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Breaking the Waves

Challenging the Liberal Tendency within Anarchist
Feminism

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(Chile). She was a garment industrial seamstress for many years, engaging in union and political organizing. She has also participated in many international socialist and anarchist gatherings over the years that have informed her internationalist perspective.

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- The abolition of state sanctioned marriage, which seeks to define relationships and families through the allocation of benefits and social acceptance
- Freedom for all people from intimidation by the threat or use of gendered violence; an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate patriarchal dominance and aggression; an immediate intervention to defend the lives of those existing at the intersections of multiple oppressions, who are disproportionately at risk of harm or death

Conclusion

We have outlined the need for a return to building feminist mass movements and the instigation of fresh anarchist ideas and tactics within emerging struggles. But as we formulate our role and our demands, we also need to consider how and where anarchist feminism has something to offer these movements. Through a re-investigation of our revolutionary heritage, and a principled engagement with the exciting new theories and practices of our global comrades, we can continue to transition from our small collectives and online communities to a position of consolidated political strength. This process will allow us to combat experiences of individual hardship with collective struggle and eventually contest the hegemonic power of capitalism and the state. If anarchist feminism fails to adapt to the challenges of our political moment, we must resign ourselves to a decade of think pieces documenting the rollback of the few remaining rights hard won by the social movements of our predecessors. We deserve better and we are ready to fight for it.

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- Sex, antisexist, and interpersonal education; addressing the need for an interdisciplinary method of education that teaches children and teenagers about sex education and challenges patriarchal gender norms; The Non-Sexist Education campaigns in Latin America and Spain offer examples of how to promote and push for an antipatriarchal, anticapitalist, and anticolonial education system.
- Revocation of the Taft-Hartley Act and Smith-Connally Act; Both of these acts were passed in the 1940s to hamper the gains and political weight of the labor movement following the organizing campaigns of the CIO in the 1930s and the strike waves following World War II (when 25 percent of the labor force was unionized). While we think we should organize no matter the legality given to us by the state, revoking these acts will give the working class breathing room to self-organize and strike. These acts currently prohibit wildcat strikes, secondary boycotts, solidarity strikes, and federal employees from striking. They further allow the federal government during wartime to seize and control an industry in which the workers have threatened, or are on,
- The decriminalization of sex work and support for the horizontal self-organization of sex workers
- That undocumented workers be fully protected by American labor laws, and that the enactment of these rights not be punishable by deportation; also, that the laws are expanded and additional resources are made available to address gender-based workplace inequalities and harassment

The Black Rose Anarchist Federation sent a delegation to participate in AFem2014, an international anarchist feminist conference developed by a committee of anarchists organizing in the UK. The goals of AFem2014 were to challenge sexism and other forms of oppression within the anarchist movement and to create a “safer space” to start conversations around individual and collective experiences that could be translated into organizing work. The conference committee hoped that the energy generated by this event would reinvigorate anarchist feminism as a whole, and would be reproduced as an ongoing series of conferences with a global impact. When viewed from this perspective, AFem2014 was an important political development that highlights the growth of anarchism and the need to advance the theory and practice of feminism within it. However, the Black Rose delegation left AFem2014 with more questions than answers, the foremost being, “What is anarchist feminism?”

AFem2014 lacked the ambition that would have allowed its potential to be realized. It was taken for granted that simply existing under patriarchy was a radical act and that this shared experience of oppression would be able to serve as a proxy for a shared political heritage and perspective. While we celebrate our own survival and that of our comrades, we are unwilling to settle for it. In fact, if we allow anarchist feminism to remain anchored in our identities rather than our practices, we risk being caught unprepared when challenges arise that demand more than a surface correction. For example, there were several occasions within the conference where the safer spaces policy would have been bolstered by a specific analysis regarding race and imperialism; the result was that a white participant wearing dreadlocks received a quick admonishment for cultural appropriation, but a complicated and painful incident regarding the silencing of a speaker relating experiences of gendered violence in the Middle East went unaddressed. As members of this delegation, we anticipated that the international nature of the

conference would allow participants a unique opportunity to compare organizing strategies from different parts of the world and return home with new political relationships that would lay the groundwork for future coordination. Unfortunately, the conference was underdeveloped in several ways that limited this potential. The primary example was the conference committee's prioritization of developing rigorous attendance and safer space policies and simultaneous failure to apply this same rigor to the solicitation and development of the conference content. There was a great deal of weight placed on having the "right" people attend (those directly impacted by gendered oppression) and creating the "right" environment in which they could meet (one governed by a safer spaces policy designed to exclude oppressive behavior). These are not negative things in and of themselves, but we found that the hyperfocus placed on them to the exclusion of the intentional curation of the political content resulted in a representation of anarchist feminism that simultaneously included all politics and no politics.

In order to respond to the political crises of our day, anarchist feminism must be able to communicate with knowledge and conviction. Those of us who wish to develop this political tendency must locate ourselves within history and build upon the lessons of the past. We must develop new theories and test them in struggle. We must build mass movements and advocate for anarchism from within them. We must make demands, and, in the words of Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, "take or win all possible reforms with the same spirit that one tears occupied territory from the enemy's grasp in order to go on advancing."¹ Finally, we must orient ourselves internationally and engage in solidarity with our global comrades. Through these practices, anarchist feminism can become a specific political force capable of confronting the formidable challenges set before us by capitalism and the state.

¹ Errico Malatesta, "Reformism," *Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings*

them, regardless of gender, sexual practices, relationship type, or family model

- Parental leave, family emergency leave, rights and resources for domestic care, fully accessible services in the home and in public for people with disabilities.
- Expansion of government-funded housing; access to quality housing that enhances the ability of community interactions through design and provisional resources that meets the many needs and safety of those who will live there
- Community control of spaces and resources to better achieve the goals of that community. It is important for this organizing to stem from community organizing and assemblies, differentiated from community spaces that do charity work that limits the autonomous and self-organizing capacity of working-class communities.
- Full autonomy for indigenous peoples and the provision of resources free of cost; After hundreds of years of colonial oppression and resource exploitation, indigenous communities must be given full control over their land and livelihood. Resources needed to rebuild their communities as they see fit must be given as minimal compensation. This includes cleaning up mining waste and the return of stolen land. There are many other demands presented by indigenous communities in resistance and they should all be met.
- The socialization of education; The expansion of education for all (no matter their age) as a social right, instead of a privilege

tors (labor, territorial, student movement) as the basis for political action, reinforcing social movement building.

intersectional and intersectoral.³³ The rebuilding of a feminist movement that is committed to fighting colonialism and patriarchal capitalism has to engage with broader social issues. We want to move beyond the cycle of what we are against because there is so much that we would like to create. We view this list of demands as a work in progress: seeds that need the nutrients of a collective movement to give them life and meaning. The following is a list of our initial demands:

- Universal healthcare
- Support for reproductive and non-reproductive rights through the creation of reproductive, sexual, and gender-based service clinics, including free abortion on demand, in all public hospitals, and in geographically isolated locations
- Support for reproductive services for individuals who wish to have or adopt children. This includes free community childcare facilities, available food programs in the neighborhood and at school. These programs also encourage breaking down masculine gender roles and expectations in relation to family and community care.
- Services for survivors of gendered violence, including housing, therapy, and access to mental health services
- Rehabilitation services for sex offenders, including group and individual therapy
- That all healthcare and related services be provided with respect, knowledge, and compassion to those who seek

³³ We are placing two political terms used in different places. Intersectional is used in the US and the UK. Intersectoral (or multisectoral) is used in Chile. Intersectional calls for an analysis that includes identity, race, and class. Multisectoralism includes those aspects but places the emphasis of sec-

By definition, a broad feminist movement will not fully represent our politics. Instead, it will serve as an avenue to challenge and advance feminism where it is being made: on the streets, in our homes, at our jobs, in the media, and through our intricate and overlapping social networks. Pushing anarchist feminism out of our small collective spaces and into the social arena means that we are willing to struggle for relevance within the movements of the working class. Our politics are more than just useful tools for managing our personal lives; they represent the blueprints for a world worth fighting and dying for. *Breaking the Waves* is a call to break with liberal feminism and acknowledge the necessity of reconstructing our own anarchist feminist historical tradition. We are simultaneously declaring a need for anarchists who are feminists and feminists who are anarchists to discuss and debate what anarchist feminism means in practice and to refine that definition through renewed struggle. Our goal is not to provide a complete guide to a new anarchist feminism, but to advance a few steps beyond the vague politics that characterize this moment. We anticipate many readers will share the frustrations and ambitions of this article, based on our own experiences and conversations with comrades who have felt similarly constrained by an anarchist movement that lacks a meaningful feminist practice and a feminist movement that declares collective struggle can only begin once we've purified ourselves and all those with whom we would organize. In the former, our politics are marginalized along with our voices. In the latter, there is no room for education to take place in struggle. The pressures of double militancy are exacerbated when our two political spaces compete for our time and labor. When we spoke to comrades within our own organizations, at AFem2014, and in all the other myriad contexts in which we encounter each other, there was a common theme expressed: we deserve better and we are ready to fight

of Errico Malatesta (Oakland: PM Press, 2015)

for it. We hope that this article can be a factor in generating a productive, challenging conversation around the issues we've raised, and we are eager to engage with theoretical contributions and criticisms as they come.

Anarchist Feminism

Anarchist feminism is a term that lacks a clear definition. In the US anarchist movement, it is employed so inconsistently that it is difficult to distill its meaning down to more than “antipatriarchal work done by anarchists, usually women.” In a world where our revolutionary movements have rich histories of theory and struggle to draw from, we do not believe such a definition is sufficient. Since anarchist feminism lacks a narrative of unbroken collective struggle, it operates as an “edgier” form of feminism, which is most visible when confronting patriarchy in the realm of interpersonal interaction and can be measured by the experience of the individual and their ability to adapt to specific social behaviors and insular lifestyles. However, this lack of history and specificity has not prevented individuals or organizations from making significant political contributions in the name of anarchist feminism.

The publication of *Quiet Rumors: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader* (1978) marked an important step in elucidating the anarchist feminist tradition. By bringing together a diverse selection of authors and continuing to update the content through subsequent editions, the editors captured the fractured, often contradictory, and evolving politics that fall under the umbrella of anarchist feminism. A review by Red Sonja, a member of the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NE-FAC) notes, “If anarchism ‘undefined’ is the sprawling body of thought that it is, reaching such polar philosophical dis-

² “Book Review: *Quiet Rumors: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader*,” *Common Struggle/Lucha Común*, April 20, 2003

Yet, the tactic of “voting for feminism” often comes to nothing due to minimal support, and/or the lack of proposals to implement ongoing internal work, including the failure to build the political capacity of female, transgender, and queer comrades. We need more than feminism on paper; we need an antipatriarchal commitment in our internal and external activities. La Alzada’s areas of work reflect demands for the legalization of abortion, sexual reproductive and non-reproductive rights, and for non-sexist education. They also challenge assumptions around strategic sector organizing, offering an intervention to rupture the patriarchal capitalist system.³¹³²

Breaking the Waves calls for a break with liberal feminism, citing the tendency for liberal feminism’s political dominance to stall the development of revolutionary feminist theory and praxis. We want to move beyond defensive demands and self-criticism that reflect a scramble for the crumbs that the system has offered. Instead, we want to redirect the flow of our political energy into building movements that go on the offensive to simultaneously improve our daily lives through social demands, while prefiguring the type of society we wish to construct. This also means treating our smaller campaigns as opportunities to learn and train for the long war against patriarchal capitalism. We have the political energy and desire to fight, but we have not learned how to maximize that flow of energy in a revolutionary way.

A movement needs achievable goals and a reason for an individual to invest time, energy and, possibly, their life. Some of us are driven by strong ideological commitments, while others participate based on issues that directly affect our personal and familial life. The process of identifying these commonalities will be the bloodline to a broader movement that is both

³¹ Strategic sectors are sectors given priority. See note 20.

³² Patriarchal capitalism is a specific term used by La Alzada militants to force a strategic building dialogue that analyzes capitalism and patriarchy as interwoven systems and not in stages.

our politics in an authentic way that has the ability to expand and escalate as struggles intersect. While making social demands on the state is frequently denounced as a reformist tactic, certain reforms can improve and save the lives of working people and strategically develop our revolutionary capacity. The struggle to achieve these types of immediate victories can generate a practice of cross-movement solidarity, and, eventually, challenge the political arena of the state in which we can influence the rhythm of politics, rather than simply chase or react to bourgeois politics. In order to act effectively in these broad coalitions, we must have a clear understanding of, and commitment to, our own politics. We must be prepared to consider which demands can bear compromise and which must retain their explicit, radical character.

In synthesizing the sections about La Alzada and the recent historical background there are several points we want to underscore. The outlining of the US feminist movement since the 1990s is meant to historically place where we stand today. The general attitude towards feminism in the US is that we are preparing eulogies for “whom the bell tolls.” Articles such “The War on Women Is Over—and Women Lost” in *Mother Jones* recap the loss of reproductive rights over the last few decades.²⁹ These articles often leave out the current social movements in the US that can be the basis for articulating a new feminist politics brewing in the margins.³⁰ La Alzada offers an example of an anarchist feminist organization that is committed to both internal and external work, including new gender theories (such as sexual dissidence) within a class struggle framework. In many anarchist and Leftist organizations, attempts are made to demonstrate solidarity with the fight against patriarchy by showing strong support for feminist concerns and proposals.

²⁹ Redden, “The War on Women Is Over—and Women Lost,” *Mother Jones*.

³⁰ Chris Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today’s Transformative Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press Books, 2014).

tances as rugged individualism on one hand and libertarian communism on the other, then ‘anarcha-feminism’ also covers such a vast political terrain with fuzzy boundaries.”² Unfortunately, many of the essays contained in *Quiet Rumors* stand in isolation, lacking a coherent thread to follow from one idea to the next. In the preface to the third edition, author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz celebrates the recentering of female anarchist heroines and states, “Our task as anarcha-feminists can be nothing less than changing the world and to do that we need to consult our heroic predecessors.”³ And yet, it is often the case that anarchist feminism is defined exclusively by these female revolutionaries at the expense of understanding them in the context of the organizations and movements in which they operated.

As an anarchist who spoke and wrote at length about the oppression of women, Emma Goldman is the first (and often the last) name that comes to mind when thinking of anarchist feminism. She was anything but an individualist and overemphasizing her as such misplaces her historically. In the US, she was politically active in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), participated in the struggle to legalize birth control, and the antiwar movement during the First World War. Goldman continues to be influential within anarchism because of her notable impact within larger movements and historical events and it is a mistake to view her exclusively as a romantic figure that is commonly misquoted as declaring, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” There are several contemporary anarchists that stand beside Goldman in her place of prominence, such as Lucy Parsons and Voltairine De Cleyre. It is rare for organizations to rise to the level of feminist celebrity achieved by the aforementioned individuals, but even anarchists uninterested in the historical struggle of

³ Dark Star Collective, *Quiet Rumors: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008), p. 11.

women can be counted on to know *Mujeres Libres*, a women's organization that fought for gender equality during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The tendency to view our politics as exemplified by valorized individuals leaves us open to many pitfalls. First, we are encouraged to imagine the politics of these individuals as frozen in time, rather than as a product of a lifetime of experiential learning. Second, by binding ourselves to individuals rather than specific political theories and practices, we are forced to find a way to ignore their inevitable failings or be willing to discard them completely as imperfect avatars of prefiguration. The truth is that in many cases, the gender of our predecessors is the least interesting thing about them. We will serve them better (and in doing so, serve ourselves better) by placing them in their proper historical context and studying how they navigated the political challenges of their day.

Anarchist feminism has failed to develop a politics that is distinct from liberal feminism, socialist/Marxist feminisms, or radical feminism. Instead, it signals the rejection of the sexist culture found in previous generations of political work without ever clarifying a positive vision of how we are to shape our movements, or which theories and tactics are best suited to our goals. Without a revolutionary ideology to illuminate the path towards ever-increasing challenges to the state and capitalism, individuals in these spaces are left with few choices but to turn forever inward, raising their consciousness, but to no higher purpose. And yet, there is a collective desire within anarchism to struggle against patriarchy. At every turn, we are told that the solution is an individual one. But here, we anarchists and aspiring anarchist feminists agree with Carol Hanisch in her seminal article, "The Personal is Political": "There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."⁴

⁴ Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970)

ships that women, queer, genderqueer, and transgender folks experience on the job and within working-class communities.

Our search for a pure prefiguration has grown into a collective practice of hyper-vigilance in which callout culture has emerged as a new power structure. It is most visible in online feminist and queer communities localized in social media sites such as Tumblr. The so-called "social justice warriors" often use public shaming and individual promotion to develop political clout. This has reinforced a purist activist approach in which there is no differentiation between someone who is trying to understand political terminology and chauvinistic, transphobic trolls. Where we differ is not on the importance of prefiguration, but with the interpretation of prefiguration as a state of fixed purity instead of an ideal we are always in the process of realizing. In the meantime, the feminist movement offers little threat to the status quo and continues to idle in the stagnant waters of liberal politics.

Before We Take it All, We Demand the Following

As anarchist communists committed to intersectional class struggle (meaning our organizing reflects an analysis of how different forms of oppression and exploitation interact), our feminist praxis is informed by a political lineage that provides us with tools for understanding and advancing our struggles against capitalist patriarchy. We can draw on the lessons of the Paris Commune, Russian Revolution, and Spanish Civil War. Simultaneously, we can engage with the emerging theories and practices of the global South. US anarchists in particular need not restrict our revolutionary education to the classroom when there are opportunities to learn from comrades actively testing exciting, new methods of engagement in the Americas. By using the *especifist* tactic of social insertion, we can introduce

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) by Judith Butler and *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) by bell hooks had a strong influence on feminist politics and offered recognition of queer politics. Academia became a place where feminism could flourish, but it also became increasingly disconnected from the struggles of working-class people due to its isolation within classrooms. In the last few years, movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter have emerged. While elements of college-based feminism are visible within the practices of these movements, the effect was minimal. This type of feminism was not designed to thrive outside the walls of the academy. College-based feminism can be credited with introducing some feminist ideas to the mainstream. For example, the issue of rape on college campuses has recently been acknowledged by the Obama administration and is being discussed in many major media outlets, providing opportunities for radical narratives, such as education around rape culture and pushback against slut shaming and catcalling. New feminists are analyzing the systemic impact of patriarchy on their own lives, but their framing too often reflects the experiences and demands of a particular political actor: the college student. The result of this limitation is a culture that prioritizes symbolic action and online debate over collective struggle.²⁸ The emphasis on the individual experience of patriarchy, and individual responses, reflects the depth with which liberal politics has affected US feminist activism. But this focus on the individual does not take into consideration the broader hard-

of the prison system, and large rallies in support of Mumia Abu Jamal. However, these movements became smaller following the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in Seattle and by 2002 the focus became the anti-war movement.

²⁸ One of the main debates happening on college campuses is about the use of trigger warnings. See: Rani Neutill. "My trigger-warning disaster: "9 1/2 Weeks," "The Wire" and how coddled young radicals got discomfort all wrong," *Salon*, Oct. 28, 2015

The Limits of Wave Theory and Academic Feminism: What is our Historical and Political Lineage?

Academic feminists have cataloged the history of feminist movements in the US into three progressive waves. The First Wave centered on the struggle for suffrage in the early twentieth century. The Second Wave—known as the Women's Liberation Movement—developed in the 1960s and '70s around the fight to legalize abortion and the failed demand for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Finally, the Third Wave continues to function as a critique of the white and heteronormative politics of Second Wave discourse and represents a shift from a movement-based politics to a more individual approach. Since it lacks grounding in a particular struggle, the ideas and practices of this wave persist without a clear conclusion. This Western conception of modern feminist history is broadly understood and accepted, and yet, there is still a great deal of debate around the precise character of each wave and how they impact the feminisms of today. Even now, there is a scramble to define a Fourth Wave in relation to women's participation in emerging technologies. However, as anarchists and feminists working within a revolutionary tradition, we cannot trace our lineage through individualist, liberal, or academic formations of feminism.

Many anticapitalist, revolutionary women have been conveniently left out of academic texts and histories. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, socialist women had little association with First Wave feminism because of its bourgeois component and reformist framework. In the UK, where the suffrage movement had a larger working-class base and utilized more militant tactics, there was more political interaction.⁵

⁵ Nym Mayhall, Laura E. *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

University feminist theory courses rarely entertain critiques of the suffrage movement, which de facto erases the activities of these revolutionary women. Instead, they celebrate the accomplishments of the First Wave and place it within the narrative of historical progress. But was it progress when white suffrage organizers refused to include Black suffrage fighters such as Ida B. Wells? The history of feminism is full of these contradictions that stand as important learning experiences. As we search for the words and actions from which to construct our tradition, we will find affinity in both familiar and unlikely places, including the traditions of Marxist and liberal feminisms. Building an anarchist feminist historical tradition will give us a platform to advance our own politics, understand our work in the context of what has already been done, and then forge ahead. Anarchist feminists who seek to reconstruct their political tradition must navigate carefully, and even bravely sail into foreign waters. We have always existed, but we have not always been seen.

In *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, the authors state, “We admit a certain discomfort with the tendency of many writers to label women anarchists and syndicalists, ‘anarchist feminists,’ or ‘anarcha-feminists.’”⁶ We share their discomfort. This practice reflects a trend that emerged among Second Wave historians and activists who began to search for women in history. Some began to retroactively label strong and independent women from the historical past as feminists, reinforcing an ahistorical understanding of feminism. Furthermore, these writers and theorists failed in offering a dialectical analysis of feminism, the meaning of which has changed over the last one hundred plus years. During the Second Wave feminist movement in the US, a political shift occurred as many socialist women infused the feminist

⁶ Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 23.

tion their central rallying call.²⁵ Liberal feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) offered minimal response and, instead, pushed to expunge the use of the word “abortion” from its propaganda. Higher costs and a service consolidation into urban areas meant the private clinic model limited the availability of reproductive services.

In the 1990s, women had little choice but to defend narrow gains.²⁶ This marked the end of an offensive women’s movement that sought to expand rights and a transition to a defensive one that desperately struggled to retain the gains of the previous decade. It is helpful to note that the feminist punk scene of Riot Grrrl emerged at the same time as Operation Rescue was shutting down abortion clinics and Bill Clinton reversed “welfare as we know it.” Riot Grrrl was a political response to the frustrations of a new generation facing a moment of political weakness and disappointment. A cultural movement such as Riot Grrrl offered a much-needed critique of male-dominated spaces, yet was confined to a limited audience. This era also introduced organizations such as INCITE! (founded in 2000) whose work focused on community accountability and restorative justice as a response to the massive expansion of the prison industrial complex (PIC) during the 1990s. Many of the founders of INCITE! came out of Critical Resistance, a California-based prison abolition organization. However, the decline of social movements capable of resisting neoliberalism generated a tendency towards self-reflection, and the creation of projects with a limited scope and base of participants.²⁷

Since the 1990s, there has been an expansion of feminist and queer theory in universities. Works such as *Gender Trouble:*

²⁵ Isabel Wilkerson, “Drive Against Abortion Finds a Symbol: Wichita,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1991

²⁶ Molly Redden, “The War on Women is Over—And Women Lost,” *Mother Jones*, September/October 2015

²⁷ During the mid to late 1990s, California experienced several social movements, including immigrant rights rallies, opposition to the expansion

of feminist and anarchist praxis within other movements as necessary to their revolutionary commitment. If we consider anarchist spaces or the labor movement as “not worth it,” then why bother calling ourselves anarchist feminists?

The Backdrop to Contemporary Feminist Politics

The 1990s marked a political shift in global politics, as well as in anarchist and feminist organizing. The fall of the Soviet Union led to a mass disillusionment with Leninist politics, but it was also a moment of political reorganization for global capitalism. The lack of an adversary allowed for the expansion of neoliberal policies proposed by the Washington Consensus.²³ The Washington Consensus was a term coined in 1989 in a piece written by John Williamson. It described the political and economic policies that were being debated in Washington to usher in a new post-Cold War era and the eventual expansion of economic policies that later became known as neoliberalism. The economic arena met the social when attacks on social reforms became necessary for the streamlining of these policies. In the US, there was a consolidation of the neoliberal economic order with Evangelical Christian ideology that, in turn, generated the so-called Culture Wars. Among others, Rush Limbaugh, who became a central figure in the 1990s, used Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural war to reverse the social gains of the previous thirty years. Feminists were unprepared for such a challenge.²⁴

Right wing social movements such as Operation Rescue emerged from this period and made the criminalization of abor-

²³ See John Williamson, “A Short History of the Washington Consensus”

²⁴ Charlie Bertsch, “Gramsci Rush: Limbaugh on the Culture War,” *Bad Subjects*, 1994

ideology of the era with their anticapitalist and revolutionary views. While there were a handful of socialist and anarchist women who used the feminist label in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the vast majority did not. This was because feminism emerged as a movement that represented the needs of bourgeois and upper middle class women who wanted the same access to citizen rights and professional opportunities as their male counterparts.

Debating the retroactive use and misuse of feminism is not a petty dispute over terms and hyphenation, but a matter of political import. First, not doing so places all feminisms as part of the same family and reinforces gender over class and political affiliation. Second, it erases entire political legacies, especially revolutionary traditions that functioned outside of, and sometimes against, the waves. The majority of socialist and anarchist women cannot escape the feminist hyphenation that reminds everyone of their gender. Additionally, this practice of finding “feminists” in history creates a feminist false consciousness that reinforces the notion that some women are “unaware” of their feminism, while women who fall outside of expected feminist behaviors are labeled “unsisterly” or “patriarchal women.”⁷ There are some women who support patriarchy, but the vast majority has to negotiate and compromise to survive within this patriarchal and capitalist society. Finally, by not placing various feminisms within their historical context, the ideological core of feminism is softened and dispersed to the point that it ceases to be a collection of theories and practices and is instead replaced by a timeless, transcendent feeling that even the likes of Hillary Clinton can draw on. There is a growing need to reaffirm feminism as a political ideology in order to rebuild a movement in which ideas can be debated and radical theory can flourish as praxis.

⁷ Susan Faludi, “The Death of a Revolutionary: Shulamith Firestone helped to create a new society. But she couldn’t live in it,” *The New Yorker*,

La Alzada: Acción Feminista Libertaria **(Chile)**

The word “alzada” is the feminine form of the Spanish noun that means rebel, instigator, or escalator. The term “territorial work” refers to community and housing work, emphasizing a geographic location. The term “libertarian” is used interchangeably with “anarchist” in Latin America and Spain. The use of the word “militant” refers to a member of a revolutionary organization that meets an expected level of political activity. Anarchist especificista organizations, such as the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU), promote the creation of specific (especificista) anarchist organizations for political work and use the strategy of social insertion for participation in social movements. “Social insertion” means building a base for anarchist ideas inside unions and other social organizations while emphasizing horizontal political participation. The term “multisectoralism” is a term used by the Chilean Left—see endnote 20 for definition.

On March 9, 2013, a group of anarchist feminists in Santiago, Chile announced the formation of La Alzada. La Alzada is not the only libertarian feminist organization in Chile, neither before nor after its foundation. However, we chose to highlight La Alzada because their organizational goal of building libertarian feminism is aligned with our own political vision. It is important to note that the backdrop of La Alzada’s foundation was the growth and emergence of an anarchist movement over two decades. Concurrently, the impact of feminist and queer politics were also being felt within the revolutionary Left. Organizations such as *Coordinadora Universitaria por la Disidencia Sexual* (CUDS, Sexual Dissidence University Coordinator) and *La Champurria* (meaning “mixture” in Mapudungun) reflect the arrival of a queer social movement and new dialogues

April 15, 2013

⁸ For information on CUDS: <http://disidenciasexual.tumblr.com/>

Finally, La Alzada’s work is characterized by their commitment to politically intervene within the anarchist and revolutionary Left movements in Chile. In a 2013 interview, La Alzada explains:

Many anarchist and Leftist organizations with revolutionary intent attempt to revalorize women, especially working-class women as doubly exploited. Most of the time it doesn’t go farther than a pamphlet, which doesn’t create a concrete praxis. From the subordination of women to control over our body to a critique of the family—such issues are part of the propaganda of various newsletters, articles, and bulletins within the broader fights of anarchism. However, these will matter little if we do not deepen our [political] positions. The idea of “the emancipation of women” becomes stale without the inclusion of a feminist framework within those same organizations. The creation of La Alzada outlines the necessity for two jobs: on the one hand, we have a responsibility within libertarian spaces and, on the other hand, the need to reach out and do territorial work from a gender perspective within those social and public spaces.²²

This framework simultaneously challenges feminist separatism and those who criticize revolutionary feminists for investing their time and energy in building political organizations. La Alzada frames their interventions and development

for the socialization of education being put forward by sections of the student movement.

²² José Antonio Gutiérrez D., “La Alzada: “The revolution must include the feminist struggle, with and inside the libertarian,” *Ideas and Action*, October 6, 2013

work within the various sectors of political activity (labor, territorial, and education). Sepulveda also promoted the demand for a *Universidad No Sexista* (Non-Sexist University). This call was originally made at the 1981 meeting by the Network for Popular Education Among Women (*REPM*).¹⁸ With the support of various feminist and Leftist organizations, the First Congress for a Non-Sexist Education took place in September, 2014. Congress organizers sought to begin a dialogue and develop concrete proposals to confront the institutionalization of gender and sexual discrimination and patriarchal politics within the education system.¹⁹ The congress document, synthesizing their discussion outlines, identified the themes and demands. One of these was for the building of an educational project that questioned the sexist and heteronormative logic inherent in the education system. Their final demand exemplifies their broader political framework: “To strengthen the networks within feminism and coordinate with other social actors (workers, *pobladores*²⁰, indigenous peoples, etc.) and to pose in all spheres a project of free education that is high quality, nonsexist, nonreligious, intercultural, and in the service to the people.”²¹

and actions in other sectors. The Mapuche struggle is also considered another sector but autonomous. The environment, feminism, and colonialism are not considered separate sectors but transversal issues that must be included into the other sectors.

¹⁸ <http://www.cladem.org/campanas/educacion-no-sexista/prensa/69-ens-otros-medios/443-dia-internacional-de-la-educacion-no-sexista>

¹⁹ <http://eldesconcerto.cl/por-que-es-necesaria-una-educacion-sexista-en-chile/>

²⁰ The word “población” is best defined as shantytown or poor working-class neighborhood. But poblaciones around Santiago have their own political history since they evolved as land takeovers by people who migrated from the countryside to the city. Some poblaciones have strong political and Leftist traditions, such as La Legua, Villa Francia, and Nueva Amanecer. An individual who lives in a población is referred to as a poblador/a.

²¹ This demand not only synthesizes positions put forward by the feminist, indigenous, and queer movements, but also reflect the radical demand

about feminism and queerness.⁸The practices of La Alzada reflect three significant elements we wish to highlight: the importance of doing social movement and social insertion work; making their politics present and influential within the Left; and the creation of new theory.

In order to contextualize La Alzada’s work, it is necessary to explain the political meaning and significance of sexual dissidence. The term sexual dissidence has a particular meaning and genealogy within Chilean feminism, queer, and social movements. Sexual dissidence is a critique of patriarchy, heteronormativity, as well as the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) movement in its alliance with the state. Some in this movement have ceased to question the socialization of violence and instead seek reforms such as marriage equality and antidiscrimination laws.⁹ The term also functions as a counterpoint to the concept of sexual diversity that emphasizes the struggle for civil rights and inclusion within the capitalist state, instead of challenging the existence of patriarchy. The most well-known sexual dissidence collective is CUDS, which defines their work in this way: “There are no women, men, or gays here. We are [the ones who] the feminist wave in Santiago, Chile threw away. Officially we are a postfeminist sexual dissident university collective that organizes our bodies to perform sexual terror actions within spaces of sexual authoritarianism.”¹⁰ CUDS organizes political interventions to spark conversation, instigate controversy, and question the social parameters that patriarchy has normalized. In November, 2012, CUDS organized a protest at the National Encounter of Diverse Feminists after a CUDS member was prevented from participating

⁹ The italicized area is a direct quote by one of the authors of this article who translated an interview with La Alzada. See: Gutiérrez D., José Antonio. “La Alzada: ‘The revolution must include the feminist struggle, with and inside the libertarian,’” *Ideas and Action*, October 25, 2013

¹⁰ <http://disidenciasexual.tumblr.com/>

for being a “bio-male.”¹¹ CUDS went to the congress and placed a banner outside that stated “*Feminismo en Toma*” (“Feminism Occupied”) to bring attention to a growing feminist movement that sought to challenge both masculinity and transphobia, in which CUDS called for a “feminism without women.”¹² At the July 25, 2013 feminist march demanding the legalization of abortion, CUDS marched with a banner that stated, “*El Derecho a No Nacer*” (“The Right to Not Be Born”), playing a prominent role during the occupation of the national cathedral in downtown Santiago. Other banners included: “Sodomize Heteropatriarchy with Your Clitoris” and “Abort Like Animals.” The sexual dissidence movement has also led to the growth of *transfeminism* in Chile, taking on a similar role in politicizing trans commitment to building and intervening within the feminist movement and against patriarchy.

La Alzada’s defining divergence from other feminist groups is that they are a social political organization in which membership requires a predetermined level of political activity.¹³ An Alzada militant participates in insertion work with working-class women and within the student movement, and advances their own political interventions within the anarchist and feminist movements. Membership is open to all and they encourage the inclusion of male-identified militants. They work closely with the domestic worker unions SINTRACAP and SINAICAP that are divided by Chilean-born (the former) and foreign-born (the latter) members who mostly hail from Peru and Bolivia. They organize union workshops, such as teaching oral and bodily expressions to build confidence and political development

¹¹ <http://revistacortela.com/la-rebelion-de-la-masculinidad/>

¹² http://www.pueg.unam.mx/images/seminarios2015_2/otras_rutas/sesion2/por_un_feminismo_sin_mujeres_cuds.pdf

¹³ For a definition on the social political organization, see Gutiérrez D., José Antonio. “The Problems Posed by the Concrete Class Struggle & Popular Organization: Reflections from the Anarchist Communist Perspective.” Anarkismo.net. November 14, 2005

for rank-and-file members.¹⁴ They have used Theatre of the Oppressed—an interactive technique used to promote social change and critique—as a tool to analyze experiences with oppression and develop combative ideas.¹⁵ They also participated in the January, 2014 port workers’ strike that had a mostly male base. They received criticism from some feminists for their participation, but La Alzada’s response was that it was important to be present in a major labor struggle. It allowed them to engage with workers and discuss their feminist work, while offering solidarity.¹⁶ They view this type of work as part of building feminist unionism that simultaneously challenges the feminist, labor, and anarchist movements.

The student movement is another key site of political activity. Prior to the split within the *FEL* (*Frente de Estudiantes Libertario*—Libertarian Student Front), an anarchist student federation, many Alzada members were also FEL militants. In 2013 the FEL decided to run a coalition ticket with other Left student federations for the presidency of the university student federation, *CONFECH* (*Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile*). Melissa Sepulveda, who is a member of La Alzada and was a member of FEL (she now participates in *Acción Libertaria*), won the presidency under a libertarian and feminist campaign. The propaganda material included the slogan, “Democratize the University...De-Masculinize Politics!” Sepulveda used her position as head of CONFECH to deepen a multisectoral approach.¹⁷ Multisectoral politics create bonds of solidarity and

¹⁴ La Alzada-AFL, “Construyendo feminismo sindical: taller de oratoria y expresión corporal con el Sintracap.” *Solidaridad: Periódico Comunista Libertario Solidaridad*, 16 de noviembre del 2013

¹⁵ The Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal developed Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1950s.

¹⁶ La Alzada-AFL, *Solidaridad Feminista con el Conflicto Portuario Hacia una Sindicalismo de clase, de lucha y feminista*, enero 2014

¹⁷ Multisectoralism is a term used in the Chilean Left. The three main sectors are labor, territorial, and student movement. Multisectoralism means having a cross-sectoral analysis in offering solidarity support for demands