

Rethinking anarchism from within the Third World

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There was no contradiction between feminism and socialism, not until the arrival of the father of anarchism, Pierre Joseph Proudhon.

Virtually, no one dared to write this truth so directly regarding the subject as Simone de Beauvoir¹ points it out loud and clear in *The Second Sex*:

In general, the reformist [socialist] movement that developed during the nineteenth century was favorable to feminism because of the fact that it sought justice through equality. There is one notable exception: that of Proudhon. No doubt because of his peasant roots, he reacts violently against Samsonian mysticism; he is in favor of small property and, at the same time, confines women to the home.

“*Housewife or courtesan*”, here is the dilemma in which he confines her.

Until then, the attacks against feminism had come from the conservatives, who fought socialism with the same harshness: Charivari, among others, found in this field an inexhaustible source of jokes; and it is Proudhon who breaks the alliance between feminism and socialism; he protests against the banquet of socialist women presided over by Leroux, he fulminates lightning and flashes against Jeanne Decoin.

Did the remainder of anarchists do anything to dissociate from this position? Not at all, on the contrary, it was reaffirmed.

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, this misogynist vision was re-projected, from the perspective of positivism and reason, advocating the clinical inferiority of women.

In the anarchist periodical, *Regeneración*, “scientific” literature was marketed and promoted with the purpose of “proving” the above. For example the work of Dr. Paul Julios Moebius entitled *The Mental Inferiority of Women*, in which the author reviews women based on Freudian psychoanalysis, Darwinism and phrenology, a racist technique very fashionable at the time and brought to Mexico by the Porfirian regime, which sought to determine the superiority of individuals based on the measurement of the skull.²

¹ From the previous segment of the essay: “In the work entitled *La justice*, he argues that woman must remain under the dependence of man; only the latter counts as a social individual; in the couple, there is no partnership, which would imply equality, but a union; woman is inferior to man, first, because her physical strength only represents two-thirds of that of the male, and, then, because she is intellectually and morally inferior in the same measure: her value, as a whole, is 2 x 2 x 2 as against 3 x 3 x 3, that is, lbs 8/27 of the value of the stronger sex.

Two women, Madame Adam and Madame D’Héricourt, replied to him, one with firmness, the second with less fortunate exaltation, and Proudhon took the occasion to reply with his *Pornocratie ou la femme dans les temps modernes*. However, like all anti-feminists, he addresses ardent litanies to the “true woman,” slave and mirror of man; despite this devotion, he himself had to recognize that the life he imposed on his own wife did not make her happy: Madame Proudhon’s letters are nothing but a prolonged lament.”

² Novoa does not fail to qualify women as sweet-spirited, tender, beautiful, but also naïve. We should not be surprised by the darwinistic positions from which the doctor draws, nor by the fact that his intellectual referents are the same as those of the PLM.

In this case the anarchists do incorporate non-anarchist experiences into their struggle, even if it is in the form of scientific misogyny.

This is not the only instance of the approach of Pelemism and anti-feminist positivism. Roberto Novoa Santos, a Galician doctor, wrote in his youth several libertarian articles. In 1908, he published *The Spiritual Destitution of the Female Sex (The Anatomical, Physiological and Psychological Proofs of the Mental Poverty of Women: Its Biological Explanation)*, later recommended in *Regeneración* 4.

Yes, there have been women in the movement, even if their role is not organizational. We can name a few *Pelemists* and count them with the fingers of one hand. Their existence is an exception, and not an organic feature of anarchism.

Raise your hand

The exercises that attempt to recover anarchist women into the roster are very much like the attempts of the States to *rescue* the heroines of the fatherland.

Their importance focuses on mentioning them in a roll call, simply pointing out that they “existed”. Their place is anecdotal rather than transcendental, no matter what place they occupied in the organization or their legacy.

Moreover, it is left aside that these women, in order to appear in the *patriotic pantheon*, had to overcome macho hierarchical structures within their organization.

María Talavera Broussé is an archetypal example of the above. The *pelemista* is not known or celebrated. If she is mentioned, it is because she was the “*companion of Ricardo Flores Magón*”. In reality, she could have never existed, and the anarchist history of the PLM would continue without complications.

Emma

Emma Goldman was among Ricardo’s most vocal supporters during his struggle. She was his anarchist mentor. It would seem that Goldman’s proposals passed without notice for the *Central Committee of PLM*.

I must state that, in the forums in which I have raised this issue, the prominence of such machismo has been downplayed by the listeners of my views.

In general, contemporary anarchists justify themselves. They say that if there was machismo, it was the result of its historical context; claiming that we cannot ask for pears from the elm tree, as if this justified something, as if feminism had not existed at that time.³ Or as if today, in the bosom of machismo in anarchism, we justify ourselves by saying that we are the result of our historical context.

The conflicting lives of Teresa Sanmartí and Francisco de Ferrer, for example. The anarchist pedagogue and founder of the “*Rationalist School*”. Ferrer always considered Sanmartí *irrational* and incapable of taking care of her children, so he made the unilateral decision to separate them from her at the moment of their birth.

³ “However terrible and disgusting the dissolution under the capitalist system of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes. It creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the “family” and of the relations between the sexes.

It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be absolute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms which, moreover, taken together form a series in historical development.

Moreover, it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of all sexes and ages, must necessarily, under suitable conditions, become a source of humane development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalistic form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery.” Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume I*

As if that were not enough, Sanmartí, at the end of their relationship, shot Ferrer “because of the jealousy he felt for the anarchist pedagogue’s close friends”, among whom was Leopoldina Bonnard, Ferrer’s lover for some time. Ferrer’s controversial marital life has been relegated to the realm of the “personal” and these controversial episodes have been minimized among his biographers.

We could also search among anarchist publications, and realize that, for example, among the books published there is not a single female author. Even in the book *Rompamos Las Cadenas* by Erick Benítez Martínez, a member of the FAM,⁴ the word “woman” is never mentioned, much less any mention of *anarcho-feminism*.

We could operate as we have operated historically, stating that these minutiae really isn’t pertinent to our anarchist practice; and what is *private* is one thing, and the political is another.

Nevertheless, I will be more honest, and say that this is what anarchism is composed of, historically: a rationalist, Western, and male-chauvinist current. Machismo is integrated in its ethical-political aspect. If the personal is political, let us not try to see anything else, because to deny its misogynistic veil is to exalt the violence of its approaches.

Heresy!

The third and last sign of anarchist-patriotism would be its aversion to *heresy*. As a form of nationalism, it would be opposed to other nationalisms, to “foreign” ideas that threaten the spirit of the homeland.

There is no current more “confronted” with anarchism than Marxism, there is no movement more heretical, more foreign than this one.

There are several anecdotes of how people react with an impressive aversion and dogmatism in anarchist circles at the mere mention of “the M word”, a phobia that has even been transferred to the color red. A self-respecting anarchist will reject Marxism as a slogan.

But it is clear and obvious that anarchism is not perfect, and many of its definitions on Political Economy or on work and production are perfectible. I think that on this point the program is quite interesting to me, since it proposes a revision of the work⁵ ethic rarely taken up in anarchist circles. I myself consider that this is a point on which I have not cultivated myself much and which I need to strengthen. For example, I would like to take up again questions about Participatory Economics, an economic vision from anarchism that is developed by Michael Albert⁶ and of which, I insist, I am completely ignorant.

I think the same thing will happen to many of you, these are aspects that are rarely addressed, but I also believe that this is a hook where the program catches us and then becomes very classical and conservative. At the same time I can point out that critical Marxism has generated very

⁴ “Federación Anarquista Mexicana” (FAM).

⁵ Note from *taller ahuehuate*: The overcoming of capitalist social relations cannot involve a simple labour-affirming reform, through ethics or consciousness. We find the concept of “liberation of labour” equally insufficient, still functioning within the confines of the value-form; rather, as described by Endnotes, the only “way out” is the suppression of value itself — of the value-form which posits abstract labour as the measure of wealth.

⁶ We highly recommend instead, for those interested in the subject, the work by a contemporary anarchist and communist author titled: *Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect*.

interesting proposals⁷ that would be worth taking up again,⁸ one of them could be the debate on the importance of use value-and in general the contributions of Bolivar Echeverría to the development of capitalism.

Another important question would be to study the historical process that generated the Marxist-anarchist division. That would help us to realize that in reality it was a fight of the individual drives⁹ of Marx and Bakunin, important characters for the history of socialism who, during part of their lives, were in complement and only after the First International generated a rupture that we suffer to this day and that does not allow the most critical visions of Marxism to nourish the anarchist approaches.

But Marxism is not only theoretical questions about capitalism. During the 1970s Marxism was reconfigured as a revolutionary praxis. In the same way as the insurrections I mentioned above, anarchism would benefit from reviewing the revolutionary Marxist experience of those decades, even if this is an attack against our national pride.

I have already made an analysis of this in *Libertarian Ethics*, this is not the place to resume that discussion, I will only delimit myself to summarize that anarchist chauvinism considers the defeat of Marxism as the clearest proof of its historical impossibility. What actually happened is that the great majority of Marxist guerrillas fell into a vanguardism and dogmatism, very similar to anarchism today, and were fought to the point of extermination. Mexico is no exception, thousands of guerrilla fighters were murdered and disappeared during the Dirty War.

Marxists or not, these people died for a political conviction, they were defeated by a State that today we pretend to oppose. Not to study their strategies, success or defeat, is to deny ourselves a historical reality and, worse, to overlook the lessons of their sacrifice.¹⁰

We could summarize it in three transversal and fundamental axes, which I believe would help to dissolve anarchism as nationalism.

The first of these would be feminism, which helps us to combat the *patriarchal* history of anarchism, the history of the great misogynist male patriarchs. The second of these would be the autonomist, spontaneous, and utopian experiences, not only those that have sympathies with anarchism, but those that came before it or outside of it.

Studying them would help us to think that this patriotic history is actually broken down into hundreds of small histories, and that the rationality with which it is clothed has more implications than we think. The third would be to remove the walls when facing the opponent Marxist experience, be it theoretical or on the ground, be it the debates on current events, or the experience of Marxism in the struggles for decolonization in the Third World.

⁷ *The Capitalist State: Illusion and Critique* by Werner Bonefeld.

⁸ “The cheapening of labour-power, by sheer abuse of the labour of women and children, by sheer robbery of every normal condition requisite for working and living, and by the sheer brutality of overwork and night-work, meets at last with natural obstacles that cannot be overstepped. So also, when based on these methods, do the cheapening of commodities and capitalist exploitation in general.”

⁹ An anarchist suggestion from within the editorial board recommends: *Bakunin versus Marx*, by Ulli Diemer.

¹⁰ The author, addressing an audience in the nation-state wrongly named Mexico, adds: “If anarchism really incorporates non-anarchist experiences into its experience of struggle we should begin with the Mexican case. I am not saying that anarchism in Korea, Macedonia or the Philippines is not important, but even if it is not anarchist, the case of the Mexican guerrillas of the 70s seems to me important to take up, because it is our immediate history and it is not contemplated in our workshop. Well, up to here my argumentation, my contributions to the libertarian studies’ program, are there more possibilities than the ones I will mention? Of course, but these are my small contributions.”

Reconciling Marxist contributions, heretical and foreign, would help to undermine once and for all this worn out, dogmatic, nationalist anarchism, and perhaps, only in this way, we can then remove the heavy labels that we have placed on ourselves and build a liberating praxis, more integral, more authentic, more appropriate to our context and above all, more urgent than ever.

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Part two of our series, «Listen, anarchist! Rethinking anarchism from within the Third World», by Guadalupe Rivera (2017). For the first section, here. The following essays have been curated by *taller ahuehuete*'s Antijuras, Suttkin and Capanegra, all identifying within the heterodox anarchist tradition.

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