

The Women in Command

The Barcelona Consumer's War of 1918

Lester Golden

1985

Contents

The Shaky Boom of the First World War: Catalan Dependency and Runaway Inflation	7
The Riots Begin	10
From Female Community to Industrial Unionism to Class Consciousness	17
Conclusion	22

In Parliament street a coal dealer refused to sell, asserting that his stocks were exhausted. When the women found out he was lying they tried to break down the door to the shop, at which point the owner tried to stop them by taking out a revolver. He never should have. All the women fell upon him and disarmed him. They made things hot for him, but without coal.¹

Historians have tended to view consumer riots as an Old Regime-style “stating of the (just) price,” a spontaneous tumult definable as a leftover from an earlier age antedating the era of modern mass politics. This study demonstrates how modern mass politics can lurk beneath the surface of an apparently spontaneous museum piece of female protest, the consumer riot.² Historians such as Eric Hobsbawm have applied the terms “spontaneous” or “primitive” to groups that accepted the obligations that Old Regime society imposed on them while they protested to assert that adherence to them conferred certain rights.³ Others, like Temma Kaplan, have argued that the traditional “female consciousness” of women consumer rioters utilized acceptance of patriarchy and the gender-based division of labor which society imposed in order to create the basis for mass political action.⁴ Distinct from feminism, which is a stepchild of liberal individualism, “female consciousness” posited a collective notion of rights rooted in traditional informally-organized social networks of markets, fountains, town or neighborhood plazas, and churches. These informal social networks—the lifeblood of communities—only revealed themselves during crises, since crises threaten the ability of women to perform their traditional social obligations: to gather the means of subsistence and to nurture life and family. The Barcelona women’s war of 1918 demonstrates how female consciousness bridged the gap between the customary and the modern ideological ways of viewing the social world. The women used patriarchal society’s traditional view of their social role to forge a mass protest movement superficially archaic in style, but revolutionary in temper and tactics. They show that the most conservative motives—the assertion of the traditional rights of family and community against the modern state and private property—can yield the most revolutionary consequences.

Catalonia provides an ideal laboratory for studying these questions. It is a nation (within the Spanish state) whose dominant class is a stateless bourgeoisie, which in 1918 remained on the dependent periphery of the world capitalist system. Until the 1960’s it had little of the heavy industry with the homogeneous male proletariat whom historians and left parties traditionally regard as the carrier of working class political strength. Consequently, Catalonia also offers an ideal opportunity to raise questions about the role of gender in mass political action. It is also a suitable locale for exploring the ties that bind traditional—in this case female—consciousness to modern mass political movements, despite historians’ attempts to sever them.

Hobsbawm and other historians have sometimes appreciated the political potential of workers’ conservative motives and the defensive movements they spawned.⁵ However, their restric-

¹ Solidaridad Obrera, 12 January 1918.

² See Charles Tilly’s *How Protest Modernized in France* for the view that a clearly visible dichotomy separates “spontaneous” and archaic from modern “disciplined” modes of popular protest. This article appears in Aydelotte, Bogue and Fogel, ed., *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*, (Princeton, 1972)

³ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (New York, 1965)

⁴ Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action,” *Signs*, (Spring 1982), 545–566.

⁵ Hobsbawm acknowledges that, ultimately, it was “...the very novelty and rapidity of the social change which engulfed them [that] encouraged the labourers to think in terms of an entirely changed society...” and their organi-

tive teleological definition of “proletarian,” centered on the point of production, has commonly caused them to write off informally organized, community-based movements as “the spontaneous solidarity of the local labouring community... [which] lacked the organization and maturity which could have made their rebellion more than a momentary danger to the social order.”⁶ Since it was women who most often led informally-organized, community-based direct action, this argument, in effect, establishes a gender-based double standard for assessing the political significance of working class organization and mobilization. These historians use the term “spontaneity” to end the discussion where it should begin. “Spontaneity” is a term too often employed pejoratively to dismiss historically significant, but theoretically inconvenient phenomena which can offer us a tangible bridge between consciousness and political action.

The best social historians have given the faceless crowd back its humanity and rationality and enabled us to see with much greater clarity the bridge between consciousness and political action. By refusing to depict the crowd as an abstraction, a “mob,” and its members as tie irrational prisoners of their instincts,⁷ historians such as E.P. Thompson and George Rude have conferred upon the ordinary people of the past an individuality that traditional history has usually reserved for the elite. The persons who compose revolutionary crowds not only possess individuality, but nationality. In the words of Rude, “far from being mere passive instruments, revolutionary crowds absorbed and adapted the slogans and ideas of the political groups contending for power...”⁸ Similarly, E.P. Thompson has rescued the grain rioters and machine-breakers of early industrial England from imprisonment in such ahistorical abstractions as “instincts” and the “social tension chart.” Historians have used such abstractions to define crowd agitation as “rebellions of the belly” and the “instinctive reaction of virility to hunger.”⁹

Despite the work of such pioneers as Rude and Thompson, however, the defeats suffered by various forms of popular rebellion has led other historians to believe that the battles of bread rioters for a “just price,” and those of the machine breakers for ethical control over industrial change, were simply part of history’s lost causes, doomed by the inevitability of laissez faire’s triumph. Historians’ twenty-twenty hindsight has blinded them to the obvious: that lost causes are never fought as lost causes. If they were, those who struggled for them really could be labeled “irrational” or described as dominated by “instinct.” Here is where historians’ and social scientists’ current preoccupation with economic development and technological progress close in to form ideological blinders. Thompson, on the other hand, has shown how the defense of traditional rights sanctioned under the Old Regime shaded into the defense of an alternative future. And just as the demands of Thompson’s Luddites and grain rioters “looked forwards as much as backwards and contained within them a shadowy image ... of a democratic community in which industrial growth should be regulated according to ethical priorities and the pursuit of profit be

zational weakness that led them to frame their defense against such changes with “... the agitational methods of political radicalism.” *Age of Revolution* (New York, 1963), 248, 251.

⁶ See Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital* (New York, 1975), 249. “Bakunin was perhaps not entirely wrong in supposing that in such a time the spirit of at least potential insurrection was most likely to smoulder among the marginal and sub-proletariat, though he was quite mistaken in believing that they would be the base of revolutionary movements.”

⁷ Hobsbawm exemplifies how even historians on the left have employed the lexicon of instincts in depicting informally organized protests. In *The Age of Revolution* he described such direct action as the expression of “...sheer hunger of the feelings of men at the end of their tether.”

⁸ George Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1972), 196.

⁹ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd,” (London: *Past and Present* 50, February 1971. 77.

subordinated to human needs,”¹⁰ the “female consciousness” of the women in the Barcelona consumer war “created the vision of a society that had not yet appeared ... by placing human need and life above property and profit.”¹¹

The debates within European and American historiography concerning spontaneity in mass protest movements, the nature of political modernization, and the rise of modern mass politics have had deep repercussions within Iberian historiography. The Andalusian Juan Diaz del Moral, Albert Balcells, a Catalan historian he influenced, and the British historian Gerald Brenan, have all tried to explain the rapid spread and durability of anarchism in the Iberian peninsula as a “spontaneous” product of the racial or ethnic character of the populations that embraced it. The use of spontaneity as an explanation turns the term into assumption-laden intellectual shorthand, a shortcut for dismissing anarchism as an irrational and archaic millenarian movement produced by Spanish underdevelopment.

For Diaz del Moral the notion of the “spontaneous” spread of anarchism through the Andalusian countryside provided the means to tie anarchism to a thousand-year old history of agrarian revolt that went back to the Caliphate of Cordoba. In his view the racial character of the Andalusian worker—“enthusiastic, idealistic, and inconsistent ... [and] who, upon receiving the fertile kiss of the ideal feel the divine surge of the artistic word within their souls...” —lay at the root of such a formidable continuity of millenarianism.¹² Written shortly after the mass strikes and revolts of the Bolshevik triennium of 1918–20, Diaz del Moral’s book *The History of Andalusian Peasant Agitations*, has set the tone of discussion on Spanish Anarchism within Iberian historiography.

A generation later Albert Balcells has employed virtually identical reasoning to explain the success that anarchosyndicalism obtained in Catalonia, the most industrialized area of the peninsula. However, unlike Diaz del Moral, he does qualify his ethnically-based explanation for Catalan anarchism by mentioning such factors as employers’ uncompromising resistance to unionization. Nevertheless, he ultimately focuses on “revolutionary messianism” to explain the triumph of anarchosyndicalism over Northern European-style social-democratic reformist trade unionism. In a less direct way Balcells supports the racially-based arguments of Diaz del Moral. He brands anarchosyndicalism, and its alleged “revolutionary messianism,” as an import from underdeveloped Andalusia which sensible prudent Catalan workers would never have adhered to on their own: “This increasing wave of immigration was one of the principal factors explaining the development of anarchosyndicalism in this period.” Because of employer and government repression “...the experienced labor leaders, those most cultured and most rooted in the country [Catalonia] were substituted by inexperienced militants who were recent immigrants to Barcelona, people more simplistic and rash, who tended towards extremism...”¹³

¹⁰ E.P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York, 1966), 552.

¹¹ Kaplan. *Female Consciousness*, 546.

¹² Juan Diaz del Moral, *Historia de las agitaciones campesinas andaluzas: Cordoba* (Madrid, 1973). 17–18.

¹³ Albert Balcells, *El arraigo del anarquismo en Catalunya*, (Barcelona, 1973), 11, 14, 15; and *El Sindicalisme a Barcelona*, (Barcelona, 1965), 11. More than analysis, Balcells’ view constitutes an echo of the bourgeois folklore of the period he studies. The Catalan Joan Farrer i Farriol has recounted how Catalonia’s nationalist employers “... to justify themselves treated us [anarchists] as ‘murcian’ [a region of southern Spain that sent many immigrants to Barcelona], as miserable foreigners... There were multitudes of Catalan anarchists, but the nationalists felt very annoyed if an anarchosyndicalist was named Roig, Pujol or Ferrer [typical Catalan names]. They wanted all anarchists to have names like Martinez, Perez or Fernandez [typical Spanish names].” (Baltasar Porcel, *La revuelta permanente*, (Barcelona, 1978), 97.

Gerald Brenan has interpreted Iberian anarchism, and the decentralized mass movement that formed a part of it, in ethnic terms similar to Balcells. Like Balcells, Brenan's point of departure is Andalusia and what he terms the "naive millenarianism" of its anarchist movement.¹⁴ Similarly, Brenan holds Spanish underdevelopment, specifically the agrarian problems of the arid, latifundist.¹⁵ South, responsible for the implantation of this Andalusian import in industrial Catalonia:

They (Catalan workers) had no better reason than any other body of workers in Europe to aim at revolution. But they were recruited to a great extent from the half-starving and embittered agricultural laborers of the south and east ... In spite of this they showed a persistent tendency towards the pure, and in practice, quite unrevolutionary syndicalism of the French CGT...¹⁶

Brenan bases his view first of all on Spanish anarchism's "strongly idealistic and moral-religious character", and secondly on its tendency to look to an ideal Golden Age in the past: "they are Spanish villagers and workmen who are trying, though being consciously aware of it, to reconstruct the primitive agrarian conditions that once prevailed in many parts of Spain..."¹⁷ This leads him to the even more ironic misinterpretation of associating anarchism with the monarchist far right (Carlism) and, ultimately, the militant Church of medieval and Golden Age Spain. Thus he views anarchism not as a phenomenon of modern mass politics, but through Tory-colored glasses which define it as an expression of certain aspects of an eternal Spanish national character:

Spanish Anarchism has, like Carlism, its atavistic side: in a certain measure it is an expression of nostalgia for the past and an attitude of resistance to the slavery which the modern capitalist structure of society and the strain of factory life bring with them... Even their violence might be called religious. The Spanish Church, after all, has always been a Militant Church and down to the twentieth century it believed in destroying its enemies. No doubt the Anarchists felt that if only ... they could get rid of all who were not of their way of thinking, they would make a better job than the Church had done of introducing the earthly paradise. In Spain every creed aspires to be totalitarian... Thus Spanish Anarchism, though seeming to look forward only to the future, is in fact dominated by that nostalgia for the past that is so characteristic of Spain...¹⁸

These three historians have corralled themselves into a trap of circular reasoning in which the millenarian nature of anarchism serves to reveal a racial or ethnically rooted essence, which in turn serves to justify the original argument about the millenarian nature of anarchism. ("In Spain every creed aspires to be totalitarian.") Such circular reasoning shows how the inability or unwillingness to look beyond the superficial connotations of terms such as "archaic" or "spontaneous" as applied to informally organized mass movements has led historians into a cul-de-sac. What we need rather is to look beneath the superficial connotations of such terms. In doing so we may

¹⁴ Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, (Cambridge, 1960), 157.

¹⁵ Latifundios are the large estates based on the inefficient, extensive agriculture and bull-raising that predominate in Andalusia, Extremadura, La Mancha, and parts of Aragon. It was the disentanglement and sale on the open market of Church and noble latifundios, along with town common lands, that opened the way for capitalist property and social relations, and then political radicalism to enter these areas of rural Spain.

¹⁶ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188, 192, 196.

discover a surprising melange within working class protest, a mixture of apparent spontaneity with a highly disciplined, if informal, organization that associated archaic rituals and language with the ideology and dynamism of modern mass movements. This mixture should be the focus for research into the channels of communication between the “spontaneous” habits, customs and rituals that form the consciousness of traditional culture and the formally organized institutions and ideologies of modern working class movements. The following description of the Barcelona women’s consumer war attempts to trace these channels of communication to illuminate the tangible links between the traditional popular culture of the female working class community and the modern mass protest movement they created in 1918.

The Shaky Boom of the First World War: Catalan Dependency and Runaway Inflation

The First World War caused the biggest boom in Spain’s history. Within this artificial boom economy the textile industry flourished most spectacularly. Normally uncompetitive in European markets, it expanded its system of domestic subcontracting and reliance on cheaper female and moral labor. The inspectors of the state’s labor mediation agency, the Social Reforms Institute, reported that French orders for uniforms caused the garment trades to grow rapidly. Contractors obtained “incalculable advantages in price and profit” from the “abuses and bad conditions” of female household labor.¹⁹ The following conversation between a French general and the owner of the factory village, Colonia Sedo, in the Llobregat river valley north of Barcelona, further underscores this point:

- How many meters of corduroy can you put out per week?
- Fifty thousand, replied Sedo.
- And of inferior quality?
- Seventy thousand.
- And of absolutely minimal quality, put out as fast as possible?
- One hundred thousand, but the material won’t last long.
- That doesn’t matter, it’ll last longer than the soldiers.²⁰

Throughout this period the export boom in foodstuffs made inflation a permanent fixture in the Catalan economy. Bourgeois leaders and newspapers worried about the social consequences of simultaneous hyper-inflation and the conspicuous consumption of the wartime boom’s nouveaux riches. One newspaper reported a construction boom on the slopes of Barcelona’s Mt. Tibidabo and denounced the “...abuses of the speculative wolves with no conscience... [who] have brought the people to a state of exasperation that has resulted in that revolt sustained principally by the women in many cities in Spain.”²¹ Francesc Cambo and Pere Gual Villalbi, leaders of the conservative Regionalist League (Lliga) and the Catalan Manufacturers’ Association (Foment del Treball), denounced employers’ shortsighted selfishness, as the economy that made the rich richer and

¹⁹ Instituto de Reformas Sociales, *Memoria del servicio de la inspeccion del trabajo sobre la influencia de la guerra europea en las industrias espanolas* (Madrid, 1918), Tomo primero. 111.

²⁰ Xavier Sedo, Interview, June 1981.

²¹ *La Gazeta de Vich*, 19 January 1918.

the poor poorer helped forge a Catalonia-wide working class community.”²² Cambo said that the “germ of rancor and protest that we find at the bottom of worker demands” stemmed from the fact that “in a period of great prosperity for business, the entire profit was for the employer, without workers obtaining any improvements at all.”²³ Gual Villalbi, in a more precise analysis, lamented how “the colossal profits realized because of the war, ... deepened the differences between the social classes [and] favored the noisy ostentation and the insulting orgy of dissolution on the part of the rich and the frank and brutal envy of the disinherited.”²⁴

Inflation created enormous labor problems for employers and made it imperative that they get the state to rein in the speculative prerogatives of the latifundist oligarchy centered in Madrid. The Catalan bourgeoisie’s powerlessness before this agrarian and financial oligarchy, as well as its dependence on foreign raw materials caused the failure of such efforts. Newspapers of all political complexions—from the ultra-right monarchists to anarchists—denounced the impotence of the *Junta Provincial de Subsistencias* (Provincial Foodstuffs Control Board).

The bust that followed the artificial textile boom underscores further how Catalan dependency on the Spanish state and foreign raw materials held the bourgeoisie’s political options hostage to the resultant social conflicts. The Republican daily, *La Publicidad*, complained that “...as soon as we attempted to prohibit our exports the allies denied us their products. After this blackmail there has been no alternative but to submit.”²⁵ Cambo complained that “politically neutral, we find ourselves to be economic belligerents.”²⁶ The textile industry collapse that he himself had warned of came when Spain’s sources of raw cotton evaporated in mid-1917. Britain declared cotton to be “war contraband” and the United States entered the war, which at once deprived Catalan textile employers of American, Egyptian and Indian cotton. In addition, the British blockade of Germany deprived Catalonia of needles and artificial dyes. By the beginning of 1918 cotton stocks had diminished by almost 2/3 compared with the year before. The government imposed a three-day week on the industry.

Further rapid rises in an already punishing inflation rate coincided with the collapse of the Catalan textile industry. Basic foodstuff prices rose much faster than the official, but fictional figure of 46% per year, based on unenforceable government-regulated prices. Potatoes doubled in a few months at the end of 1917, while bread prices jumped 80% during that winter.²⁷ Lola Iturbe, then a sixteen year-old seamstress, described the winter of 1917/18 as “a very difficult time [when] there was a lot of hunger; work was hard to find and very badly paid. It was a

²² The following manifesto from the leather and textile manufacturing center of Igualada, 68 km. west of Barcelona, illustrates how inflation brought heretofore conservative small towns within leftist Barcelona’s sphere of influence: “PEOPLE OF IGUALADA: Foodstuffs, monopolized by speculating thieves, go up in price everyday; ... Barcelona and Valencia have taken a strong stand, confronting the causes of these evils... we cannot tolerate that... they scandalously trample our brothers, the strikers... Such are the causes behind our decision to throw the working people of Igualada into a general strike.” A general strike soon followed. Igualada Municipal Archive, Lligall (folder), 1916 (e).

²³ *La Gazeta de Vich*, 5 April 1919.

²⁴ Pere Gual Villalbi, *Memorias de un industrial de nuestro tiempo*, (Barcelona: Biblioteca del Foment del Treball, 1922), 169.

²⁵ *La Publicidad*, 19 January 1918.

²⁶ Francesc Cambo, *L’accio d’estat i l’accio privada en les industries que tenen sobreproduccio, conferencia*, (Barcelona: Biblioteca de Catalunya, 1 April 1917)

²⁷ *El Imparcial*, 13 January 1918, 13 April 1918.

matter of maybe eating a bit of bread or bread with sardines, and if there were others who had nothing you said, ‘here, eat some.’²⁸

This situation decimated the already precarious living standards of the mostly female textile workforce before hitting the rest of the Catalan working class. As a result, women—both home and factory workers exploded in protest against inflation more quickly and violently than the formally unionized male-dominated sectors of the working class. Women all over Spain struck not for incremental demands at their isolated workplaces, but directly at points of distribution. Women and children led assaults on grain storehouses, processing factories and bakeries in Vigo in June 1917 and in Madrid in March 1919. At the time the bourgeois press emphatically expressed its fear that the “spontaneous solidarity” of the female working class community in defense of its traditional rights, expressed in the supposedly archaic form of an Old Regime-style bread riot, might become “more than a momentary danger to the social order.” During a *jornaleros*’ (agricultural day laborers) strike in the Andalusian town of Baena in 1919 “...it was the women who played the most violent role in the strike... calling the men cowards because they didn’t do nothing” “*porque no hacen na*”).²⁹ In Seville in February 1917 “...it was the women who sustained the rebellious movement, who defied the Civil Guard and the police, who didn’t flee cowardly, like the ‘men’, who at the first sign of the tricomis [the Civil Guards’ hats], fled and abandoned their posts. “^” The headline below illustrates the Spanish bourgeoisie’s fear that open channels of communication between “spontaneous” habit, custom, and ritual on the one hand, and the formally organized institutions of mass society—in this case the Socialist Party and its ideology—on the other hand, might make of a bread riot more than just a riot:

FOODSTUFFS IN MADRID; EXPLOSION OF POPULAR FURY AGAINST INFLATION; STATE OF SIEGE DECLARED: The people assault all the foodstuff storehouses ... lightning strike by bolshevism.³⁰

This “state of siege” headline demonstrates that the Spanish state took female direct action far more seriously than later historians have. Women’s *rebomboris del pa* (bread revolts) attained their most organized and politicized form in Barcelona in January 1918. They demonstrated that community-based protests around distributive grievances prevented the Catalan bourgeoisie, including the Republican petit-bourgeoisie, from sponsoring intermediary labor authorities that could administer class conflict at isolated points of production or channel it toward a legalistic framework. This neighborhood mobilization also swept away what remained in Barcelona of trans-class Republican politics. It thus helped prepare the way for the absorption of the textile industry’s industrial unions (*sindicats unics*) into the anarchosyndicalist trade union confederation, the CNT (National Confederation of Labor). The massive influx of workers from the male-dominated *petits oficis* (“little trades”), as they were known colloquially, and their subsequent adoption of industrial unionism, came shortly thereafter, five years after female textile workers had formed industrial unions. “Spontaneous” community-based protest by unorganized women clearly had a hand in transforming the political and organizational alignment within the formally-constituted institutions of the Catalan working class. Though these riots did not initiate a social revolution, they did not just dissipate themselves into an historical void, as the historians of “instinctive rebellions of the belly” have assumed they should.

²⁸ Author’s interview with Lola Iturbe, June 1981 (hereafter cited as Iturbe interview).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1919.

³⁰ *El Imparcial* 1 March 1919.

The Riots Begin

On January 10th the Radical Party daily *El Progreso*, reported the “first sparks of popular justice” when coal dealers closed their shops rather than sell at the government-fixed price and women forced them to open and sell at precisely that price.”³¹ The ongoing supply and inflation crisis came to a head when the government became frightened into enforcing its price regulations on some of the smaller shopkeepers, located primarily in working class neighborhoods. For three years male workers had repeatedly carried out strikes against inflation, including a general strike in June 1916, but had not frightened the state into action. “Spontaneous” community-based direct action against points of distribution did, which “...so angered the coal dealers, especially those ... in the workers’ neighborhoods, that yesterday morning they refused to sell coal, despite the fact that they all had large stocks.”³²

Women in working class neighborhoods struck immediately against this lockout. On January 11th a woman named Amalia Alegre posted a manifesto at a market calling upon women to demonstrate peacefully in front of the Civil Governor’s Palace and the town hall in protest. Held that same morning, four hundred women attended this first illegal demonstration, which “formed as if by magic.” By one account, “the forces of public order could have broken up the demonstration, but didn’t, in consideration of the fact that it was made up of defenseless women.”³³

The next day the demonstrations continued. However, they were only apparently spontaneous. From their inception the women’s protests in defense of their traditional rights as consumers were linked to one of the formally organized institutions of mass society present in the working class community: a political party. Alegre had acted at the instigation of one of her neighbors, a feminist Radical Republican and journalist named Maria Marin. For Marin, the protests constituted a means to a political objective. She pursued a secular, political variation of the trans-class feminism that had motivated the social Catholic movements of bourgeois women:

For some time we have been pointing out the need for women to take a more active part in public life... Women have thrown themselves into the streets and abandoned the kitchen because there is nothing left in it to cook. Now we ask the men: how are you going to arrange to get them back in there?³⁴

She and other petit-bourgeois women, such as the owner of a small garment business, Josefa Benet, sought to limit the movement to a peaceful, legalistic protest. Marin planned for the women to march in orderly fashion through Barcelona’s main avenues and “offer to the authorities and an indifferent public a spectacle never seen before... but without causing harm to anyone, or assaulting the shops.”³⁵ During the first few days, Marin, Benet and other Radical Party politicians maintained their tutelage over the protests. On the way to the Civil Governor’s office on January 12th the women stopped at the offices of two Republican newspapers, *El Progreso* and *La Lucha*, “to whom they manifested their unconditional adherence.”³⁶

³¹ *El Progreso*, 10 January 1918.

³² *Ibid.*, 11 January 1918.

³³ *El Correo Catalan*, 11 January 1918.

³⁴ *La Publicidad*, 18 January 1918.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1918.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1918.

However, the inertia and obstinacy of the authorities as well as the women's desire for direct action, a natural right in their eyes, soon caused the Republicans to lose control of what they had started. The protests would quickly move from pleas for government charity—part of the Radicals' social paternalism—to an indirect assault by the anarchist movement on the local authorities and capitalism's distributive network. This altered the balance between the archaic elements of the protests and the aspects of modern mass politics they contained.

The day after their first meeting with the Civil Governor on Friday January 11th, "there arose among the women the idea that they should see the Governor again and notify him that they could not wait until Monday, since they had to eat."³⁷ They obtained the Civil Governor's agreement to a meeting of the Foodstuffs Control Board, the Governor himself, and the women. Nothing came of this meeting except the Civil Governor's "request" to the railroad station managers not to let grain shipments through for export north to France. Such government inaction moved the women to threaten systematic direct action of their own. By making such a threat the women, in effect, asserted their existence as an organized community with political weight. Their declaration below announced that this community was prepared to exert political pressure through coercive force in order to assert what it saw as its natural rights to subsistence. It thus constituted a challenge to the monopoly of the use of physical force in defense of property rights that all states assume as their natural right:

WOMENS' MANIFESTO: If in the space of 24 hours the prices of all foodstuffs are not fixed at their levels of January 1913 in the warehouses of the big speculators (*acaparadors*, literally, "hoarders"), the women's demonstration of Barcelona will take charge of selling them at the prices it judges most suitable.

—By agreement of female public opinion, 13.1.18³⁸

In recounting how the demonstrations "were acquiring the proportions of a riot," the republican paper *La Publicidad* reminded its readers that the 1909 anticlerical antiwar revolt known as "Tragic Week" had begun with a women's demonstration. *La Publicidad* wanted to "to point out that the smallest causes sometimes produce large consequences."³⁹ The Catalan bourgeoisie's fear of women's mass protest was clearly linked to its fear of revolution.

By January 15th Amalia Alegre and her followers vowed to withdraw from the movement if the rest of the women engaged in "disturbances." When she and a commission she led meekly left an interview with the Civil Governor without having gained any concessions, their moderation infuriated the majority, who nominated another group to present their demands. This second group gave the following response to the governor's explanations for the government's inaction:

—This doesn't tell us anything. We need to know within 24 hours what the cuts in food prices and rents will be. We can't wait any longer...

—You will find out whatever is agreed upon through the newspapers.

—If you don't take care of this matter immediately, I assure you that tomorrow we will eat better and cheaper ... we will

³⁷ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 13 January 1918.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 January 1918.

³⁹ *La Publicidad*, 13 January 1918.

—Well, if you're going to be so intransigent about it, I can count on the Police. We'll see who comes out on top.

—Enough begging for charity. Let's go. They withdrew... insisting that they would take justice into their own hands.⁴⁰

When this more radical commission informed their companions of the poor results of the interview, the women tried to invade the building. Neither the Civil Guard's saber-wielding call to halt, nor their threat to fire dissuaded the women. Then a shot rang out, and "the women's indignation knew no limit. The irascible screamed: "we should bum the Civil Governor's Palace ... and today all of them threatened to carry out their vengeance."⁴¹

The authorities' ineptitude, and above all, their knowledge that there was no substantive government intervention they could deliver other than the repression they had promised, quickened the pace at which the movement was escaping the tutelage of the moderates Marin, Alegre and Benet. The authorities made this likely outcome inevitable when they broke up the meeting at which Alegre tried to convince the women to stick to legal tactics: "because the demonstrators resisted, the Civil Guards fell on the multitude with the women fleeing terrified."⁴² At subsequent assemblies the women "strongly censured Amalia Alegre, who was accused of having sold out to the Civil Governor..."⁴³ They also shouted down Benet. It is clear that to label such a movement, with its complex transformation from peaceful protest to direct action, as an "instinctive reaction to hunger" or "a rebellion of the belly" imposes upon it a uniformity that distorts historical reality. Given the behavior of the authorities, who appeared to be more the captives of their irrational instincts than the crowds they repressed, the women's subsequent actions seem quite rational. Maria Marin herself agreed. Her comments below neither brand the women as an irrational mob nor do they posit the existence of an abyss that separated their informally-organized assertion of their traditional rights from the modern mass politics that leads to revolution:

Except for the change in time and place, what is happening among the Barcelona women reminds one of what occurs in Russia. I, Maria Marin, am Kerensky. Those who attack private property, cause harm and shout must be moved by some Trotsky in skirts.⁴⁴

The Madrid daily *El Imparcial* reported that "[the women] say that no energetic measures on the part of the government will be obtained if they don't adopt a violent posture."⁴⁵ The day after the interview with the governor they began to take women from many walks of life off streetcars to join demonstrations, including one in a wedding dress. One cartoon in the satirical weekly *L'Esquella de la Torratxa* aptly illustrated the transclass feminist element of the protests. It depicted two elegantly dressed upper class women complaining that nowadays more women than members of the opposite sex were chasing after them.

The Radical Party tried to use the trade unions to regain tutelage over the women's protests, presuming that the women's husbands, brothers and fathers would get them off the streets more

⁴⁰ *El Correo Catalan*, 15 January 1918.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15 January 1918.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19 January 1918.

⁴³ *La Publicidad*, 21 January 1918.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1918.

⁴⁵ *El Imparcial*, 19 January 1918.

easily than the government's police. As the governing party of the municipality of Barcelona, the Radicals invited the unions to participate in the Local and Provincial Foodstuffs Control Boards. In exchange for the unions' collaboration they offered them 100 positions for unemployed workers as investigators for the Control Boards. The CNT daily *Solidaridad Obrera* denounced the unions that accepted the offer as "serving only those who affirm that the working class abandons the women in their struggle for price reductions and they are the ones who refuse to echo the protest of our female comrades."⁴⁶

The Radicals failed. It was not only anarchosyndicalist control of most of the unions,⁴⁷ with their steadfast aversion to any collaboration with state institutions, that insured this failure. As the strategic imperatives of the situation itself impelled women to take an increasingly more violent direction, the movement passed to the leadership of a group of female anarchist textile workers who were also strict adherents of the CNT's ideology of direct action. They declared that "those who advise [using] means of persuasion are in error or affiliated to a political party which pretends paternity to this movement. We mustn't permit that."⁴⁸ When the female working class community asserted its traditional rights of defense against commodity speculators it rerouted the channels of communication between Barcelona working class culture and the institutions of modern mass politics present in the community. In essence, they denied the Radicals and their petit-bourgeois constituency the access they had had to that culture and its customs and rituals of self-defense.

Women such as Lola Ferrer, Libertad Rodenas and Rosari Dolcet had grown up in Francesc Ferrer's anticlerical and rationalist Modern School and had subsequently fallen in with a remarkable young anarchist militant from Igualada of feminist bent, Joan Farrer i Farriol. Lola Iturbe described how Farrer, one of the founding members of an anarchist workers' atheneum in his home town of Igualada, influenced these women from the textile industry's trade union movement: "he had this bunch of women around him ... he was a man who always occupied himself with these [womens'] movements."⁴⁹ During the 1913 textile strike it had been Farrer who had perceived the need to bring women trade unionists from Barcelona to organize the women textile workers of Igualada. Unlike most male syndicalists, who wanted to keep female competition out of the labor force, Farrer saw the importance of female involvement in the anarchist movement and of organizing female dominated industries. Farrer and these women constituted a bridge between the spontaneous solidarity of the female working class community—the product of custom and conservative motives—and anarchism, a creation of modern mass politics inhabiting a mostly male subculture of worker intellectuals. It was this bridge that could cause the women's movement to shed its deceptively archaic veneer; it could animate the movement with the lan-

⁴⁶ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 19 January 1918.

⁴⁷ By 1918 *Solidaridad Obrera* was a truly mass circulation daily. By the 1930's, under the Republic, it was the daily with the largest circulation in Barcelona.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1918.

⁴⁹ During the 1913 textile strike, when the women were initially reluctant to form a union, the men who headed the La Constancia textile workers' union in Barcelona offered to come to Igualada to organize them. Farrer had another: to bring militant women trade unionists from Barcelona to speak to the as yet unorganized women textile workers of Igualada. "It was Maria Prat who ignited the Igualada women [...]. She pointed out very well the miseries of the factory, and the harassment of the foremen... When she finished the women fell over themselves asking for union cards to the point that we ran out and had to send to the printer for more. A textile union of 2600 members was constituted, the majority women, who defended their rights like lionesses... The men who worked with them were more tentative, as if they were the women." Porcel, *La revuelta permanente*, 60.

guage and organization of modern mass politics. Since Joan Farrer i Farriol was far from typical, this bridge was always a rickety one.

These anarchist women were decidedly feminist in outlook, with a feminism nurtured by both traditional female consciousness and custom on the one hand, and the revolutionary and ideological forces in their lives on the other. They illustrate how the female working class community's "spontaneous" defense of traditional rights shaded into modern feminism and a conception of an alternative future which would subordinate property rights to the values of family and community. As the manifesto below demonstrates, they also thought of themselves as a revolutionary vanguard, distinct from and ahead of their male counterparts:

For we women, always ridiculed by men without culture, the time has come for us to show these same men the route to follow. While they demolish and despise each other with partisan politics, and are corrupted in taverns and on the gambling tables, we, the eternal victims of social problems, are destined to be the ones to get the men out of the dead end they're stuck in, the filth of politics...⁵⁰

When the bourgeois press accused the women of being prostitutes Libertad Rodenas denounced the hypocrisy of the bourgeois—"surrounded by mistresses, the product of our labor"—and urged the women to "love those unhappy women as sisters."⁵¹ The mass of the movement's non-anarchist women shared these feminist sentiments, at least strategically. Women who marched from Barcelona's outlying neighborhoods closed down the "music hall" shows in the Barri Xino (Red Light District). They swept the music hall girls along into their demonstrations and trashed the establishment of one owner who resisted.⁵² No form of business-as-usual would continue while inflation and shortages raged unchecked.

At the same time the working class women who formed the core of the movement drafted all other women into instant membership in their insurgent community. Mixed with trans-class feminism were strategic considerations and considerable resentment against bourgeois women who were ashamed of working as seamstresses.⁵³ Many advocated forcing policemen's wives and other bourgeois women to the head of the demonstrations as a brake on the Civil Guard's repressive zeal. If that failed, no matter: "...let's go up to the apartments of the bourgeois women and take them out into the street so that just like the rest of us they can be mowed down by the police and the Civil Guard."⁵⁴

When the women asserted their traditional rights against the laws of the marketplace they not only declared their solidarity with prostitutes, but posited a model of community in which women would not be bought and sold as commodities. Such action also underscored women's determination to organize autonomously: "They forced all men who tried to join the demonstration to withdraw... In an assembly of 5000 women not a single man was allowed entry."⁵⁵ The women also had a strategic motive for excluding men from their demonstrations and assemblies: "some

⁵⁰ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 21 January 1918.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21 January 1918.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21 January 1918.

⁵³ Many middle class women who worked as seamstresses "went through the streets with the package [of merchandise] hidden [because to work] was a dishonor [which] their rank didn't permit. They preferred to die of hunger rather than go to a factory and ask for work." Iturbe Interview.

⁵⁴ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 23 January 1918.

⁵⁵ *El Imparcial*, 15 January 1918.

are policemen and will betray us.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, when women consciously mobilized on an autonomous basis they did not thereby erect a female counterpart to the exclusivist trade unionism of male workers. On the contrary, mobilization by neighborhood expanded the scope of and politicized demands even before women had moved from peaceful demonstration to direct action. These expanded demands embraced more facets of life within the working class community than those that the CNT unions typically concerned themselves with:

There are many men who read books of science, philosophy and the humanities ... and show themselves off as being anarchist and syndicalist know-it-alls, but don't practice their theories in their homes, showing their wives and children no consideration.⁵⁷

The women's demands directly concerned male syndicalists. The all-female assembly of January 14th demanded amnesty for railway workers fired after the previous summer's general strike, as well as reductions in rents and food and coal prices.⁵⁸

Meanwhile the women continued their assaults on bread shops and coal wagons. On at least one occasion they insisted on paying for the contents of the latter. On January 16th *La Publicidad* reported that women had taken over a ship in Barcelona harbor laden with fish. The same paper also wrote of “guerrilla warfare” and “female armies” in the streets.⁵⁹ The following description, by the Badalona anarchosyndicalist, Joan Manent i Peses, shows that until the Spanish government called in the army, the battle was by no means one-sided. Women used rituals that invoked traditional maternal authority, treating the police and civil guard like naughty little boys, to deflate and render impotent the symbols of state authority:

The authorities, surprised by that popular movement, tried to react. But the charges of the police and the civil guard against that multitude of thousands and thousands of women failed, because the women confronted the police forces with a courage rarely equalled. More than one policeman or civil guard was given spanking and thrashing and sent home without his pants and with his alleged manhood exposed in the street.⁶⁰

By January 24th, the general strike, “by declaration of the women,” had extended to the industrial suburb of Sabadell, twenty miles away.⁶¹ “THE WOMEN, MASTERS OF BARCELONA!” headlined *El Imparcial* in Madrid, while it accurately described the scope of the women's organization and the tactics they employed. The description below underscores how it was not a faceless crowd on an irrational rampage that made “the women masters of Barcelona.” The Madrid daily's account of the elaborate organization the women employed in pursuit of their objectives illustrates Rude's point that “...the collective mentality of the crowd corresponds closely to that of the groups of individuals forming it.”⁶²

⁵⁶ Solidaridad Obrera, 12 January 1918.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 January 1918.

⁵⁸ *El Imparcial*, 15 January 1918.

⁵⁹ *La Publicidad*, 17 January 1918.

⁶⁰ Joan Manent i Peses, *Records d'un sindicalista libertari*, (Paris, 1977), 29.

⁶¹ *El Imparcial*, 25 January 1918.

⁶² Rude, *op. cit.*

Among the groups of women there is a new tactic. Some are charged, with a perfect organization, with watching over by district the women who go to work and the shops that withdraw their goods, to then prevent the former from entering work, and to loot the latter... Some groups reconnoitred the breadshops of the Gracia neighborhood, forcing (the shop-keepers) to sell bread at 45 centimos per kilo.⁶³

Lola Iturbe's oral account confirms what *El Imparcial* described. The domestic servants of her portside neighborhood met at the *Mercat del Born* (Born Market) to map out strategy, while other women of the neighborhood met at the public wash basins for the same purpose. Since women met here in the normal course of their daily activities, the police could hardly shut down such meeting places as they could a union hall or a party headquarters. Iturbe has also told how women from different neighborhoods got to know each other in prison. The ahistorical abstractions "spontaneous solidarity" and "instinctive reaction of virility to hunger" only blind us to how such social networks within the working class community form. Again, they end the investigation just where it becomes most fascinating: at the level of oral history, which could show us that there is far more to "spontaneous solidarity" than meets the eye.

The anarchist women weavers who came to lead the movement propelled what had begun as demonstrations appealing for government charity in a decidedly revolutionary direction. Some male syndicalists acknowledged this: "Yesterday you placed the standard of revolutionary conduct at such a height that you left the majority of the men who believe themselves to be able revolutionaries looking very small."⁶⁴ Other men in the CNT felt their manhood threatened, perhaps because of the women's aforementioned refusal to allow a single man to enter their demonstrations or assemblies. One syndicalist from the industrial suburb of Badalona wrote:

We men must advise our female comrades, the women of Badalona, to imitate those heroines of Barcelona, Malaga and the province of Santander... One doesn't beg for justice; one seizes it. And the hour for justice has sounded with the heroism of the women. Either we take advantage of it, or we should give our testicles to the dogs to eat.⁶⁵

The Spanish government most certainly felt threatened, unable to see any humor in the spectacle of its civil guards running through the streets of Barcelona with only their tricorn hats on. It reacted by declaring a state of siege in Barcelona province. It recognized the dangerous impact that the movement had had all over Catalonia, and that this informally organized movement could, as much as trade unions, create among workers the consciousness of belonging to a nationwide working class community:

En molts pobles de Catalunya
hom cantava
Una tal Amalia Alegre
que de molt mal humor estava
un paper va escriure un dia

⁶³ *El Imparcial*, 25 January 1918.

⁶⁴ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 21 January 1918.

⁶⁵ *La Colmena Obrera*, 19 January 1918.

dient al governador;
—Volem menjar barato,
i si això no logrem,
algu pagara el pato!—
Ai! ... Ai! ... Ai! ...
Per les dones va esser
una mala setmana,
quan anaven pel carrer,
cridant: Ai! ... Ai! ... Ai! .
que tenim gana.⁶⁶

From an isolated textile factory village outside Ripoll, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the director wrote to his employer in Barcelona:

What really gives rise to a lot of comment are the events involving the women in Barcelona, which some women [here] get all excited about and say that here they should do the same. It shouldn't be long before this happens.⁶⁷

Joan Manent i Peses, the CNT leader from Badalona whose memoirs contain the song quoted above, recounted the results of the three-week-long riots: "The victory was smashing: foodstuffs went down some thirty per cent and all the shops were abundantly supplied, because the Madrid government, frightened by what was going on in Barcelona, strongly restricted exports to the belligerent powers."⁶⁸

From Female Community to Industrial Unionism to Class Consciousness

As the women threw themselves into the streets to demand a little bit more well-being for their children, all social elements suffered a shock or looked up from their daily affairs.

Everyone tried to find out to what could be attributed this rapid awakening of the women... what causes obliged the patient and tranquil woman worker of the factory, the pretentious and semi-bourgeoisified seamstress to throw themselves like a hurricane into the streets to protest.

... Nobody supposed that the seamstress, resistant to all principles of association, inveterate enemy of all collective effort, the pacific housewife, who fights with her husband when he goes on strike... could, in a given moment... throw herself into the streets in virile and decisive protest.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Manent i Peses, *Records*, 29.

⁶⁷ Botey & Co., *Assumptes socials i vagues*, (Barcelona: unpublished private business archive), 17 January 1918.

⁶⁸ Manent i Peses, *Records*, 30.

⁶⁹ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 18 January 1918.

Later generations of historians have matched this male trade unionist's incredulity at the women's ability to informally organize a mass movement of protest and direct action of tremendous scope and violence. When they have written about such movements, historians have dispatched whole communities to political oblivion with the pejorative shorthand of "spontaneous," "archaic" or "primitive." These are the adjectives historians have used to label the analytical compartment they have reserved for those sectors of the working class previously written off as apolitical or unorganizable. When such communities have shown disturbing signs of life these labels have served to define their uprisings as blind alleys and lost causes whose failure was inevitable. Historians have reserved success—revolution or class consciousness—for the most privileged and male sectors of the working class associated with the creation of labor parties and trade unions. However, in the cases of Catalonia and Spain, such an analysis badly distorts the historical reality of how working class consciousness and strength developed. *La Publicidad* told of how male workers "have shown signs of immobility and quietism" in the face of the inflation and shortages that were the Spanish working class's single most explosive grievance.⁷⁰ In *Solidaridad Obrera* one trade union journalist urged the women to "...continue in their glorious work... which in a few days has gained what peaceful protests during three years of war have not."⁷¹

The strength of the Catalan working class that defeated General Franco's coup in July 1936 and then carried out a social revolution during the Spanish Civil War was built by the experiences it lived as a community during the First World War and the Russian Revolution. This community acquired revolutionary potential not from its inhabitants' theoretical knowledge of revolutionary ideology—in this case anarchism—but because "all the experiences of the people of the neighborhood revolved around anarchist ideas."⁷² More simply, the community dog wagged the syndicalist tail more often than the reverse. When the working class community of the Barcelona neighborhood of Horta prevented the Civil Guard from occupying their barracks all through the years of the Republic (1931–36), that experience gave an entire community, not just its members in the CNT, a sense of its power.⁷³ Because unions commonly shared headquarters with neighborhood institutions, they tended to become community institutions. For example, the largely female cardboard-folders' union in Barcelona's portside fifth district headquartered in a beer hall. In Clot the leather workers, the La Constancia textile union, and the local neighborhood association shared the same locale. During the 1909 strike against the Radical Party paper *El Progreso*, two local Radical Party centers in the industrial suburb of Terrasa, several cafes, and two choral societies donated money to the strikers. Neighborhood sentiment outweighed party affiliation.⁷⁴ These examples make totally untenable the notion that an unbridgeable gap divided "modem" or "disciplined" forms of working class protest or organization from the "spontaneous solidarity of the local labouring community" that Hobsbawm wrote of, indicating instead a symbiotic relationship between the two and the Janus-like nature of the political activity of both.

In marketplaces, neighborhood fountains, and washing areas women—especially seamstresses and textile workers—constituted the prime conduit, the lightning rod, through which the experiences alluded to above passed: "... we would hear that this [riot] had happened in this

⁷⁰ *La Publicidad*, 13 January 1918.

⁷¹ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 18 January 1918.

⁷² Magdalena Cervantes, "Una nueva fuente historica sobre la formacion de la ideologia anarquista Barcelonesa: Emili Salut y su obra *Vivers de Revolucionaris*," *Convivium*, (1978), 106.

⁷³ Iturbe Interview.

⁷⁴ *La Voz del Pueblo*, 6 March 1909.

or that neighborhood... news like that spread through the city like dust.”⁷⁵ The words of the anarchist weaver Rosari Dolcet at a January 1918 women’s assembly illustrate how informally organized direct action could propagate revolutionary ideas among the lowest rungs of the working class: “I don’t know ... if these ideas of mine are anarchist; but if to want that my two children should eat is to be anarchist, long live anarchy!”⁷⁶ Dolcet’s speech illustrates Rude’s point that the crowd, far from being either the passive instrument of demagogues, or an irrational force raging out of control, could absorb and adapt the slogans of formally organized political groups contending for a working class constituency and use them to serve their defense of the community’s traditional rights.

Newspapers from the extreme right to the moderate, electoral left recognized that women’s neighborhood insurgency contained as much subversive potential as the mechanics of political and trade union organizing. The pro-Lliga *La Gazeta de Vich* feared the revolutionary consequences of the lack of social control over women that religion and a cohesive patriarchal family had once provided: “The mass of women, so suddenly transplanted from the family sphere to the world of labor that contains the germ of class struggle, runs the danger of being easily taken in by agitators due to her ignorance of social laws. The danger is very grave...”⁷⁷

A center-left satirical weekly, *La Campana de Gracia*, concurred, albeit from a different viewpoint:

Let no one... treat as a joke this intervention of the skirts in the conflict over food-stuffs... Men make political revolutions. But in social revolutions the skirts are also revolutionary... Remember that even those who call themselves revolutionaries were afraid to talk of revolution, because today, a woman standing upright on a bench... can have more force than [Radical Party leader] Alexandre Lerroux or the political and trade union organizations. Today the women are beyond the rhythms of politics. They make history. Perhaps these might be preludes of who knows what.⁷⁸

Another satirical weekly, *L’Esquella de la Torratxa*, pointed out, in more tongue-in-cheek fashion, the tremendous impact the women had had. It marveled that the women had managed to achieve what the bourgeois nationalism of Cambo and the Lliga had failed at utterly: to get the Castilian speakers of Barcelona to speak a word of Catalan. After hearing “Ya vienen las donas!” (“Here come the women!” with the orthography and pronunciation of the Catalan word for women, “dones,” Castilianized) *L’Esquella* called them “all the force of our nation.”⁷⁹ Those at all familiar with Iberian linguistic politics can appreciate that anyone who could bring a Catalan word out of the Castilian speakers in Barcelona was making history.

Though satirical, the article forces us to ask in a serious way what impact the women had on Catalonia’s political and social alignment. This is really a two part question: how did political

⁷⁵ Iturbe Interview.

⁷⁶ *El Imparcial*, 23 January 1918.

⁷⁷ *La Gazeta de Vich*, 21 May 1921.

⁷⁸ *La Campana de Gracia*, 26 January 1918. Some of the women who led the movement viewed it as a prelude to a revolution like the one that had taken place in Russia shortly before. They made explicit references to the Russian Revolution that *La Campana de Gracia* referred to only obliquely. In one speech in Sabadell Rosari Dolcet “...referred to the revolution in Russia and with fire and conviction recommended unity [to the women] so that they be able to imitate it.” *Solidaridad Obrera*, 25 January 1918.

⁷⁹ *L’Esquella de la Torratxa*, 26 January 1918.

alignment within the working class change as a result of the movement, and what impression did this change leave on the consciousness, social policy prescriptions, and political program of the Catalan bourgeoisie?

First, the women did cause a realignment of intra-working class politics by definitively severing the ties between the transclass Republicanism of the Radical Party and Barcelona's working class community. Far from being irrational captives of their instincts, the informally organized crowds of women whom the Radicals had called upon to pursue their own political objectives utilized the Radical Party instead, as well as the CNT trade union federation, to pursue their own agenda. A movement that began as a staged demonstration of transclass feminism and Republicanism demanding little more than charity from the authorities quickly turned to mass direct action. The movement's original sponsors, who had conceived of the original demonstration as a way to forge a paternalistic tie between the unorganized poor and the political agenda of the progressive petit-bourgeoisie, were horrified by the course it subsequently followed.

This secular version of social Catholicism was no longer possible when it was the Radical Party's functionaries of the municipality of Barcelona who guarded the markets against attack and a large part of the Party's constituency—shopkeepers—refused to sell goods at the official prices.⁸⁰ The Radicals and other Republican parties felt so menaced by the force and scope of female direct action that when the demonstrators passed by their headquarters they called them thieves. Republican leader Marcelino Domingo's daily, *La Lucha*, proclaimed "death to the thief" as its slogan. The Republicans dusted off the time-honored tactic of branding female protestors as unnatural by making oblique references to possible homosexuality within their ranks: "Until now women wanted to be followed by men. Now things have changed. Now women force those of their own sex to follow them. There is no doubt that this is in very poor taste. It is deplorable that the war should have brought us these inversions."⁸¹ Beginning several years before the consumer war of 1918, the female working class community contributed heavily to an organizational realignment within the trade union movement. With the Catalonia-wide *La Constancia* strike of August 1913, the female-dominated textile industry became the first to abandon craft unionism for industrial unionism. After another strike of similar scale in June 1916, the Constancia union joined the CNT. The greater effectiveness of the new form of labor organization was soon noticed by some of the men in the CNT. Workers trying to organize an industrial union in Barcelona's utility and electrical equipment industry called upon the workmen to "...look at the example of the Constancia Textile Workers' Union, which with the cooperation of men of conscience and the help of some brave woman comrades, has come to have an organization of such strength that face-to-face with the employers of the industry it is indestructible."⁸² Two weeks later, when its leaders declared the new union to be "fully functioning," they asked the workers of the textile union to demand of those workmen with whom they lived that they join the union."⁸³ If the textile workers were the conceptual source for industrial unionism, the neighborhood clearly provided the means for its implementation.

However, the workers of the "little trades" outside the textile industry generally ignored the syndicalists' advice until late 1918 or 1919. Most workmen clung to their traditions of craft unionism. When the CNT's Barcelona Congress of June 1918 endorsed industrial unionism, the mech-

⁸⁰ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 22 January 1918.

⁸¹ *L'Esquella de la Torratxa*, 26 January 1918.

⁸² *Solidaridad Obrera*, 13 January 1917.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1917.

anism of formally-constituted trade union organization—the men had finally caught up to the women. Eight months later the CNT multiplied its membership by more than one thousand percent as the gas and electrical workers' strike against the "Canadiense" power company turned into a general strike. The spectacle of whole industries striking frightened the bourgeoisie into escalating the conflict with a successful lockout against the entire working class. The real denouement to this step-by-step escalation toward civil war came when the employers embraced first covert terror, then state repression, and finally military intervention against the new industrial unions. The unequal worker-employer "war of the pistoleros" was followed by employer sponsorship of legislation to outlaw industrial unions and force workers along with their employers into vertical syndicates organized by craft.⁸⁴ In promoting their corporatist agenda, employers expressed their aversion to the riotous female working class community outside the social controls of the pre-industrial patriarchal family.⁸⁵ Their fear that "the promiscuous mixing of the sexes" in the workplace would create a truly cross-gender working class community formed an integral part of the new militant corporatism: "...we can never emphasize enough the need for [women's] education after formal schooling. They possess the treasure of a greater and more exquisite sensitivity. Channel this ... and women will be a brake on violent passions ... from her breast children will not be nursed on class hatred."⁸⁶

The Catalan bourgeoisie's corporatist agenda extended into politics, to the militarization of bourgeois rule. All the leading lights of the organized Catalan employers—the presidents of the Catalan Employers' Federation, the *Foment del Treball Nacional* (Promotion of National Production), the latter's former president, the leading Catalan delegate to the Spanish Employers' Confederation, and the leader of the Regionalist League—all spoke out in favor of state sponsorship of bourgeois paramilitary groups and praised Italian fascism when it arrived on the scene.⁸⁷ When faced with a choice between two enemies, its own working class or the centralist Spanish state which denied its national aspirations, the organized Catalan bourgeoisie opted for the latter as the lesser of the two evils. Catalan employers showed their enthusiasm for the Italian model when they endorsed the coup d'état of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in October. Indeed, so anxious were they for military rule that they published their endorsement of Primo's coup the day before he carried it out!

More than five years earlier, the middle class editors of *La Campana de Gracia* had written that the women "make history." Neither the editors nor the women suspected what kind of history they would make.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1917.

⁸⁵ *La Gazeta de Vich*, 21 May 1921.

⁸⁶ Confederacion Patronal Espanola, *Segundo Congreso Patronal. Memoria. 20–26 Octubre 1919* (Barcelona: Biblioteca de Cataiunya, 1919), 206. 205.

⁸⁷ These legislative proposals are contained in: *Exposicion que la Federacion Patronal de Cataluna ha elevado at Excmo. Senor Ministro del Trabajo sobre la sindicacion profesional obligatoria* (Barcelona: Camara de Comercio, 1922) and *Informacion relativa al proyecto sobre sindicacion obligatoria*, (Barcelona: Foment del Treball Nacional, 1921). The following excerpt from the former document indicates how important the employers' associations felt their corporatist legislative agenda to be: "Employers, in soliciting a Unionization Law, cannot forget that the entire edifice of our future social legislation has to rest on this Law." The resulting legislation that the Social Reforms Institute formulated for the Labor Ministry stipulated that unions would be strictly local and organized by craft; *Boletin del Instituto de Reformas Sociales* (Madrid: in the Foment del Treball library, Barcelona), November–December 1922. This brought to fruition the corporatist social policy agenda Guillem Graell, the president of the *Foment del Treball Nacional*, had first formulated in 1918: "workers' associations have to be professional, merely technical, a true guild ... so as to put out the fire of Utopia." *Programa economico, social y politico para despues de la guerra* (Barcelona municipal archive, 1918), 224–25.

Conclusion

As the Catalan working class gradually assimilated mass politics and its forms of protest, ideology, and organization, it forged a sense of identity as a community in opposition to both the Catalan bourgeoisie and the Spanish state. As Catalan workers developed a consciousness of class and community, archaic notions of community and the defense of its traditional rights to life, peace, and subsistence concurrently filtered and masked the process. There have been other conflicts in which conservative motives articulated by archaic forms of protest and political discourse have shrouded revolutions in their stage of incubation. The French historian Francois Furet has written how the revolutionaries of 1789 drew up lists of grievances for the impending meeting of the Estates General:

... [they] were imprisoned in what one might call their out-moded channels of communication with the monarchy... [and] hid the new political configuration... they speak of “the nation” in order to demand the restoration or the securing of its rights... [and] on the old idea that there is a set of original rights predating the monarchy itself...⁸⁸

In similar fashion the Catalan working class was bilingual in its political discourse for at least one generation before, and for some time after the movement described here. Traditional “female consciousness” constituted both the symptom of, and the vehicle for expressing this bilingualism in political and social discourse. Forms of protest and community organization which stressed the defense of traditional rights stubbornly resisted becoming as obsolete as later generations of historians have judged them. Such seemingly archaic forms of protest and organization fulfilled an essential function for the working class in a state whose guarantees of civil liberties were always partially illusory and which could in any case be legally suspended at any time, as they were in January 1918. Later nationwide general strikes, backed up by the syndical infrastructure, only very gradually superseded localized community protests and consumer riots. As the weight of the working class’ experience of rebellion and repression tipped the balance toward the overt expression of modern mass politics, the bourgeoisie answered in kind. The bourgeoisie’s political discourse and ideas on social policy ceased to stress nostalgia for a long lost age of paternalistic class harmony and a voluntary and privately administered return to that era. The new themes of compulsory vertical unions “industrial armies” —and the cartelization of industry were expressed in a futuristic tone and stressed state coercion as the route to the impending corporatist Utopia.⁸⁹ Phrases such as the “the economic mobilization of the entire nation” and “the imposition of cartelization” revealed how the bourgeoisie grafted the social and economic doctrines of a fascism-in-embryo onto its historic nostalgia for Old Regime paternalism. Without entirely leaving behind the world of Pope Leo XIII, the Catalan bourgeoisie embraced that of Mussolini.

The womens’ consumer riots, which began by speaking an archaic political discourse, but rapidly adopted the language of modern mass politics and anarchist ideology, enable us to glimpse a similar evolution within the working class in greatly accelerated time-lapse fashion. “Female consciousness”, which emphasized women’s traditional social function in placing human needs and distributive justice before property and profit, enabled the anarchist women who seized

⁸⁸ Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, New York, 1981), 42–43.

⁸⁹ Graell, *Programa economico*, 206–07.

control of the movement to mix ostensibly archaic ritual with the ideology and organization of modern mass politics. It is this melange of the archaic and the modern, whose far-reaching political potential historians have usually overlooked, that allowed women's conservative motives to have revolutionary consequences:

... to take this city with these hands, our hands, is it possible? ... This city will be taken, if not by our hands, at least by others like ours, but stronger. Stronger perhaps for having been better hardened, thanks to our very weakness... But they will take the city.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Victor Serge, *The Birth of Our Power*, (New York, 1967), p. 74. This is a novelistic account of the Russian revolutionary Serge's 1917 exile in Barcelona, written in 1931, five years before the Spanish Civil War.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lester Golden
The Women in Command
The Barcelona Consumer's War of 1918
1985

Retrieved on 10th November 2025 from escholarship.org

usa.anarchistlibraries.net