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## Transforming education to change the world: the Modern School of Ferrer Guardia

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### ABSTRACT

A historiographic investigation and new conversations about a relevant teaching-learning experience in the history of an education considered alternative, promoting internationalist transformative ideals and methodologies, is the purpose of this paper. It offers a tour of the history of the Modern School for the benefit of historians of education, presents the value of creating a revolutionary school in a dystopian place, and recounts some of its great themes and concepts, as well as its expansion for a new world. Despite a very poor social situation, and the power of religion, the Modern School emerged compiling ideas of progressive educational ideals, with an eagerness to go beyond borders, thanks to its creator, Francisco Ferrer Guardia, which means that more than a century later, both an institution and a human being are objects of study. The history of the Modern School has not been strongly represented in educational history research as a revolutionary, interdisciplinary, and even intersectional subject, as the history of those who were defeated and repressed often is not. Beyond a set of historical facts, its ideals expanded, as they still exist today for whom utopia is not just a dream, but a reality to be achieved.

### KEYWORDS

Alternative education, Anarchism, Atheism, Educational innovations, Ferrer Guardia, History of education, Modern School, Pedagogy, Rationalism, Revolution, Social change, Teaching methods

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## Introduction

If any entrepreneur considered, today, creating an educational project, through a small school, and believed that this experience would reach different continents, being the object of study by researchers from different international universities and, that more than a century later, it would continue to be investigated, and published, on what was established, we would probably consider it a utopian being. However, utopia was possible, in a rather dystopian space, where the ideas of freedom, and the constant eagerness for its diffusion, implied the death penalty for a person totally implicated by a rationalist, scientific and integral educational model.

Francisco Ferrer Guardia's idea was as simple and modern as it still can be for many people: he just had to do the opposite of what he had suffered at school. A new plan was born in 1901, in Barcelona, being the compilation of ideas and previous theoretical-practical educational experiences -that he was able to learn about- the main novelty, giving rise not only to one school, but to dozens of them, and to publications, such as newsletters and books (many translated), for use in schools in Spain and around the world.

The Spanish institutions of power estimated that by closing the Modern School in 1906 and executing its creator -after his second imprisonment- in 1909, they would eliminate two scapegoats, as an exemplary measure to eradicate a whole set of ideals and practices, but this caused the proposals to be amplified and expanded throughout the world.

## Dystopian society and accounts of theoretical perspectives compiled in the Modern School

Probably, for all research topics being investigated, history is a fundamental source without which it is not possible to fully understand the complexity of the phenomena. Any teacher who wanted to explain different situations in Spain at the end of the 19th century to a neophyte student in the matter could use the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* as a didactic resource, since in both Spain and the television program one could mention theocracy and patriarchy as tangible realities (Jiménez-Esclusa, 2022).

The reality of Spain was hard. Minors exercising begging and sometimes delinquency in large cities (Huertas, 2009). Social inequalities suffered by a mostly agricultural working class, with a Spanish active population, in 1900, of only 40.60% of the total (Sánchez, 1990). Between thirty and forty percent of women working in a wide variety of jobs, with lower wages than men, and adding said tasks to domestic work (Arbaiza, 2002). Domestic workers, ironers, and the like remained in the underground economy, not to mention the exploitation of girls, concealed behind the first child protection laws, and prostitution.

It is shocking to imagine the vision of Barcelona at the end of the 19th century. The industrial working class, women and men, at dawn, on their way to the factory, along dirty roads, without lighting, while the little ones, and elderly or unemployed women stayed at home, while the majority of children over the age of six went to work (Marín, 2009).

The population grew by 300 percent between 1850 and 1900 in Barcelona, becoming a space of social tensions, a true chaotic model of urban growth based on the free market, a true bourgeois dystopia. The Restoration authorities often supported the Reactionary Catholic Church for the provision of a basic level of public services in sectors that in other parts of Europe began to fall under the auspices of the State and, in matters of education, religious schools used violence and fear to instigate obedience and respect in those working-class children who were not working (Ealham, 2005).

The Inquisition in Spain was not abolished until 1834 (Alvar, 1997). The Holy Office had contributed to the depopulation of Spain. Countless families had to emigrate at different times, causing the expulsion of Jews and Arabs, and sacrificing nearly four hundred thousand people in three centuries, all of this, in the words used as a primary source, since it is a testimony of a Secretary of the Spanish Inquisition (Llorente, 1822).

As for hygiene, Catholic filth dominated in Spain, in the words of Ferrer himself (2010). In 1900, it was a country in which life expectancy at birth was less than 35 years (Nadal, 1984), cholera infections alone caused some 800,000 deaths in the 19th century, out of an average population of fifteen million inhabitants, and consumption, at the end of the 19th century, claimed the lives of 40,000 Spaniards every year (Beltrán, 2006).

School hygiene was not only chapter seven of Ferrer's posthumous book, but it must take into account that France lived, at the end of the 19th century, under its Third Republic, and that it had politicians such as León Bourgeois, Minister of Education during some of the years that Ferrer lived in Paris. If we pay attention to the concern that Ferrer showed for hygiene in the Modern School, Bougeois previously affirmed that the first of the social obligations that derive from the fact of solidarity is the obligation to protect human life from the risks derived from unsanitary conditions (Shapiro, 1985). Ferrer, as a Spanish teacher for Masonic personalities, a profession he practiced shortly after arriving in Paris, "caused a 'deep impression' on León Bourgeois" (Dommangeat, 1972, p. 386).

The analytical framework or method of inquiry in this research is related to historiography and virtual ethnography, with the utmost consultation and respect for primary sources, and appropriate critical attention to secondary sources. This creates a puzzle in which, although sometimes complex, we manage to fit all the pieces together, thoroughly substantiating everything that is necessary, beyond passions or phobias.

The selection of sources and the analytical framework reinforce the academic rigor: the Bulletins of the Modern School, books written by the subject of the research, and even the book written by one of his daughters, are sources of considerable strength.

Ferrer had committed himself to a frustrated republican uprising in Santa Coloma de Farnés, Girona, which led to the execution of the two captains who led it, after which he would voluntarily emigrate to Paris in 1885. French history probably did not bear much resemblance to the facts of 19th century Catholic Spain -which France tried to conquer at the beginning of that century-: the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Commune of 1871.

France itself is one of the fundamental pedagogical sources of the Modern School: the ideas of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon... Paul Robin had defined integral education for the International in 1869 and then translated it into action with the Cempuis orphanage -in which Ferrer will be inspired in many aspects- but, previously, under the Commune, Eduardo Vailland and Louise Michel will try the experiment that Paul Robin carried out in 1880 (Safón, 1994). The French education law of March 28, 1882 made it secular, and that of October 30, 1886 extended this character to the teaching staff (Drustua, 1900). The Republicans were hostile to the Church out of philosophical conviction, being rationalists and positivists (Heers, 1986), just like Ferrer, and with him, his global project. But, in Spain, the Catholic Church controlled everything.

Reducing Catholic power in Spain was a utopia. The Draft Federal Constitution of the First Spanish Republic of 1873 was not promulgated and made impossible by various issues, including the coup d'état of General Pavía on January 3, 1874, until December 1874, when General Martínez Campos took power, proclaiming Alfonso XII as King of Spain. In its article 35, separated the Church from the State, and in its article 36, it prohibited the Nation or the federal State, regional States and Municipalities, directly or indirectly, from subsidizing any cult (Tierno, 1968).

During the Second Republic, the Constitution of 1931, in its article 3, affirmed that the Spanish State did not have an official religion, repeating the non-economic support of religions in its article 26, where the prohibition of religious orders to exercise teaching was also clear. The Law of Confessions and Religious Congregations (1933) reinforces the latter. In its article 30, we can read that religious orders and congregations could not dedicate themselves to the exercise of teaching, not even private, neither directly, nor by using interposed lay people.

The 1936 coup d'état in Spain returned and further expanded the power of the Catholic Church in education to the absolute, and today 2,558 Catholic schools operate freely, with more than one and a half million students, and more than 100,000 paid teachers (Spanish Episcopal Conference,

2022). The Spanish Government and the Holy See, continuing the revision of the concordat texts in the spirit of the Agreement of July 28, 1976, being in force, today, the Instrument of Ratification of the Agreement between the Spanish State and the Holy See on Education and Cultural Affairs, signed in Vatican City on January 3, 1979. Religion is a must in every Spanish school today, but in the Modern School, the dynamics were different.

The existence of secular and anarchist schools was already a reality before Ferrer's experience, not only at a European level, but even in Catalonia and Andalusia (Álvarez, 1991). Trinidad Soriano -Sevillian architect and one of the founders of the International Workers Association in Spain-, in the Internationalist Congress of Zaragoza in 1872, carried out a comprehensive teaching project clearly a precursor of Ferrer's work. We have the existence of a pro-anarchist teaching committee (1898), with personalities like P. Kropotkin, J. Grave (author of the first reading book of the Modern School: *The Adventures of Nono*, published in 1903), L. Tolstoy, Ch. Malato, J. Ardouin, the aforementioned L. Michel, and E. Reclus -author of the third reading book of the Modern School- (Solá, 2007).

The theoretical bases of the Modern School were established, and would continue to develop with the publication of dozens of newsletters and books, despite being in an almost theocratic, patriarchal place, and with enormous inequalities as Spain was at the beginning of the 20th century. Meanwhile, the European powers that generated and perpetuated these problems met to put an end to the libertarian ideal at The International Anti-Anarchist Conference, held in Rome in 1898 (Bach, 1981). Later, they would deal with showing who they were during World War I, in 1914, and, precisely in Rome, it was the march, in 1922, that would give way to Mussolini's fascism (Foot, 2023). To summarize some events that occurred in the 20th century we would need an even worse word than dystopia.

## Big ideas, new methods.

*Cartilla Filológica Española* -Spanish Philological Primer- (Publicaciones de la Escuela Moderna, 1903), the first reading book for school, introduced new literacy methods, in this case, not only through the alphabet and the syllabary, but through vocabulary -serving this for knowledge of the mechanism of language-, and intuitive learning, paraphrasing the aforementioned work, where functional illiteracy is mentioned -perhaps today more booming than ever (Fregoso-Peralta and Aguilar-González, 2013; Walat, 2017) : "fed up with seeing that over the enormous mass of illiterates there is a fairly considerable layer of people who know how to read without understanding what they read, who know how to make letters and cannot write the poorest thought..." (Publicaciones de la Escuela Moderna, 1903, p. 3).

The second reading book, *Las aventuras de Nono* (Grave, 1903), presents a libertarian world, called Autonomy, in which one lives equally for oneself and for everyone in the joyous and happy community of wanting, knowing and power, of which Nono is a part, but he falls into the cursed region of the Argyrocracy, the kingdom of money, the capitalist world. *Patriotismo y colonización*, -third reading book and translated, like the previous one-, published by the Escuela Moderna publishing house and written by the French libertarian geographer Jacques Élisée Reclus (1904), is explicit, showing how patriotism has been used to foment the hatred of the people from some countries to those of others, and with such premises, it was easy to judge what the patriot will understand by colonization: the right to perpetrate all crimes... "colonial" inspires no other purpose than to seize treasures, lands and people.

*Origen del Cristianismo* (Malvert -a pseudonym-, 1906), fourth reading book, expresses that science is the expression of the truth, henceforth belonging to the direction of the world, instead of divinity (p. 175). It is, for example, at the end of this essay, where we can see the order of the reading books, or the description of one of the fundamental primary sources for the study of the subject, the *Boletín de la Escuela Moderna*, a monthly publication dedicated to the diffusion of pedagogical novelties and the study of important topics. Likewise, some songs were mentioned -another innovative methodology of the school, not so much for the fact itself, but for the content

of the songs, without praising religion, authority or the system-: *Los juguetes* -toys-, *La vida* -life-, or *Empecemos* -let's start-, with lyrics by Fermín Salvochea, important anarchists from Cádiz -southern Spain- (Herrerín, 2021).

If the hidden curriculum is still a tangible fact today (Kozlowski, 2021), and if one of the real goals of intersectionality is to challenge the structures of power that oppress particular social groups (Hanson and Fletcher, 2021), a manuscript of Ferrer Guardia, written during his first imprisonment in the period 1906-1907, showed the ideals to be transmitted. These structures of power were: private property, authority, religious morality, military morality, judicial morality, political morality, patriotic morality, morale at work... begging teachers to make the prevailing social immobility more apparent, to collect all the facts reported by the press and found in history books or others... "that children are well convinced of the reality of social injustices. Neither will my colleagues stop helping children to understand what a moral society can be..." (Ferrer, 2009, p. 16).

62 Escuela Moderna Newsletters were published, and in them we find all the new ideas that were implanted within the archaic Spanish society of the time. The first 17 numbers (1901-1903) help us to know a large part of the innovations that would be developed. Two-seat tables, as in the schools of Paris; end of the use of reading posters and religious moral maxims; on the walls, maps, blackboards, and pictures of lessons on things, or science topics. The lessons on things -that is how they called it- were probably the most original methodology. The word lessons -master classes-, ended up transcending to the lessons on things. One does not fully educate by disciplining intelligence, ignoring the heart, and relegating the will, since the person, in the unit of his cerebral functionalism, is a complex, and has several fundamental facets. It is an energy that sees, an affection that rejects or adheres to what is conceived, and a will that curdles what is perceived and loved into acts. Since they had the natural sciences as an educational guide, we are able to understand that they would try to make intellectual representations that, while educating, suggest science, so students turn them into juice of feeling, and even love them intensely. All this, written in 1901, in the first school bulletin.

The innovations went further. Excursions to all kinds of places up to twice a week, not only to rivers, mountains, forests (Aubert and Siles, 2009), but even to the Montjuich Fort moat where the dissidents were assassinated (premonitorily, where Ferrer was shot), since they were really the basis of the lessons of things; introduction in Spain of plates, drawings, slide projector, organ models (Delgado, 1979); play and physical education as everyday events, even been considered the latter as the first critical physical education in history (Torrebadella, 2016); daily hygienic-sanitary inspections; science masses, that is, activities coinciding on the date and time with the religious services on Sundays, in which, not only for the students, but for the entire population in general, there were activities (including medical examinations and vaccination of the children), and lectures by university teachers -facts imitated abroad, by Luigi Fabbri in Italy, by Sebastián Faure in France... (Cappelletti, 2012); coeducation of social classes and sexes -a real scandal for the Spain of the time-, and even a primitive feminist education (Nadal, 2022).

The Modern School abolished rewards, punishments and examinations. This is still today a utopia in a high number of self-styled teaching spaces. Another big change: the "First Normal Year." With the establishment of a considerable base of knowledge and critical sense, the courses as they are usually understood nowadays, were suppressed. The students carrying out individual work, under supervision, it was the abolition in the practice of functional illiteracy, and the beginning of a truly autonomous student body, for a society opposed to the existing one, yesterday and probably today.

Even the theater would be a form of education and rebellion against the status quo. This school opened a contest for theatrical plays... with the purpose of facilitating the necessary progress on the current state of the art in what is routine and promoting young people... postponed by companies and authors who monopolize the taste of the public (Malato, 1906).

Ferrer shared the goal of the grassroots libertarian movement to emancipate the proletariat. Education would serve as a means to guarantee freedom or to oppress people (Eberspächer, 2020), and the chosen option would develop unambiguously.

For this reason, the revolutionary intellectuals of the time, like Ferrer, tried to develop a discourse that sought the development of freedoms and social struggles without vanguards or parties. The cultural organization, as one more revolutionary path, would disseminate knowledge through various forms: the construction of modern schools, the popular press (such as the Escuela Moderna newsletter) and the organization of a truly atheist and public educational movement, obviously without a state (Ferretti, 2018).

Although the Spanish government closed Ferrer's institution, it continued to amaze the world that thought another way of life was possible (Suissa, 2006). Ferrer took a risk, not only creating a school, but trying to bring together all available critical science, disseminating it among his students and throughout the world, to the best of his ability (Nadal, 2023a).

## **Histories of the expansion of transformative ideas and methodologies.**

Ferrer, whose death has taken Europe... story of the teacher who in career of only eight years grew to be a menace to the power of clericals in Spain. This was one of the headlines of more than 75 press releases and/or articles published by the New York Times (1909) during the last arrest, death sentence, and execution of the founder of the Modern School. The Spanish State, criminally trying to repress ideals that were a possible seed that could germinate in serious damage to its interests, achieved the global dissemination of the figure of Ferrer and his ideas. In Copenhagen, Denmark, a rally under the presidency of the mayor Jensen gathered more than six thousand people, declaring the murder illegal and unjust. Similar events occurred in Thessaloniki (Greece), Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam, and in Holland a circulation of 20,000 copies of a manifesto was made; students in Saint Petersburg went on strike for several days after the execution; On April 14, 1936, a monument of Ferrer was inaugurated in Morava-Ostrava, Czech Republic... (Ferrer, 1980).

Even more than 3,000 kilometers away, in the theater of Beirut, Lebanon, three days after Ferrer's assassination, a drama was performed in which he was a hero. Written in 24 hours by a group of writers, it was learned just as quickly, and its performance generated a high number of protests, with the main actor, Daoud Moujaës, sentenced to seven months in prison, despite which he went into exile, and he came to visit Ferrer's grave and dedicate an ode to him (Khairallah, 1912).

Different sources have to be consulted to achieve a realistic image of the influence of the Modern School, even in the antipodes of Barcelona, such as Australia -which Ferrer visited and where part of his family lived- (Petersen, 1968; Compte-Barceló, 2016; Keene, 2005; Burón, 2018...). Its influence in the United States is one of many possible research topics. More than twenty schools were established in different parts of the country, where children might study in an atmosphere of freedom and self-sufficiency, in contrast to the formality and discipline of the traditional classroom, and, of course, these places where called Modern Schools (Avrich, 1980; Grosvenor & Pataki, 2017).

Ferrer school in the city of Lausanne, created in 1910 and directed by the Federation of Workers' Unions of Francophone Switzerland and by the libertarian educator Henri Roorda (Lenoir, 2013), Modern Schools in São Paulo (Bauru, Jaú, Campinas, São Caetano), in Minas Gerais (Machado), in Rio de Janeiro (Mehl & Moura, 2007, p. 72) are just examples.

Rationalist teaching was co-opted by the authorities: it reached the rank of a law, in Mexico (De Jesús, 1934; León, 2016). All of the above, is not a coincidence, nor was it solely due to the murder of Ferrer. Argentina, Central America, Cuba, Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia... accredit experiences related to the Modern School that we investigate now (Nadal, 2023b).

The ideals of the Modern School are clear. Rationalist, scientific, comprehensive, physically and intellectually active teaching, lessons of things and not words, constant trips abroad, critical sense,

teacher and student autonomy, coeducation of girls and boys. Education, like revolution, must be global. Ferrer created in 1908 the International League for the Rational Education of Childhood, to practically introduce in childhood education, in all countries, the idea of science, freedom and solidarity. It also proposes to seek the adoption and application of the most appropriate methods to the psychology of the child (Ferrer, 1908). Initially based in Paris, soon this league already had sections in France, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, England, the Netherlands and Portugal (Prado, 2015).

George Orwell glimpsed the better world he was looking for when the anarchists tried to convert Barcelona, in 1936, into an egalitarian and self-managed city (Wilkin, 2013). Perhaps this was already taking place at The Ferrer Colony and Modern School of Stelton, New Jersey, from 1911 to 1953, one of the attempts that have come to be considered among the most notable, and forgotten, counterculture attempts in the United States (Veysey, 1978).

With an unequivocal social impact (Fernández, 2020), and with ideals totally opposed to the authoritarian pedagogical thought of the time (Bahr and Dallabrida, 2020), the rationalist school promoted by the Modern School always had a counterattack promoted by the groups in power, that is, the Church, the State, and the world of business (Bilhão, 2016; Colleldemont and Vilanou, 2017).

## Concluding: the dream is not over.

In the conflict between science and religion that reigned in Spain at the end of the 19th century (Muñoz and Lemke, 2022), the Modern School was much more than a school "pervaded with anarchist and libertarian ideology" (Giménez, 2015, p. 193). The state execution of Ferrer implied, to a large extent, the resignation of the president of the nation's government, Maura, just eight days after the assassination (Velázquez, 2013).

At the monument in honor of Ferrer in Brussels, his own words perpetuate that rationalist teaching can and should discuss everything, placing the child in advance on the simple and direct path of personal investigation. There are teaching and research staff who consider that the Modern School is an international and current figure (García-Yeste et al., 2016), that its ideals in education have survived around the world (Gribble, 2018), and question themselves how they could resist being a sell-out within the overwhelming functions of the state and capitalism (Haworth, 2012).

In a world facing difficult social, educational and even family problems (Villalba, 2023), freedom in education based on the Modern School is still discussed, researched, published and reissued (Ferm, 2005), and there are still experiences influenced by it, such as Summerhill's (Fortunato and Silveira, 2023). Perhaps we could speak of a primitive intersectionality, as contents that can be read in the Modern School Newsletters, for example.

Feminist, postcolonial, black and indigenous scholars (Barnes & Pietsch, 2022) have an educational experience in which colonialism was taught as it really is since childhood. Girls and boys were united, when it was almost a sin. Women were the intellectual protagonists. A main goal was also to reunite minors from all social classes to fight, together, against all causes of oppression, until total liberation.

If the causes of oppression continue to be the same, yesterday and today... Is the school and the education promoted by Ferrer Guardia, still modern, still a utopia to implement, obviously, surpassing all its defects, and enhancing and improving all their contributions?

Ferrer's model could inform current educational practices, especially in history education. We relate it to everyday practices based on theories that escape state control. To fly in the dream of a better, self-managed world, which was not, and is not only, a daydream. It was a reality, just as it can be today in so many spaces, larger or smaller, that we are unaware of. Other experiences, past and present, already exist, or existed, and, perhaps, are far from where we live. It could be an amazing trip to research about them.

A more focused debate on the implications for curriculum design and teacher training, based on this revolutionary school, will always be possible. The practical relevance of the article would increase by promoting research on this, and many other, anti-authoritarian, emancipatory, and authentically revolutionary experiences, since utopia was possible and still can be.

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