

imperial nation. Delap briefly mentions her childhood in Swaziland and her relationship with local domestic workers (p. 1), but she does not develop the issue of empire beyond making a few scattered references (pp. 17, 79, 101, 181).

Whereas recent studies of domestic service often take a comparative approach, Delap concentrates her gaze on Britain; certainly the very novelty of her approach makes a comparison difficult; yet some scope to develop comparisons does exist, and if pursued they would have yielded interesting results.

Finally, Delap devotes only limited attention to contemporary domestic work, which sounds rather surprising in a book that, according to the author, also places the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries – “periods when ‘domestic service’ became a site of nostalgia or fantasy, but which also witnessed a resurgence of paid private domestic work” – into its “single analytic frame” (p. 3).

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VEGA, EULÀLIA. *Pioneras y revolucionarias. Mujeres libertarias durante la República, la guerra civil y el franquismo*. Icaria, Barcelona 2010. 389 pp. € 23.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859013000102

One of the most powerful images and myths (in the sense of strongly structured accounts of collective memory and identity) bequeathed by the Spanish Civil War to the left is maybe that of the war as a setting of personal promotion and liberation for republican women. In particular, the libertarian organization *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) soon fascinated both anarchist and feminist activists and researchers. As early as 1971 in an article published in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Temma Kaplan presented the organization *Mujeres Libres* as a key player for the visibility of female-specific issues during the Civil War, together with the Ministry of Health under Federica Montseny.¹ In Spain, the publication of the works of Mary Nash, whose study on the magazine *Mujeres Libres* even preceded the dictator's death,² and later those by Martha Ackelsberg, opened the door for the female anarchist organization, described by several authors as anarcho-feminist – despite the rejection of a feminism considered to be “bourgeois” by the free women themselves – to be well-known and studied. However, the broader phenomenon of women's participation in the libertarian movement is relatively poorly known and has been subject to militant rather than strictly historiographic interest. Eulàlia Vega's book therefore represents the most serious attempt to date to provide a long-term overview (Republic, Civil War, Franco regime, exile) of the experiences and militant paths of the female anarchists who made up the generation of “free women”.

1. Temma E. Kaplan, “Spanish Anarchism and Women's Liberation”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6:2 (1971), pp. 101–110.

2. Mary Nash, *Mujeres Libres, España, 1936–1939* (Barcelona, 1975).

In her book, Eulàlia Vega reconstructs the historical and militant experience of eleven libertarian women born between 1915 and 1920 who have in common that they actively participated, from their anarchist activism, in the defence of the republic and the revolutionary processes triggered during the Civil War. Most of them were members of *Mujeres Libres*, and they all spent a substantial part of their activist life in the city of Barcelona. The methodology used is described as “renewing”, but in fact largely reflects the paradigm of oral history as formulated and practised since the 1960s by authors such as Oscar Lewis, Paul Thompson and Ronald Fraser. It consists of interweaving the different “life stories” of these eleven women, developed through oral interviews, to build a collective account organized around five major milestones, aptly combining individual paths and evolution of the historical context: the years of training, the start of activism (which coincides roughly with the early years of the republic), the defining experience of the summer of 1936, defeat and, finally, exile and clandestineness.

The novelty, from our point of view, lies more in the way of presenting and regrouping the material collected, in the intellectual and openly militant project which inspires the whole, powered by two of the most dynamic historiographic trends of recent Spanish contemporary history: the socio-cultural history of politics and gender history. The result is a sort of collective biography which shows the experiences and mechanisms for the construction of the identity of the women who were active in the anarchist movement at a crucial moment in the contemporary history of Spain, which was also an exceptional stage in the collective political learning of Spanish women belonging to the so-called “underclasses”. The book demonstrates how these women became subjects thanks to numerous assignments of identity, such as gender, class, national and linguistic allegiance (the fact that several testimonies were transcribed in their original language, Catalan, is probably a calculated decision) which gave meaning to their experiences and enabled subsequent militant commitments.

Eulàlia Vega’s use of oral sources allows her to reconstruct the mechanisms and spheres of political socialization in the anarchist environments of Spain (and in particular those of Catalonia) in the 1910s and 1920s, beginning with their own family environment. The author provides a wealth of information about the places and ways in which anarchist political culture was constructed during the first third of the twentieth century: political culture understood as the development of a particular world view (an ideology, if you like) starting from collective forms of political and cultural sociability, made possible by a network of trade unions, cultural, educational, and militant spaces and structures. On mentioning or describing libertarian associations (*ateneos*), rationalist schools inspired by Ferrer i Guardia’s Modern School, cultural groups (such as *Cultura Rebelde* and *Sol y Vida*), Eulàlia Vega recovers the atmosphere of working-class libertarian Barcelona in the 1920s and 1930s, in what is probably the most successful and innovative part of the book. The political learning of anarchist women, in their own words, helps us to understand how a militant identity is constructed by means of numerous factors, ranging from the objective influence of living and working conditions to the receipt of the discourse of the environment through various channels, one of the most important being the family: “I was immersed in anarchism from childhood”, says one of the women.

The experiences described by the women during the years of the republic and the Civil War are less novel, as they are better-known. These included activism in affinity groups or in the organization *Mujeres Libres*, commitment to the anti-fascist revolution triggered by the uprising of 18 July 1936, and the different ways in which libertarian women participated in the anti-fascist struggle. In short, the experiences of dictatorship and exile allow the long-term life experience of these women to be traced. The success of the book,

and of the way in which Eulàlia Vega describes the life stories of the women she interviewed, lies in the fact that it suggests, without the need to dwell on theoretical explanations (which in the circumstances would have unnecessarily burdened the text), how gender relations shaped the experiences of these women and, also, how the extraordinary nature of the circumstances that they experienced, the strength of their convictions or their will, led them to overcome, to a greater or lesser extent, the social role assigned to them and the limitations imposed on them by the fact that they were women. These women were “pioneers and revolutionaries” in two ways: like their male companions, as leading figures in an extraordinary process of social revolution; and as women, for having created new forms of female political participation and activism.

Moreover, from our point of view, some of the events narrated, such as the May Days of 1937 in Barcelona or the repression in the rearward (both of those classified as “fascist” and within the anti-fascist field itself), would have required a more complex contextualization, in order to evoke the different historiographic and memory conflicts to which these events have given rise. Indeed, the author’s *parti pris* is always to take the testimony of her eleven interviewees as an absolute reference. The (primary or secondary) written sources used to contextualize the oral testimonies are relatively scarce. The book is thus intended to be not so much a linear account of historical events, illustrated by the experience of libertarian women, as the reconstruction of a collective experience starting from their memories. This represents a preference for the subjectivity of the historical agents and highlights the memorial dimension of what is related, the recovery of a “class” language, in so far as the witnesses reproduce the words of the past in their testimony.

However, the problem is that the book takes a narrative form, in which the events narrated by the central characters are often retranscribed by the author in the third person singular. In our opinion this writing choice represents both a methodological and an epistemological problem, as the historian’s voice uses and is superimposed on the voice of the witnesses, and this introduces ambiguity in relation to the status of the account. Indeed, oral history is by definition a collective production, the result of the interaction between historian and interviewee. However, on reproducing the content of the testimony without the form (the words of the witness), the testimony ceases to be an independent production, an object of study in itself, and becomes one more source through which the historian tries to gain access to a supposed historical “truth”. In essence, this contradicts the very purpose of the book, which is to construct a choral account starting from different memories, different life courses which shared remarkable experiences and a common political culture, during an exceptional period of recent history, all with the aim of making a both gender-related and political experience visible.

In any case this point, which concerns present-day debates on the status of historical writing, does not at all detract from the merit and interest of the book, which represents an important contribution to knowledge of the historical experience of libertarian women, beyond the “institutional” history of the Free Women. We should therefore welcome Eulàlia Vega’s attempt to make these women’s experiences visible, a project that makes sense both from a political and militant and from a historiographic point of view.

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