro-sex' position stated here, it was still common among anarcho-syndicalists to espouse a gender-bound philosophy of sexuality. Indeed, both female and male activists in the CNT generally backed this, and very few libertarians at the time questioned the 'natural' status of motherhood and rigid gender roles. Equally, few questioned the primacy of sexual relationships between men and women over same-sex ones. Indeed, the general zeal for understanding of nature and application of 'natural' principles to sexuality was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it was a suitable concept to organise around and press for change, presenting sexuality as a force that could not be held in check even by the most reactionary and repressive of regimes. On the other hand, it prescribed a rigid version of what sexuality should be.

Masturbation and homosexuality were usually still out; 'gendered' sex roles and heterosexual reproduction were in. For men, there was much debate over sexual methods, and encouragement of the ability in those not seeking a permanent relationship to separate sex from love while maintaining respect for the partner. In another piece of solicited advice, Martí Ibáñez replies:

"In the garden of life, new young women are flourishing who are capable of understanding the amorous desires of a sincere man. But be courageous, proletarian friends, and always carry the truth on your lips. If you do not seek a definitive companion, but an amorous friendship, do not hide your desires. Learn how to disconnect love from the sexual experience when necessary and know how to practise it without binding yourselves or binding anyone else to anyone. And above all, do not demand from women that they submit to any limitation of sexuality that you would not submit to yourselves; do not demand more than you offer. Mutual respect, tolerance, comprehension, are indispensable qualities for loyal love comradeship. And when the moment arrives for you to join together for all time, be capable of tolerating in your companion a sexual freedom like your own. Do not demand more than pristine moral purity, that supreme feminine jewel, in whose radiance the happy waters of conjugal delight will flow."

Mujeres Libres

Campaigning around issues of sexual equality, free love and opposition to strict monogamy was a natural development from the more tentative concern for women's issues that libertarians had shown in the late 19th Century. However, the next substantial organisational development in the heart of the anarcho-syndicalist movement was to take this campaigning an important step further.

In mid-1936, a number of women members of the CNT and broader anarcho-syndicalist circles decided to create a specifically female organisation, which would attend to the problems that women experienced in wider society, as well as within libertarian organisations. Concerned with the exploitation of women both 'in the factory and the hearth', Mujeres Libres (Free Women) was established, and it rapidly grew in membership. According to one woman at the time, Mujeres Libres was created in order to free women from their "triple enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as producers".

Within a few months, Mujeres Libres was able to mobilise some 20,000 women members, and developed an extensive network of activities designed to empower women as individuals, while building a sense of comradeship and community. The former may sound familiar, and has been a feature of the mainstream feminist movements since that period. However, the latter was and remains a distinctive element of the Mujeres Libres' brand of feminism, and it was drawn directly from applying the anarcho-syndicalist principles of the movement within which Mujeres Libres was rooted.

Responding to real oppression of women in Spanish society, as well as the problems that women encountered in less-enlightened quarters of the CNT, drew up a programme of education and 'enabling', which attempted to free women from their down-trodden status of mid-1930s Spain.

Still unable to break completely with gender roles, and prescribed forms of behaviour, many male anarcho-syndicalists reproduced patterns of inequality in their organisations and home life. Mujeres Libres countered this. One member of Mujeres Libres discusses the situation in the libertarian organisation Juventudes Libertarias (Libertarian Youth), where some young (male) members clearly still clung to the cultural norms of their recent upbringing:

"I did not agree with the idea of Mujeres Libres. I thought, the struggle

affects both men and women. We are all fighting together for a better society. Why should there be a separate organisation? One day, when I was with a group from the Juventudes, we went to a meeting Mujeres Libres had organised at the Juventudes headquarters, where they also had an office. The boys started making fun of the speakers, which annoyed me from the outset. When the woman who was speaking finished, the boys began asking questions and saying it didn't make sense for women to organise separately, since they wouldn't do anything anyway. The debate was impassioned. The tone of their comments disgusted me, and I came to the defence of Mujeres Libres... In the end, they named me delegate from our neighbourhood to the meeting of the Federación Local de Mujeres Libres de Barcelona."

1936 Revolution

When Revolution and Civil War broke out in 1936 (see Unit 17), the opportunity was taken to put years of development of counter-culture ideas into practice. While this task was seized upon with relish, however, the Civil War and overwhelming international financial and military support for the fascists was to ensure that the cultural revolution was short-lived. Indeed, from 1937 onwards, the pressures of war put paid to any real free time with which to enjoy the possibilities of living within a newly enlightened society.

Nevertheless, in the short time of the revolution, amazing steps were made to put counter-culture into practice, while at the same time organising the economy and collectivising rural and industrial production (see Unit 18). In Catalonia, for example, during the early months of the July revolution, Church weddings were abolished and the 'free union' was available to all those who wished to partake. While people were sometimes 'married' in the CNT offices with a short ceremony, the couple believed that their union was entirely different in nature from that endorsed by a Church or state marriage ceremony.

Also in Catalonia, a decree allowing legal abortion for the first time in Spanish history was passed on 25th December 1936, and on 1st March 1937, norms by which hospitals and clinics would be regulated were established. The enthusiasm of the CNT-controlled Catalan Health Department (SIAS) was considerable with regard to this provision. However, the curtailment of CNT involvement in SIAS in June 1937, as they were ousted by non-revolutionary elements, meant that impact was probably minimal. In addition to abortion on demand, anarcho-syndicalists planned to establish rehabilitation centres for prostitutes in an attempt to remove prostitution, sex-counselling consultancies for the youth and an Institute of Sexual Science. Unfortunately, none of these came to fruition.

Conclusion

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalists, in addition to fighting on an 'economic' level in numerous strikes and land occupations (see Unit 18), attempted to create a counter-culture in place of both liberal and Catholic-dominated versions of culture and sexuality. Not content with mere sex education, the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to introduce a different way of thinking and behaving into their social and sexual relationships. While, in the short time it operated, it certainly did not eliminate sexism and repressive attitudes towards sexuality, it did signify the very serious attempts of women and men to effect change in working class communities, raising the banner of opposition to repressive and hierarchical relationships from wherever they might come.

The major successes of Mujeres Libres were drawn from the simple fact that, like the CNT and all other successful libertarian organisations, they connected directly with the reality that their members (and women in wider society) were living through.

Through networks made between like-minded people, and those in similar situations, whether they were women, young persons, in the same industry or in affinity groups connected to the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation), anarcho-syndicalists and others drew upon and bolstered community resistance to oppression in its many forms. As with other anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the idea of the revolution meant ridding society of all oppression, whether sexual, gender-based, cultural, social or economic.

Key points

- The Catholic Church had immense power over all areas of Spanish life in the 1930s, including education and social morality.
- The idea of Women's emancipation and liberation grew within the anarcho-syndicalist movement.
- A key concept of the growing anarchist culture was the way in which people should live with, and relate to, each other.
- Anarcho-syndicalists questioned the moral code of the bourgeoisie including marriage, sex and sexuality.
- Mujeres Libres developed to challenge the view of gender roles taken by many less-enlightened male workers.

Checklist

1. What were the differences in the approach of the anarcho-syndicalist to the ideas of women's emancipation compared to the liberal and conservative feminists?
2. How did this approach differ to the Marxists?
3. What was the "Novela Ideal"?
4. What was the idea of "free love"?
5. Why was the Mujeres Libres formed?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the differences in the approach of the anarcho-syndicalist to the ideas of women's emancipation compared to the liberal and conservative feminists?*

Middle class feminists were careful to assure men that their demands for the political equality and the right to vote would not mean they were any less feminine, respectful and delicate. The anarchists saw the vote as a superficial solution and attempted to assess the roots of capitalist social-relations that produced the inequality between women and men.

2. *How did this approach differ to the Marxists?*

Marxists believed that economic emancipation would then lead to the liberation of women. Anarcho-syndicalists argued that this was not enough and an alteration in attitudes and an empowerment of women was also needed.

3. *What was the "Novela Ideal"?*

The Novela Ideal was a series of novelettes that professed anarchist ways of living. They were anti-religious short stories often focusing on love and sexuality.

4. *What was the idea of "free love"?*

Anarcho-syndicalists promoted free love as opposed to the marriage contract. They believed love should be given freely or not at all. Marriage was an authoritarian institution that supported a society based on inequality and power relations.

5. *Why was the Mujeres Libres formed?*

Despite all the attempts by anarcho-syndicalists there were still a lot of men who were unable to break with rigid the gender roles of society. Anarchist women sought to challenge these stereotypes head on and so formed Mujeres Libres.

Suggested discussion points

- How important is it to challenge the dominant ideas of sexual morality in society?
- What do you think the women of Mujeres Libres in the 1930s would feel about the concept of "Girl Power" today?

Further Reading

Free Women of Spain. Martha Ackelsberg. Bloomington, 1991. £11.99. -LI- -BS-

A unique account of the working class womens' organisations in 1930's Spain that struggled for the social revolution alongside the workers and the CNT. Detailed exposition of the ideas and practical projects developed by revolutionary women in this anarcho-syndicalist experiment that was far in advance of post-war "feminism".

Mujeres Libres. Organising Women During the Spanish Revolution. DAM, 1987. 60p. -SE-

Now sadly out of print, this reprint of an article by Martha Acklesburg provides an excellent introduction to the work of this anarcho-syndicalist women's organisation during the revolution.

Women in the Spanish Revolution. Liz Willis. Solidarity, pamphlet. £1.50 -AK-

Important, non-academic, informative and reasonably priced. An extremely rare contribution to a topic which has been consistently under-represented in history - women in Revolution.

Women. Mary Low. (in; M.Low & J.Brea, Red Spanish Notebook, City Lights Books, ISBN 0872 861325) -LI-

Tragically out of print and hard to find, this time the subject is from a POUM perspective. Deals with Mujeres Libres etc.

Anarchism, Ideology and Same-sex Desire. R. Cleminson. KSL. £1. -AK-

Anarcho- syndicalist ideas on same sex desire, by a member of Solidarity Federation who is also a historian on the Spanish Revolution.

Notes:

Unlike other topics on revolutionary Spain, this Unit topic is poorly catered for. Mujeres Libres is still thriving today; if you speak Spanish, SelfEd can put you in touch with them/more recent literature. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13-18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).