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The Question of Feminism

Lucia Sanchez Saornil

1935

Lucia Sanchez Saornil (1895–1970) was a Spanish poet, writer and anarchist feminist. She was active in the CNT but critical of the sexist attitudes of many male Spanish anarchists. She helped found the anarchist feminist group, *Mujeres Libres*, in April 1936, a confederal organization of Spanish anarchist women that played an important role in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War (1936–1939). The following excerpts are taken from her article, “The Woman Question in Our Ranks,” originally published in the CNT paper, *Solidaridad Obrera*, September-October 1935 (reprinted in “*Mujeres Libres*” España, 1936–1939, Barcelona: Tusquets, 1976, ed. Mary Nash). The translation is by Paul Sharkey.

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It is not enough to say: “We must target women with our propaganda and draw women into our ranks;” we have to take things further, much further than that. The vast majority of male comrades – with the exception of a half dozen right-thinking types – have minds infected by the most typical bourgeois prejudices. Even as they rail against property, they are

rabidly proprietorial. Even as they rant against slavery, they are the cruellest of “masters.” Even as they vent their fury on monopoly, they are the most dyed-in-the-wool monopolists. And all of this derives from the phoniest notion that humanity has ever managed to devise. The supposed “inferiority of women.” A mistaken notion that may well have set civilization back by centuries.

The lowliest slave, once he steps across his threshold, becomes lord and master. His merest whim becomes a binding order for the women in his household. He who, just ten minutes earlier, had to swallow the bitter pill of bourgeois humiliation, looms like a tyrant and makes these unhappy creatures swallow the bitter pill of their supposed inferiority...

Time and again I have had occasion to engage in conversation with a male comrade who struck me as rather sensible and I had always heard him stress the need for a female presence in our movement. One day, there was a talk being given at the Centre, so I asked him:

“What about your partner. How come she didn’t attend the talk?” His response left me chilled.

“My partner has her hands full looking after me and my children.”

On another occasion, I was in the corridors of the court building. I was with a male comrade who holds a position of responsibility. Out of one of the rooms emerged a female lawyer, maybe the defence counsel for some proletarian. My companion threw her a sidelong glance and mumbled as a resentful smirk played on his lips: “I’d send her type packing.”

How much of a sad tale is told by those two, seemingly so banal, episodes?

Above all, they tell us that we have overlooked something of great significance: that while we were focusing all our energies on agitational work, we were neglecting the educational side. That our propaganda designed to recruit women should be directed, not at the women but at our own male comrades.

That we should start by banishing this notion of superiority from their heads. That when they are told that all human beings are equal, “human beings” means women as well, even should they be up to their necks in housework and surrounded by saucepans and domestic animals. They need to be told that women possess an intellect like their own and a lively sensitivity and yearning for improvement; that before putting society to rights, they should be putting their own households in order; that what they dream of for the future—equality and justice—they should be practicing right here and now towards the members of their household; that it is nonsense to ask woman to understand the problems facing humanity unless she is first allowed to look inside herself, unless he ensures that the woman with whom he shares his life is made aware of her individuality, unless, in short, she is first accorded the status of individual...

There are many male comrades who honestly want to see women do their bit in the struggle; but this desire is not prompted by any change in their idea of women; they seek her cooperation as a factor that may hold out the prospect of victory, as a strategic contribution, so to speak, without giving a moment's thought to female autonomy or ceasing to regard themselves as the centre of the universe...

Etched in my memory is a certain trade union propaganda rally in which I was a participant. It took place in a small provincial town. Before the meeting got under way I was accosted by a male comrade, a member of the most important Local Committee... Through his fiery enthusiasm about the “sublime calling” of woman there shone, clear and precise, the blunt argument maintained by Oken — with whom he, no doubt, was not familiar, but to whom he was connected by the invisible thread of atavism — “Woman is but the means rather than the end of nature. Nature has but one end, one object: man.”

...He was complaining about something that was, as far as I could see, the main grounds for satisfaction: That women had broken with the tradition that had them as men's depen-

dents and stepped out into the labour market in search of economic independence. This pained him and delighted me because I knew that contact with the street and with social activity would provide a stimulus that in the end would activate her consciousness of her individuality.

His complaint had been the universal complaint of a few years before when women first quit the home for factory or workshop. Could it be deduced from this that it amounted to damage done to the proletarian cause? Woman's absorption into the workforce, coinciding with the introduction of machinery into industry, merely heightened labour competition and as a result led to a discernible fall in wages.

Taking the superficial view, we would say that the male workers were right: but if, ever ready to delve into the truth, we were to explore the core of the issue we will find that the outcome could have been so different, had the male workers not let themselves be carried away by their hostility to women, based on some supposed female inferiority.

Battle was joined on the basis of this supposed inferiority and lower pay rates were countenanced and women excluded from the class organizations on the grounds that social toil was not woman's calling, and on this was built an illicit competition between the sexes. The female machine-minder fitted in well with the simplistic view of the female mind in those days and so they started to employ women who, inured down through the ages to the idea that they were inferiors, made no attempt to set limits to capitalist abuses. Men found themselves relegated to the rougher tasks and specialized skills.

If, instead of behaving like this, the male workers had offered women some quarter, awakening in her encouragement and raising her to their own level, drawing her, right from the outset, into the class organizations, imposing equal conditions for both sexes upon the bosses, the upshot would have been markedly different. Momentarily, their physical superiority would have given them the upper hand in the selection of

sole topic of conversation. And I have seen two types of female response to this. One, instant surrender to the suggestion; in which case it is not long before the woman winds up as a plaything of masculine whims and drifts away completely from any social conscience. The other is disenchantment: whereby the woman who arrived with loftier ambitions and aspirations comes away disappointed and ends up withdrawing from our ranks. Only a few women with strength of character who have learned to gauge the worth of things for themselves manage to weather this.

As for the male response, that remains the same as ever, in spite of his vaunted sexual education and this is plain when, in various amorous entanglements with the woman he regards as a “female comrade,” the Don Juan figure turns into an Othello and the woman-if not the pair of them-is lost to the movement...

It is, ultimately, my considered opinion that resolution of this problem lies solely in a proper resolution of the economic question. In revolution. And nowhere else. Anything else would merely be calling the same old slavery by a new name.

their employer, since it would have cost him as much to employ a strong person as it would a weakling, and, as for woman, her desire for improvement would have been aroused and, united with the men in the class organizations, together they could have made great and more rapid strides along the road to liberation...

At the present time the theory of the intellectual inferiority of women has been rendered obsolete; a sizable number of women of every social condition have furnished practical proof of the falsity of that dogma, we might say, by displaying the excellent calibre of their talents in every realm of human activity...

But, just when the road ahead seemed clear, a new dogma — this time with a semblance of scientific foundation — stands in woman’s way and throws up further ramparts against her progress...

In place of the dogma of intellectual inferiority, we now have that of sexual differentiation. The moot point now is no longer, as it was a century ago, whether woman is superior or inferior; the argument is that she is different. No longer is it a question of a heavier or lighter brain of greater or lesser volume, but rather of spongy organs known as secreting glands which stamp a specific character on a child, determining its sex and thereby its role in society...

As far as the theory of differentiation is concerned, woman is nothing more than a tyrannical uterus whose dark influences reach even into the deepest recesses of the brain; woman’s whole psychic life is obedient to a biological process and that biological process is quite simply the process of gestation... Science has tinkered with the terms without tampering with the essence of that axiom: “Birth, gestation and death.” The whole and all of the womanly prospect.

Plainly an attempt has been made to frame this conclusion in golden clouds of eulogy. “Woman’s calling is the most cultivated and sublime that nature has to offer,” we are told; “she

is the mother, the guide, the educator of the humanity of the future.” Meanwhile the talk is of directing her every move, her entire life, all her education towards that single goal: the only one consonant with her nature, it would seem.

So now we have the notions of womanhood and motherhood set alongside each other again. Because it transpires that the sages have not discovered any middle ground; down through the ages, the practice has been a mystical eulogization of motherhood; hitherto, the praises went to the prolific mother, the mother who gives birth to heroes, saints, redeemers or tyrants; from now on, the praise will be reserved for the eugenic mother, the conceiver, the gestator, the immaculate birth-mother...

I said that we had the notions of womanhood and of motherhood set beside each other, but I was wrong; we already have something worse: the notion of motherhood overshadowing that of womanhood, the function annihilating the individual.

It might be said that down through the ages the male world has wavered, in its dealings with woman, between the two extreme notions of whore and mother, from the abject to the sublime without stopping at the strictly human: woman. Woman as an individual, as a rational, thoughtful, autonomous individual...

The mother is the product of the male backlash against the whore that every woman represents to him. It is the deification of the uterus that hosted him.

But — and let no one be scandalized for we are in the company of anarchists and our essential commitment is to call things by their proper name and tear down all wrong-headed notions, no matter how prestigious these may be — the mother as an asset to society has thus far merely been the manifestation of an instinct, an instinct all the sharper because woman’s life has revolved solely around it for years; but an instinct, for all that, except that in some superior women it has acquired the status of sentiment.

Woman, on the other hand, is an individual, a thoughtful creature, a higher entity. By focusing on the mother you seek to banish woman when you could have woman and mother, because womanhood never excludes motherhood.

You sneer at woman as a determinative factor in society, assigning her the status of a passive factor. You sneer at the direct contribution of an intelligent woman, in favour of her perhaps inept male offspring. I say again: we must call things by their proper names. That women are women before all else; only if they are women will you have the mothers you need.

What I find really shocking is that male comrades who style themselves anarchists, bedazzled, perhaps, by the scientific principle upon which the new dogma purports to rest, are capable of upholding it. At the sight of them, I am assailed by this doubt: if they are anarchists, they cannot be for real, and if they are for real, they are no anarchists.

Under the theory of differentiation, the mother is the equivalent of the worker. To an anarchist, above all else a worker is a man, and above all else the mother should be a woman. (I am speaking in a generic sense). Because, for an anarchist, the individual comes first and foremost...

Regrettable it may be, but the campaigns for greater sexual freedom have not always been properly understood by our young male comrades, and in many instances, they have attracted into our ranks a large number of youths of both sexes who could not care less about the social question and who are just on the look-out for an opening for their own amorous adventures. There are some who have construed that freedom as an invitation to over-indulgence and who look upon every woman that passes their way as a target for their appetites...

In our centres, rarely frequented by young women, I have noticed that conversations between the sexes rarely revolve around an issue, let alone a work-related matter; the moment a youth comes face to face with someone of the opposite sex, the sexual issue casts its spell and free love seems to be the