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**Telling Stories All Over Again:
Looking Back on The Scholar and The Feminist XII**

By:

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As I look back over the program for the conference, “Women in Culture and Politics,” I realize that it marked a critical point in my scholarly and scholarly-political development. On the one hand, I participated in a panel-- “Who’s Telling Whose Story and Why?” --that gave me a unique opportunity to reflect on the process of doing oral history. My participation in that panel profoundly shaped the book on *Mujeres Libres*, [Free Women of Spain](#), that I was to write in the years that followed. On the other hand, the morning panel I attended that day-- “Challenging the Myth of Passivity: Working Class Women’s Culture and Neighborhood Politics”-- introduced me personally to the women of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, and started me on a path that led, ultimately, to my current book project, an exploration of the implications of their leadership training programs for democratic thought and politics. Both projects manifest what is, for me, a crucial link between my scholarly interests and my political commitments.

Amazingly, I was able to find my notes from the presentation I gave at the workshop in 1985. In what follows, I have attempted to turn them into a narrative. Those who know the course my work has taken in the interim will, I hope, see some of its roots in these comments.

* * *

Who's Telling Whose Story– And Why?

I have been engaged, off and on, for the past six years in gathering information from participants in the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement who were active during the Civil War period (1936-39). I began this research in an effort to learn about the social revolution (little-known to most Americans and even– thanks to Franco–to many Spaniards) that took place in many areas of Republican-controlled Spain during the War, and transformed the day-to lives of thousands of people. Within that general framework, I was also interested specifically in male-female issues: how did a movement that was committed to gender equality–as part of an overall goal of overcoming hierarchical social relationships– deal with that commitment in practice? I interviewed people who participated in the movement and, specifically, in anarchist industrial collectives in Barcelona and its environs. In the course of that research, I “discovered” *Mujeres Libres*, an anarchist women’s organization; more accurately, I discovered that some key *Mujeres Libres* activists were still alive and willing to be interviewed. Those are the two “data sources” on which this presentation draws.

My starting point for today is the feminist insight that naming ourselves, telling our own– and our foremothers’ stories, is crucial to empowering ourselves and taking responsibility for our lives. But how do we come to know– and how do we choose– the stories we tell, whether about ourselves or others? Our need is for stories that make sense of our lives– that tell us where we’ve come from, where we’re going, and why. Hence, of course, the importance of learning and claiming our history: learning the stories of what others (especially women) who have come before us have done, and from which we can learn; exploring the traditions within which we can situate ourselves (or strive to change!).

As one who studies historical, as well as contemporary issues, I’m particularly aware of a two-fold dynamic involved in engaging with my material. The questions I pose here are, no doubt, true for virtually all those who engage in what we might call “activist” or “engaged” scholarship; but it becomes particularly clear, I think, when we look at a period not our own, and at people/women living in very different contexts. I would articulate them as follows:

What stories have our foremothers given us? What can we learn from them to help us make sense of our lives?

How did they come to understand, claim, or formulate their own stories for themselves? How did they– and the stories they told about themselves– change? With what consequences? (This means seeing them, as we see ourselves, as people struggling to give meaning to their own lives, and in their own terms.) The women of *Mujeres Libres*, for example, spoke and wrote of the importance of *capacitación*, which I have translated, loosely, as “empowerment.” How did they understand that process, which was so central to their vision? Where did it come from? How did they make it “theirs”? (And, always lurking in the background, for me: do we want to, and how could we, make it ours?)

While I did not formulate these issues so clearly before I undertook my fieldwork, I eventually became aware that it was this dual sense of trying to explore stories that has framed much of the work I have done, and continues to influence that in which I am currently engaged.

Whose stories do we tell?

I begin with two stories about my fieldwork experience which illustrate some of the issues I've spoken to already, and which I'd like to highlight this afternoon.

1. One is a story that I experienced, at the time, as a story of failure— of my failure— to “get people to talk to me” about their lives, or to share their stories. I had gone to Lérida, a small city about a three-hour bus ride from Barcelona, to try to find, and interview, surviving members of an agricultural collective that had been formed in the area at the beginning of the Civil War. I had studied many of the records of the collective (which took the name “Adelante!”/forward) in the National Civil War Archives in Salamanca, and was eager to track down and talk with people whose names appeared in those documents. After considerable sleuthing, I was able to locate a number of people who were either still living in the area, or who had returned to Lérida after having spent the Franco years in exile or underground. I expected to find people eager to talk about their experiences as young revolutionaries. I was, however, to be greatly disappointed. While one or two were willing to talk with me, many more refused, commenting that “It was a long time ago, why not just let it be?” or, “He was young and didn't know any better. He was just doing what he was told...he has nothing to say.” “Why would you want to talk with me? I was just an ordinary person, living my life.”

After many fruitless efforts (including some accompanied by a local activist to vouch for me), I realized that what I was encountering was not simply reticence or reluctance to talk to an outsider, but fear. Their refusal to talk was a consequence of having lived with 40 years of Franco's repression. All too many of those participants— most of whom had not, in fact, been movement activists at the beginning of the War, but who had been swept up in the revolutionary fervor of the collectivizations— wanted only to distance themselves from those events. They were in no way certain (in 1979, or even in 1981) that Franco's forces were gone for good. Further, they were experiencing a considerable sense of isolation: very few of those around them (even their children) knew what they had been through. And, even though it was now supposedly “safe” to tell their stories, they seemed to have no desire to do so. The wounds were still too raw, the insecurity too great. I realized that I was learning something quite significant— even if it was not what I had set out to learn. Although I did not find out much from them about life in an agricultural collective, I did learn a great deal about the long-term effects of fear and repression¹. In addition, the process led me to ask some other questions: What right did I have even to try to find these people, and/or to intrude on their lives? Who was I to ask them to tell— or even to claim— a story they did not want to tell? Was I causing them harm by stirring up old memories and hurts? What were my responsibilities as a scholar? And, equally important, what were my responsibilities as a fellow human being?

2. The second story is much more up-beat. It focuses on an interview with one member of Mujeres Libres, Soledad Estorach, who was living in Paris at the time. Her story was in many ways representative, even if not necessarily “typical,” of those of many of the women I interviewed. She described her life as a young anarchist activist: “It was an incredible life, the life of a young militant. A life dedicated to struggle, to knowledge, to remaking society. It was characterized by a kind of effervescence, a constant activity.” We talked for many hours, over a number of days, about her story, how she grew up in a very conservative rural area, but had been taught to read by her father, a progressively-minded man; how she had left home at 14 to find work in Barcelona so that she could earn money to study and “see the world”; and how, once there, she got involved with the anarcho-syndicalist union and with anarchist youth groups, and

became a movement activist. Over time, I realized that we were becoming friends, rather than simply interviewer and interviewee; the interview had shaded into a discussion. In response to her questions, I shared some of my own activist experiences. It became clear to me that my political commitments were an important aspect of what had given me access to her and others—and what had facilitated her telling of her story. We shared something-- despite the considerable difference in our ages, and the contexts in which we had been active-- a hope for a transformed world, and a vision of what that world might be like.

Nevertheless, two moments in the midst of these heady conversations brought me up short. (A) At one point, in the midst of a discussion of what she was doing during the revolution of July 1936, Soledad spoke of building barricades, and of the heroism of a small group of her friends. She showed me the scars left when her hands were grazed by bullets. Then she turned to me and asked “and what about demonstrations that you were involved in?” And I realized that, although I had been active in opposition to the Vietnam War, and had also spent many hours engaged in various forms of feminist activism, I had never come near either a barricade or a bullet. Our contexts were completely different; we had lived our lives on vastly different terrain. (B) At the same time, however, I also came to realize that, by engaging in this mutual sharing, we had crossed what felt to me a boundary. I felt constrained from asking her about interpersonal relationships, whether she had ever thought of marriage, taken a lover, etc. Somehow, rather than being simply an “informant,” she had become something of a friend-- and one does not ask questions like that of friends one doesn’t know very well!

And why are we telling them?

These stories raised a number of questions for me: Why am I studying these people and events? For whom am I writing? Whose story am I telling? And why am I telling it?

I conducted the first round of these interviews in the spring and summer of 1979. I was not able to return to Spain again until the summer of 1981. As my departure date approached, I found myself wondering why I was going then. After all, many people are away in the summer; would I be able to find anyone? Would I succeed in gathering any more data? Was this a foolish plan? Nevertheless, even though, by objective criteria, it might not have made much sense to go in the summer, I realized that I felt compelled to go, for reasons that I came fully to understand only when I arrived. In brief, I went because of my story; because my interpretive community was there. People with whom I was working in Spain-- both my whether as friends, subjects, or both-- understood that my interest in these events of 40 years before was not just scholarly but also intensely political—and, because of that, personal. The anarchist-feminist militants had been acting on commitments that I admired, shared, and hoped to learn from (a process that I could barely talk about, let alone share, with many of my colleagues in the U.S. academic world). I realized, then, that I wanted to tell their stories for them --to reclaim, and recover, what they had done-- but also for me and for us-- to learn about the process of empowerment, consciousness-change, and social transformation.

I am writing, then, both for them and for us. On the one hand, I write for them: to make available to a broader audience information about the tremendously important work they did, so that their stories, and the story of the social revolution more generally, will not continue to be buried in the complicated political machinations of the Spanish Civil War. And on the other hand, I also write for us-- and by “us,” I mean feminists and progressives more generally, who are

interested in social change, and especially consciousness-change— because I believe they have some very important things to teach us.

Two related aspects of their process and vision are particularly compelling: (a) their insistence that *capacitación* must be the focus of any meaningful movement for social change; and (b) the importance of *direct action and participation*. With respect to the first, they insisted that empowerment comes from and through communities of people: hence the importance of support networks and cultural work within their overall programs. Their programs were multi-faceted: literacy was critical: they mounted massive programs to teach women to read, so that they could experience themselves as capable of understanding, and engaging in, the issues of the day; knowledge about women's sexuality and basic health care and child-rearing were also vital if women were to take their places as full citizens; and, of course, programs of apprenticeship and capacity-building at workplaces, into which women were entering in large numbers during the war. And, in connection with direct action, they insisted that empowerment, or consciousness-change, develops through taking part in creating that new society. They opposed hierarchies of every sort, and insisted on the consistency of means and ends.²

The more I explore these processes, however, the more I see not just that they worked in Spain, and that we can learn from them; but also that they are our story, as well. After all, empowerment and direct action are largely what feminism was about in the U.S. Whether in consciousness-raising groups, women's health collectives, in actions at the Pentagon or opposing nuclear power, in neighborhood organizations, or in a multitude of other contexts, feminists have been struggling to empower ourselves, and to do things differently. We, too, have been trying to tell new stories, in our words.

And I have come to realize, as well, that, in learning to tell their stories, I can also better see and tell our stories. There is, of course, a danger here: of “contaminating” data, of reading in concerns from our context that would have had no meaning in that earlier period. But there is also the possibility of attaining a greatly enriched understanding of both our time and theirs. Perhaps, through this complicated process of mutual reflection and questioning, we can develop techniques for writing multi-dimensional histories, ones that acknowledge the importance of community, not just among ourselves, but also over time.

NOTES

1. I wrote up these findings in "Revolution and Community: Mobilization, Depoliticization, and Perceptions of Change in Civil War Spain," in Women Living Change, ed. Susan C. Bourque and Donna Robinson Divine, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), pp. 85-115

2. All of these themes are developed more fully in Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); revised edition forthcoming AK Press, 2004.