

A note on the anarchist agrupación

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During the golden age of Spanish anarchism, anarchist activism was principally oriented around revolutionary unions and affinity groups. Anarchists joined or formed unions in their workplace, which were – or which they tried to ensure were – organised in a way consistent with anarchist principles and oriented toward anarchist goals. All eligible workers were encouraged to join. This became known as anarcho-syndicalism and the CNT was its biggest example. Anarchists also formed affinity groups. These were formed on the basis of common interests, friendship, political disposition etc, or else with specific aims in mind, such as the publication of a newspaper or armed direct action (in such cases they were often referred to as ‘action’ or ‘defence’ groups). In 1927 the FAI was founded as a federation to coordinate anarchist affinity groups, which did not normally number more than twelve to twenty members.

The agrupación was a distinct organisational form that played a lesser but significant role during these years. Agrupaciones were unique in inviting participation based on an individual’s interest and commitment, rather than workplace or affinity. Their distinctiveness is underappreciated in Anglophone circles because the word is normally translated in the same way as the Spanish word *grupo*, i.e., ‘group’, and is therefore easily confused with affinity groups. In my book¹ I translate agrupación as ‘grouping’ but now I think ‘association’ would have been more accurate.

The main difference between the agrupación and the grupo was that, unlike the latter, the former did not have a restricted membership. As such, agrupaciones were important in enabling access to the world of Spanish anarchism for people who, for whatever reason, were not members of the CNT (e.g. people who didn’t work, people working in non-unionised workplaces, or where a rival union predominated, etc).

Here are five ways in which the agrupación as an organisational form was significant to the history of Spanish anarchism:

1. Cultural endeavours.

Agrupaciones were often attached to *ateneos* (social and cultural centres) and ran ‘excursiones’ (days out to the beach or countryside). In addition to facilitating entry into the anarchist universe, ateneo-affiliated agrupaciones such as ‘Sol y Vida’ and ‘Faros’ were vital nodes in the increasing cohesion of Spanish anarchism in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their importance in

¹ *Revolution and the State: Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (AK Press, 2020)

the ideological and cultural formation of a generation of Spanish anarchist activists is attested to in many memoirs and works of oral history.

2. Allowing for autonomous women's organisation.

Mujeres Libres, the most famous and the largest autonomous women's organisation in the Spanish anarchist movement, began as an agrupación. It later constituted itself as a federation and staked a claim to being the fourth pillar of the Spanish libertarian movement alongside the CNT, the FAI, and the Libertarian Youth (it was rebuffed in this effort, as detailed in Martha Ackelsberg's book²). Mujeres Libres was preceded by other anarchist women's agrupaciones. Its initial foundation came from the fusion of the group around the journal *Mujeres Libres* and the Agrupación Cultural Femenina in Barcelona.

3. Encouraging inter-generational dialogue.

By the 1930s, anarchism was a movement that could claim several decades of continuous presence in Spain. When the civil war broke out in 1936, a group of veteran activists, who had experienced anti-anarchist repression at the turn of the century and been involved in the initial formation of the CNT, formed the agrupación 'Los de ayer y los de hoy'. The intention was to put their collective experience at the service of younger generations of activists. They set up a social centre and an old persons' home specifically for veterans of the struggle, which was called the Casa Albergue Anselmo Lorenzo. According to one eye-witness report, the agrupación voted to affiliate to another anarchist association on the eve of the May days: the Friends of Durruti.

4. Enabling political regroupment.

By the spring of 1937, militarisation at the front and 'normalisation' in the rear-guard had led to growing dissatisfaction amongst anarchist activists with the direction that the revolution and civil war had taken. The agrupación Amigos de Durruti was formed in March of that year so that this general mood could be given organisational expression. It established a newspaper, *El Amigo del Pueblo*, and participated actively in the May days uprising in Barcelona. It was disowned and maligned by the CNT leadership.

5. Depoliticisation.

The openness of the agrupación form was what also enabled innovations within anarchist organisational culture. Clearly, associations intended to foster new connections or give cohesion to existing tendencies, could not be restricted by workplace or pre-existing interpersonal relations. However, this openness was what made the agrupación the chosen organisational form of the anarchist leadership in Spain when it tried to stymie internal opposition. In 1937, the Peninsular Committee of the FAI attempted to impose a restructuring of the organisation that would see affinity groups replaced by anarchist agrupaciones based on locality, which would have an open membership. Anarchist critics of this manoeuvre argued that it was intended to give the FAI a top-down, party political character. A majority of affinity groups across the Republican territory opposed the plan, which was nevertheless agreed to when the delegations from Catalonia and Aragon reneged on their mandates at a national plenum. Consequently, in the anarchist heartland of Barcelona, there were effectively two FAIs: the newly-formed Agrupación Anarquista de Barcelona and those of the city's affinity groups (the majority) who refused to join the agrupación and continued to meet as a Local Federation, much to the annoyance of the movement leadership. The Agrupación Anarquista de Barcelona was disbanded in September 1938.

² *Free Women Of Spain: Anarchism And The Struggle For The Emancipation Of Women* (AK Press, 2004)

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