

Francisco Ferrer

The Modern School

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The Modern School

The “Escuela Moderna,” which Ferrer opened in Barcelona in August 1901, was not the first of its kind in Spain. The organized freethinker movement itself had long recognized the urgent need to counter religious superstition and its pernicious consequences through rationalist and non-ecclesiastical schools.

As early as 1885, the non-ecclesiastical school “La Verdad” (The Truth) was founded in San Felice de Guipolo. It was the best-equipped school in the entire city and was attended by a large number of students. In 1888, the freethinker association “The Friends of Progress” established a similar school in Madrid. The association’s statutes stated its primary purpose as “The creation and defense of non-ecclesiastical schools for boys and girls with all necessary classes and grades.”

Sixty Spanish freethinkers’ associations were represented at the International Freethinkers’ Congress in 1889, and the report read out shows that they saw their primary task as the fight for non-church education. Several of these associations maintain non-church schools, and their aim is to exert their influence to ensure that religious instruction is completely eliminated from all elementary schools.

This was the atmosphere and sentiment regarding religion in schools during the few years of experimentation and preparation before the founding of the “Escuela Moderna.” During all this time, groups of advanced thinkers—socialists, anarchists, freethinkers, syndicalists, and co-operatives—had collected and pooled their funds, formed their joint committees, founded schools, purchased teaching materials, and rented premises to free themselves and their children from ignorance, superstition, and spiritual slavery. They were determined to do for themselves what the government would not do for them. And when Ferrer set about organizing the efforts of the anti-clerical schools in 1901, providing them with new textbooks, and raising their teaching to the highest standards of modern pedagogy, this was a most severe blow to the forces of religious superstition and clerical domination.

The intellectual ground was thus well prepared for the seeds sown by Ferrer’s Modern School in Barcelona. His great merit lay not only in having given the movement a new lease of life, but primarily in devoting his enthusiasm, his wealth, and his organizational talent to the task of ripening the seeds already sown, perfecting teaching methods, and providing the schools with a rich and diverse range of textbooks. Ferrer’s Modern School was not the first of its kind, but it was certainly the most vibrant of all non-ecclesiastical schools in Spain. The first school founded in Barcelona soon multiplied, its influence spread, and by 1906, there were already sixty schools based on its model in Catalonia and elsewhere.

Let us now consider the basic principles of Ferrer’s aspirations and their practical implementation. In the manifesto that Ferrer issued on the occasion of the opening of the first school in Barcelona, he expressed his ideas as follows:

“The real question for us is to use the school as the most effective means to achieve the complete spiritual, intellectual, and economic emancipation of the working class. If we all agree that the workers, or rather, all of humanity, can expect nothing from any god or any supernatural power, can we replace this power with another, such as the state? No, the emancipation of the proletariat can only be the direct and self-conscious work of the working class itself, of its will to learn and to know. If the working people remain ignorant, they will always remain in bondage to the church

or the state, i.e., to capitalism, which represents these two powers. If, on the contrary, they draw their strength from reason and knowledge, their well-understood interest will soon lead them to put an end to exploitation so that the worker can take the fate of humanity into their own hands. Therefore, in our opinion, the most important thing is to enable the working class to understand these truths.

Let us establish a system of education through which the child can quickly and easily learn the origin of scientific inequality, religious lies, pernicious patriotism, and the long-standing customs in the family and elsewhere that keep them in slavery. It is not the state, the expression of the will of an exploitative minority, that can help us achieve this goal. To believe this would be the most pernicious madness.

If you want good merchants, skilled accountants, capable civil servants—in a word, people who think only of securing their own future without concern for others—then turn to the state, to the chambers of commerce, to all patriotic clubs and societies. But if you want to prepare a future of brotherhood, peace, and happiness for all—as you must want! — then turn to yourselves, to those who suffer under the existing system, and establish schools like ours, where you can teach all the truths that humanity has acquired.”

The school’s program provides further information about its organization and the type of instruction provided:

The mission of the “Modern School” is to educate the children entrusted to it—boys and girls—so that they become men and women who think freely and independently and love truth and justice. To achieve this goal, the school replaces the dogmatic method of theology with the rational method of natural science, with the intention of awakening, developing, and cultivating the special abilities of each individual student; so that the innate and latent abilities of each child are given full scope, and thus they can become not only useful members of society but also, thanks to their specialized education, an instrument of the spiritual and moral upliftment of the masses. Our teaching is based on the child’s progressive development and avoids all atavistic, reactionary instincts—religion, racial animosity, class prejudice, passion for war, and the desire for revenge—which represent in the child the dead weight of the past and thwart every free and purposeful attempt to realize a better future for humanity. Our teaching recognizes neither dogmas nor customs, for these are forms that constrain the life of thought within limits established by the demands of temporary social conditions.

We disseminate only the results proven by facts, the theories confirmed by reason, and truths reinforced by irrefutable evidence. The purpose of our teaching is that people’s thinking should become an instrument of His will. We want the truths of science to shine in their own light and illuminate the thinking of everyone, so that in their work they can create happiness for humanity without others having to suffer because of the unjust privileges of some.

It is undeniable that the child comes into the world without any preconceived ideas and that during its life it acquires the ideas of those who surround it and dominate its thinking. Furthermore, the child changes its experiences according to its powers of observation, and its ideas are determined by the conditions of its environment. It is therefore clear that if the child can be raised to learn the scientific truths about the world around it, and is warned in time that, to prevent error, one should under no circumstances blindly believe in anything, but only recognize those truths

proven by science—that its mind will develop in a direction favorable to all study. Therefore, in order to enable the child to form his own independent judgment about the various problems of human life, it is important that everything, in nature and in books, be presented to the child as it really is, and not as it is usually presented in schoolbooks, which are notoriously saturated with religious and social prejudices. To educate children so that they develop free from prejudice and to publish textbooks that will achieve this success—this is the purpose of the Modern School.

Ferrer did not take the position that books intended for children should not discuss God, religion, and other social dogmas. On the contrary, he was convinced that the rationalist school can and must discuss all these problems in order to clear the way for the child from all of this and, after careful consideration, to make him aware of his own origins and the origin of all the suffering that plagues humanity in the form of the existing social order and its struggles. In a word, rationalism in school must make the child a self-confident person, who knows his own nature and the nature that surrounds him, so that he can follow his reason in life, true to the principles that permeate him, and act for the best good of all.

The implementation of this program fell far short of the ideal. Already in the first section, which consists of very young children, the first introductory elements of literary and scientific knowledge were taught. In this section, as in all other sections, the children are given only textbooks published by the school itself. The first reading book is simultaneously a primer, a grammar, and an illustrated handbook on the development of nature. In simple language that is easily understandable to children, it describes the course of world development from the atom to man. The latter takes the form of a conversation between child and teacher, some of whose concluding sentences we would like to quote:

Student: So why does the universe exist?

Teacher: The universe exists simply because it exists. The universe is the universality of substance. Science shows us that not even the smallest particle of this substance can be created or destroyed; substance is therefore indestructible and eternal. However, the concept of eternity makes the idea of a world creation impossible; the two are incompatible. If we understand by universe the universe that exists at this very moment, we can answer that this universe exists because substance, that is, everything that exists, namely matter and energy, is incessantly changing. The universe, at any given moment, is the state of matter and energy at that given moment. Therefore, in order to truly understand the why of the existing universe, it is necessary, after establishing the eternity of substance, to trace its transformations down to the present day. In doing so, we must avoid all imaginary explanations and rely exclusively on observation and experience. When we have explained how substance changes, we have shown why the existing universe exists and why it is the way it is.

Student: Yes, I understand: The universe is the concept that humans have of the universality of substance. But what disadvantage would it entail to say: Substance is God?

Teacher: A very great one. The word God evokes in us the idea of a Creator, a fantastic, omnipotent being. If substance has existed from all eternity, it cannot have been created, so the childish concept of an omnipotent ruler cannot possibly be applied to this substance. The times of superstitious fear in which primitive peoples lived are over. We do not want to apply metaphysical explanations to those facts whose cause we can know. We must choose between two worldviews: the dualistic and the monistic.

Student: What are these worldviews? Can you explain that to me?

Teacher: The dualistic worldview assumes a Creator in the universe, i.e., a being outside the universe, which is not the universe and created the universe. But this raises the questions: Who created this Creator? Where was he, and what did he do during eternity, before the world was created? The idea of a Deity is a mere illusion; and it results in dualists making the grave error of subordinating their behavior in life to the alleged will of this unreasonable metaphysical hypothesis, calling it the Supreme Being. The monistic worldview is not based on imaginary speculations, but on the facts of science. It does not assume the existence of a Creator, but draws its conclusions from the existence and imperishability of substance through all its transformations.

Student: And along with the idea of a Deity, should one also reject all ideas of a future life and an immortal soul?

Teacher: That is beyond doubt. These ideas derive from the hope that, contrary to all the results arrived at by science, certain phenomena of energy, which we observe only in the activity of certain organisms, continue to exist in the same form even after these organisms have ceased to function, and even after they have dissolved.

Student: So you're saying this hope is false?

Teacher: Of course. It's easy to prove that the existence of an individual is strictly limited by fertilization on the one hand and death on the other. Outside of the existence of the individual, we cannot imagine an existence for itself. Therefore, we must strive for our happiness during our existence, instead of submitting to "fate" and hoping for a supposed existence after death. Let us hope that all people will soon come to understand these truths, without which the efforts to establish a rational society must remain unsuccessful.

Student: What you have said has convinced me. From now on, I will also be one of those who strive to contribute to the establishment of a rational society...

Ferrer's reader quickly sold out in two editions of 10,000 copies each. The preface to the second edition rightly states: "As we anticipated, the children learn to speak, know, and think at the same time. Through observation and listening, they are in the process of imprinting on their minds not only the conventional things that stick in their memory, but also the vivid images of ideas that give life to the mechanism of language."

This reader for the advanced levels is truly excellent; it introduces students to a critical examination of modern state and capitalist society, and from it we learn the true purpose that Ferrer associated with his Modern School. We would like to reproduce some characteristic passages from the textbook here:

"The surest means of eradicating our errors is to subject everything to close and determined scrutiny, without a priori recognizing opposing ideas and opinions. (p. 152) ... When brutal power presumes to suppress every just, noble, and lofty feeling, the result is indignation. When some people, by virtue of the position they occupy, instead of guaranteeing the free expression of thought, impose senseless obstacles and shackles on it, the use of force cannot be avoided. (p. 154)

Patriotism, capitalism, and religion form a net that suffocates and atrophies the human personality. (p. 154)

Truth, justice, and beauty are the three great forces that attract our reason, that constitute the essence of our progress, that explain the driving force and purpose of our development. (p. 155) We do not seek admirers; we make ourselves not idol

worshippers. We mercilessly overthrow statues and images. We smash to pieces all hypocritical priesthood, all seemingly holy things, all idolatry. Down with idols of clay and flesh! That our conscience, our thinking, may never submit to conscience and thinking. (p. 158) We abhor everything that can divide us and enthusiastically love everything that strives to unite and fraternize us. The commandment of love is the great law of nature. (p. 159)

A man buys an uncultivated and marshy piece of land. He hires laborers to put it in good repair and cultivate it, while he remains quietly in the city. After a few years, this barren land is transformed into a good garden or field and is worth a hundred times more than when it was purchased. The owner's sons, who inherit this land, will say they are enjoying the fruits of their father's labor; and the sons of the workers—those who truly made the land fertile—will continue to work and suffer. (p. 161)

One cannot harness a force of whose existence one has no knowledge. Humans could not harness the electricity that surrounded them when they were not yet aware of it. On the contrary, we have no example of people not immediately making use of a force that lay within their reach. Therefore, it is necessary to reveal to the proletariat its own power, to show it that it is not weak, that it is the stronger party, that it must not obey, must not yield, and must not endure slavery. (p. 165)

Religions have made work a curse; the rulers have made it a yoke; humanity will make it its joy and its pride. Then work will no longer be a shame and a torment, but the expression of human joy in the general happiness. (p. 165)”

The spirit of the Modern School can best be seen in these fragments. This spirit permeates all the other textbooks (32 in total), written on various branches of knowledge by the most eminent scholars of Spain and France, mostly directly for the school. Most of these books, distributed in large editions and at low prices (usually 1–2 pesetas), are provided with an introduction by Ferrer himself, and each of these introductions sheds new light on his beliefs and ideals. We present some of the most notable ones below.

First and foremost, there is Malvert's book, “The Origin of Christianity,” which, using historical documents and illustrations, demonstrates how the symbols, customs, and dogmas of the Christian Church have formed and developed since prehistoric times, until they were finally woven together by the priestly caste into the system that is used today as “Divine Revelation” for the purpose of making people overlook their actual misery and thus subservient to a ruling class. In the preface, Ferrer writes:

“The goal of the old educational system, if not openly stated, was in fact the following: to teach people the uselessness of knowledge so that they would submit to the material deprivations of life, content themselves with the dreamed-of compensation of eternal heavenly happiness after death, and remain in holy fear of eternal punishment. Therefore, it used to entertain children with stories, anecdotes, travelogues, scraps of classical literature, etc., and to impart to them an education in which good and useful things were mixed with untruths.

But all this led to an unjust social condition; for minds were thereby fed exclusively with mystical ideas and thus accustomed to recognizing the mediation of the priest

of that power between a supernatural power and human beings. And these priests sanctioned the foundations of their privileged position; they justified the existence of the privileged and disinherited classes and, by implication, all the injustices under which human beings— each one in his or her particular situation—suffering. The Modern School, on the contrary, strives to educate free, responsible intelligences capable of living in the full development of all their human faculties. It must necessarily set itself a completely opposite goal; it must teach solely the proven and provable truth, reject any lie or fable, and always favor light over darkness.”

To combat the second mainstay of social misery, the dogma of patriotism and militarism, the Modern School published a translation of the collected sayings and judgments on war and militarism by the anarchist Jean Grave, editor of the journal “Temps Nouveaux.” In the preface, Ferrer writes: “This book seems extremely useful to us for strengthening the sense of justice that has not yet been corrupted in children, and for protecting them against the selfish and malicious influences of the privileged... In publishing this collection of anti-militarist ideas from international literature, the Modern School trusts in the correctness of its intentions and the goodwill of all those teachers who are convinced that war is the most criminal disorder of humanity and militarism the perpetrator of this crime—and that both maintain the prerogative of the ruling class in society. It hopes that all educators will feel a duty to convince all their pupils that peace based on social justice is the highest good humanity can strive for, and that peace will find its highest reward in fraternity, in the coming just society.”

Another highly important book is “The Universal Substance” by Paraf-Javal and A. Bloch. This small, very simply written book breaks down the riddles of life into their simplest natural components, so that the foundations of belief in magic and miracles can be scientifically overthrown and swept away from human thought. Ferrer considers this work the most important among the editions of the Modern School. In the preface, he states:

“It was necessary to build a barrier against the influence exerted on the child by heredity and atavism in the family and at school, as a result of the ignorance of parents and friends, and reinforced by unreasonable teaching methods. The Modern School, aware that religion is an existing social, political, and economic fact that must be reckoned with, has decided to provide both children and their teachers with the spiritual weapons offered by this book to enable them to resist the onslaught of superstition. At the same time, the child is encouraged to think for himself and to develop his personality in character and expression.

Instruction is based on this principle down to the smallest detail. When the child sits at his desk in school, when he walks in the nearby woods or on the seashore with his friends and teachers, when he visits with them a factory in the city, a technical facility, or a scientific laboratory—it is always addressed first and foremost to his own Personal observation to awaken in him a thoughtful interest in all the diverse objects that surround him. Instead of stuffing his head with knowledge, one tries to let it develop from his own consciousness, so that it is the result of his independent, rational thinking. Thus, teaching becomes a collaboration, a camaraderie between student and teacher. Through these rational methods, the child’s mind is developed so that it remains receptive to everything beautiful and good.”

The essays of the students (boys and girls, on average ten to twelve years old), collected and published in a special book of the Modern School, can give us a sample of the magnificent fruits this anarchist education, in the noblest sense of the word, bears in the intellectual development of simple, young children.

In their exquisite naiveté, they faithfully reflect the thoughts and feelings of these little, freely growing human beings, who have not been crippled and drilled to ruin by fear of punishment and authority, and by the mind-numbing indoctrination of misunderstood and prejudiced opinions of others. From these many and numerous essays, we extract the following:

1. THE MICROSCOPE. The science of antiquity lagged behind, for it had only the naked eye as its means of observation. Today we have the microscope, and with it we see the germs of many diseases and the composition of animal and plant organisms. The microscope is an invention of free men; Religious fanatics are incapable of making inventions because they attribute everything to their god.

2. THE PRIESTS. The priests say that one should not believe in science and should not live according to its teachings. They say that there is an almighty God; but if he can do everything, why does he allow the rich to exploit the poor?

3. THE POLICE. The police arrest the unfortunate people who steal a loaf of bread for their families, imprison them, and thus increase misery.

4. THE INN. What a pity that there are so many inns and so few free schools. In inns, the men get drunk and consume their families' livelihood. The women suffer and become sick. As a result, the children, ill-fed and poorly clothed, roam the streets, unable to read or write, and following the same path as their fathers.

5. WAR. People should not fight each other. Weapons were invented by humans to dominate their fellow human beings, rather than as useful tools for the advancement of humanity. Much is said about the glory of war, but this glory only belongs to the commanders, for the soldiers who work for them, if they don't die on the battlefield, return home with one eye, one arm, and one foot less. The inventor of a murder machine is proud of his work; he is even given rewards; and thus, instead of improving himself, people become brutalized by war.

6. RELIGION. Religion has always led humanity down the wrong path. Instead of teaching children to think and love one another, it teaches them to pray and to admire those who kill. It wants people to believe in miracles, when it has been proven that everything in the world can be explained by natural causes. Religion has always been the misfortune of humanity; it is the cause of exploitation and war. If we ask the followers of each of the countless religions which is true, they all answer: "Ours." And that proves that they are all false.

7. MONEY. Because of money, there are rich and poor; the wealthy exploit the workers, and while some enjoy abundant sustenance, others lack bread, clothing, and shelter. If there were no money, everyone could exchange the fruits of their labor and possess what they need, whereas now those who work suffer deprivation, and those who produce nothing possess everything in abundance. Money makes people power-hungry and creates inequality.

8. PARASOMISTS. Parasites are certain animal or plant organisms that live at the expense of others and contribute no labor to their existence. Similarly, there are parasites in human society; there are workers from whose labor the rich feed, and from whom the priests eventually take everything.

9. THE REGIMENT. One day, as I was walking down the street, I saw a regiment of soldiers. I felt so sorry for them that when they came close to me, I ran to the other side of the street. With

pain, I saw that people were rushing to see this troop of slaves pass by, and that schoolchildren also came to admire them. This shows that the people are crude and that, instead of following the path of progress, they prefer to see unhappy slaves.

10. BULLFIGHT. I don't understand how many people today can find pleasure in seeing animals suffer. This pleasure is a fruit of ignorance. If everyone received the appropriate education, as we do, there would be no more bullfights.

11. MODERN PROGRESS. In our times, there are inventions that are thanks to science and reason. People begin to progress when they abandon old prejudices. Religion is opposed to science. How could it, with Galileo, acknowledge that the earth is stationary and the sun revolves around it?

A free and happy childhood! This is the path on which the fighters for a free and happy humanity will grow up. This was the ideal that Ferrer strove unceasingly. From prison (on the occasion of his first arrest in 1906), he wrote to Professor Heaford:

“After a few months of this humanitarian and scientific education, I have been able to see for myself what kind of men and women will grow up if we give children a rational education. It was a joy to see how the feeling of camaraderie developed between boys and girls in friendship and mutual respect. The most wonderful relationships existed between the teachers and their pupils, as all were imbued with the desire to realize an ideal society based on mutual affection and solidarity.”

Ferrer's first arrest

One can easily imagine the fear and anger that gripped the priesthood and the government when they saw the extent to which the influence of these genuine Modern Schools was spreading throughout the country. From the pulpits of churches and in clerical and conservative newspapers, Ferrer was portrayed as the worst criminal, the devil in human form; there was no outrage of which this simple, high-minded man had not been accused.

An opportunity had to be found, by any means possible, to neutralize him. And when, on May 31, 1906, Matteo Morral threw a bomb in front of King Alfonso XIII's wedding carriage—which, as is well known, left the royal couple unharmed—it was only natural that Ferrer would be portrayed as the “intellectual author” of this assassination attempt. “These crimes will be repeated as long as freedom of reading, teaching, and thought is maintained in Spain; it is from this that all these antisocial monsters spring,” wrote a religious magazine, the “HEART OF JESUS” in Bilbao, characteristic of the state of mind of Spanish clericalism.

After spending a year in pretrial detention, Ferrer was brought before a civil court. The prosecution sought by every means possible to secure his death sentence or at least life imprisonment by buying witnesses, forged documents, and influencing judges, jurors, and public opinion. But the court, to at least maintain conventional form, needed proof of his guilt. The prosecutor finally declared that he had no evidence that Ferrer was complicit in the assassination, “but he had the moral certainty of it.”

In one of his letters from prison, Ferrer wrote: “Everyone thinks I will certainly be acquitted, but Becerra del Torro (the public prosecutor) declares that he wants my head because he believes I knew about Morral's intentions. Who can say who will win: the truth or Becerra del Torro and his Jesuits? Meanwhile, I'm not complaining, because the longer I remain in prison, the more

strongly the movement in favor of the Modern School will develop, and I prefer that to be the case.”

Ferrer was not to be deceived this time. Indeed, such a unanimous storm of indignation erupted among the peoples of all countries, among those who think liberally and justly, and especially among the revolutionary proletariat, that the Spanish ruling clique saw its political and financial interests threatened and considered it wiser to abandon its attempt on Ferrer’s life for the time being. Due to a lack of evidence, the court was ultimately forced to acquit Ferrer and return his assets, which had been the primary target of the case.

During his stay in prison, to ward off boredom and constantly reflect on his principles, Ferrer wrote the following sentences, very characteristic of his mentality, on the wall of his cell:

“Never receive anything from others! Always remember that the clever and powerful, even when they give you the most beautiful things, make you slaves! To seek to establish the harmony of all people on love and brotherhood, without distinction of sex or class, that is the great task of humanity. We have all dedicated ourselves to this in the rationalist schools, where we teach our students only that which is based on scientific truth. These same truths, guaranteed as such by experience and the lessons of history, will ultimately show the disinherited classes the way to the victory of freedom. The working classes will only free themselves from slavery when, convinced of their strength, they take the management of their affairs into their own hands, no longer trusting the favored classes or expecting anything from them.

If human beings were rational beings, they would not tolerate any injustice against themselves or their fellow human beings, nor could they feel any desire to commit injustice. No worship or servitude to gods or exploiters! Instead: let us all learn to love one another! My ideal is to teach—to teach only what is rational and scientific—to teach as the “Escuela Moderna” does, whose teachings bestow humanity and dignity. To love a woman passionately and have an ideal I can serve; to desire to fight for it until I win—what else can I desire or long for?

Physically, mentally, and morally, schools imprison children in order to guide the development of their abilities into desired paths. Today’s education is nothing but drill. I love the free spontaneity of the child and detest the intellectual deformity of the child subjected to our current education. As long as there is no change in the system that has persisted to the present day, as long as no effort is made to prevent under all circumstances the crimes that are now punishable, namely by establishing a fraternal organization of society, so long will everyone convicted in the name of justice be unjustly condemned.”

Fundamentals of free education

After his release, Ferrer devoted himself to his life’s work with renewed vigor. While in prison, he wrote the following essay, which can be seen as a declaration of his convictions and a program for his work. It was published under the title: **Scientific Rationalism**.

Six years ago (1901), when we had the great joy of opening the Modern School of Barcelona, we emphatically emphasized that its teaching system would be rational and scientific. Our main

aim was to make the public aware that, since we consider reason and science to be the antidote to all dogmas, no religion of any kind would be taught in our school.

We knew that by this decision we had aroused the hatred of the priestly class against us, and that they would fight us with all the means usually employed by those who live exclusively by lies and deceit and who are so adept at abusing the influence afforded them by the ignorance of their followers and the power of the state.

The more we were shown the recklessness involved in so openly opposing the ruling Church, the more courage we felt within ourselves to persevere in our undertaking; for we were convinced that the greater an evil and the more powerful a tyranny, the more strength is needed to combat it, the more energy must be devoted to destroying it.

The general outcry of rage that has risen in the clerical press against the Modern School—and to which I probably owe a year in prison—has shown us that, confident in the excellence of this method of instruction, we must fill all liberal thinkers with renewed enthusiasm to continue the work with greater determination than ever, to expand and spread it as far as our strength allows.

We must note, however, that the task of the Modern School is not limited to the desire to remove religious prejudices from people's minds. It is true that these are perhaps the greatest obstacles to people's spiritual liberation, but their destruction cannot suffice to ensure the preparation of a free and happy humanity; for one can imagine a people without religion, but at the same time without FREEDOM. If the working class frees itself from religious prejudice but retains the prejudice of private property as it exists today; if the workers believe the fairy tale that claims there will always be rich and poor; if freethinking education must be content with spreading knowledge of hygiene and natural sciences and solely educating good apprentices, good clerks, good employees, good workers, and good citizens in all branches of work, we can very well be atheists and, as far as the meager sustenance we can procure with our miserable wages allows, we can lead a more or less healthy and vigorous life—but we will always remain slaves to capital and the state.

The Modern School seeks to combat all prejudices that prevent the complete liberation of humanity. Therefore, it appeals to human reason, that is, it seeks to instill in children the desire to recognize the origin of all social injustices so that they, in turn, can combat and resist them.

Our freethinking combats fratricidal wars, both internal and external; the concept of freedom taught by the Modern School combats the exploitation of man by man, the slavery of women; he thus combats all enemies of human harmony: ignorance, wickedness, pride, and other vices and faults that divide people into oppressors and oppressed.

The rational and scientific teaching of the Modern School, as we can see, encompasses the study of everything that promotes the freedom of each individual and the harmony of the whole, toward the achievement of a social state of peace, love, and prosperity for all, without distinction of class or gender.

Francisco Ferrer Carcel Modelo de Madrid, June 1, 1907

The renewal of the school

For those who wish to renew childhood education, two means of action are available: to work to reorganize schools through the study of children, to scientifically prove that the existing organization of instruction is flawed and to introduce gradual improvements; or to establish new

schools in which those principles are directly applied that condemn the conventions, prejudices, cruelties, frauds, and lies on which contemporary society is built.

The former approach, in any case, offers great advantages. It corresponds to a developmental conception that men of science will defend and which, in their view, is the only one that leads to the goal. In theory, they are right; and we are prepared to acknowledge this. It is obvious that the arguments of psychology and physiology must bring about important changes in educational methods; that teachers, if they understand the child better, will be better able to adapt their teaching to natural laws. I even admit that this development will proceed in the direction of freedom, for I am convinced that coercion is only the result of ignorance, and that the educator truly worthy of the name will achieve everything through the child's voluntary compliance, for he will know the child's desires and will support their development by simply satisfying them as far as possible. But in real life, I don't believe that those fighting for the liberation of humanity can expect much from this means. Governments have always been careful to maintain the upper hand in the education of the people. They know better than anyone that their power rests almost exclusively on schools. Therefore, they are increasingly seizing control of them.

The times are over when they opposed the spread of learning or sought to restrict the education of the masses. This tactic was once possible for them, for the economic life of nations permitted the ignorance of the people—that ignorance which makes rule so easy. But circumstances have changed. Scientific progress and inventions of all kinds have brought about a revolution in labor and production relations. Today, it is no longer possible for the people to remain ignorant; it is necessary for them to be well-informed so that a country's economic situation can withstand international competition and progress.

From this moment on, governments want universal public education; they want an ever more perfect organization of schools; not because they hope to renew society through its establishment, but because they need people, workers, and more perfected tools to profit from industrial enterprises and the capital invested in them. And one can see how the reactionary governments are now following this movement. They fully understand that the old tactics have become dangerous for the economic life of nations and that public education must be adapted to new needs.

But it would be quite wrong to assume that rulers had not foreseen the dangers arising from the intellectual development of the people and that they had to change the means of their rule. Their methods had also adapted to the new realities of life, and they had worked to retain control of developing ideas. Striving to preserve the faith on which social discipline was once built, they sought to give the ideas emerging from scientific research a significance that could not harm existing institutions. And for this purpose, they seized control of the schools. They, who had previously left the care of the people's education to the priests because they were perfectly suited to such a task, now everywhere took the direction of the school organization into their own hands.

For them, the danger lay in the awakening of human intelligence, in the face of a new life, in the awakening, in the depths of consciousness, of the will to liberation. It would have been madness to fight against these developing forces; They had to be guided in the desired direction. To this end, instead of adhering to the old procedures of all governments, they employed new, evidently successful methods.

It didn't take a genius to find a way out; the simple force of facts led the people in power to understand what had to be done to counter the emerging dangers. So they founded schools, worked to spread knowledge with all their might, and although there were some among them

who initially resisted this movement—for the various well-known currents favored some of the warring political parties—they all soon understood that it was better to give in and that the best tactic was to secure the protection of their interests and principles through new means. As a result, very bitter struggles broke out for the conquest of the school; in every country the struggles are still ongoing; here it is the republican and bourgeois social order that is victorious, elsewhere it is clericalism. All parties know what is at stake and will stop at no sacrifice to secure victory. The battle cry of all is: “For and through the school.”

And the good people must be touched by such concern. Everyone wants their elevation through education, and therefore their happiness. In the past, certain people could say to them: “Those people over there are trying to keep you in ignorance so they can better exploit you; we want you to be well-educated and free.” Now this is no longer possible; schools are being built everywhere, under all sorts of banners.

This unanimous reversal in the rulers’ ideas regarding schools is the reason why I don’t trust their goodwill; and this explains for me the facts on which my doubts about the effectiveness of the reformatory measures proposed by certain reformers are based. Incidentally, these reformers generally care little about the social significance of education. They are people who are very enthusiastic about the investigation of scientific truth, but in their work they set aside all considerations that are foreign to the object of their studies. They work persistently to learn about the child and will eventually be able to tell us—their science is still young—which educational methods are best suited to bring about the child’s full, harmonious development. However, I believe that this somewhat professional indifference toward the cause they seek to benefit is very detrimental to it.

I don’t believe in the least that they are unaware of the facts of social conditions, and I know that they hope for the best results for the general welfare from their work. They say: “By working to uncover the mysteries of human life, by investigating the process of its normal mental and physical development, we will give education a system that can only be conducive to the liberation of all powers. We want to concern ourselves directly with the renewal of schools; as scholars, we cannot do this, since we cannot yet determine exactly what is to be done. We will proceed slowly, step by step, and we are convinced that schools will change in proportion to our discoveries, through the pressure of circumstances themselves. If you ask us what we, as human beings, hope for in the future, we agree with you in foreseeing a development in the sense of a great liberation of the child and of humanity through science; but even in this case, we are convinced that our work is perfectly effective for this purpose and will achieve it by the fastest and most direct route.”

This line of reasoning is apparently logical, and no one would want to contradict it. And yet, it contains a great deal of self-deception. Indeed, if only rulers, as human beings, shared the same ideas as the well-meaning reformers; if they were truly concerned that society continually transform itself in such a way that slavery of any kind gradually disappears—then one could claim that the work of science alone can improve the lot of peoples. But this is far from the case. We know only too well that those who compete for power have only the preservation of their own interests in mind, that they are only concerned with achieving victory for themselves and satisfying their own needs. It has been a long time since we stopped believing the words with which they conceal their intentions. Some naive people still refuse to admit that all sincerity has ceased in them and imagine that they sometimes also want the happiness of their fellow human beings. But the number of these gullible people is continually shrinking, and the rational

thinking of our time no longer allows us to deceive ourselves about the true intentions of those who govern us.

Just as they, when the need for popular education became apparent, knew how to adapt so that this education would not pose a threat to them, so too will they know how to reorganize schools according to the new principles of science so that nothing can endanger their rule. These are, of course, ideas that many find difficult to accept; but one must have seen up close what is going on and how things actually happen in order not to be deceived by high-sounding words.

Ah! What hopes have been and what hopes are still being had from general popular education and compulsory schooling! The majority of progressive people expect everything from it, and it is only in recent times that some are beginning to understand that these things only give us illusions. One realizes that the knowledge acquired is actually useless; one realizes that one has waited and hoped in vain. This is because the organization of schools, far from corresponding to the ideal one so readily creates of it, today turns popular education into the most powerful means of enslavement in the hands of the rulers.

Their teachers are merely the conscious or unconscious tools of the rulers and, moreover, are themselves educated according to their principles; they have endured the discipline of authority from their youth and more than anyone else; those who have escaped the clutches of power are very rare; moreover, these few remain powerless, for the organization of schools holds them so tightly under its coercion that they can do nothing but submit.

I do not want to put this organization on trial here. It is well known enough to be described in one word: COERCION. School imprisons children physically, intellectually, and morally, in order to guide the development of their abilities in the desired direction. It deprives children of contact with nature in order to mold them according to its own whim. And this is the explanation for everything I have said here: the care that governments expend in guiding the education of peoples is the destruction of the hopes of all freedom-loving people.

“Long live the free school!” were his last words. Thus died the Spanish champion of the secular, free school; a victim of his idea, a victim of clericalism.

When Ferrer’s murder became known, a wave of indignation swept the entire world. Massive demonstrations broke out everywhere, and in the Latin countries, even work stoppages took place in protest against the villainous deed of the villains. In Paris, bloody riots broke out in front of the Spanish embassy. Even the German intelligentsia rallied around the time to speak out against the judicial murder of Francisco Ferrer by the Catholic Church in Spain. Spain was at the pillory of public opinion, but Ferrer was no longer alive.

(Note: Francisco Ferrer was executed on October 13, 1909, following the bloody repression of a wave of workers’ strikes in Spain. His murder caused outrage worldwide.)

The press reported the following on the Ferrer case:

“The unbelievable, monstrous thing has happened: the Spanish freethinker Francisco Ferrer was shot yesterday morning in execution of the death sentence passed against him. This is not merely a naked judicial murder, a mockery of justice and all forms of law...” (Frankfurter Zeitung, October 14, 1909)

“Bloodlust clouds the minds of the Spanish priests, the Spanish government, and the Spanish king. Otherwise, the audacity with which they dare to defy the entire public opinion of Europe

would be inexplicable. They not only dared to bring Francisco Ferrer before the Barcelona court-martial because they knew that the innocent man would be acquitted by any ordinary court. They have committed worse crimes, offering up as a sacrificial victim the man who bears no responsibility other than having fought for a modern, religionless school in the land of illiterates and monks." (Vorwärts, Berlin, October 14, 1909)

"The cowardly judicial murder at the Spanish mountain fortress of Montjuich has aroused disgust and indignation throughout the world. The name of the murdered man, Francisco Ferrer, is mentioned on all continents, and his sad fate has triggered violent protests in all countries against the reign of terror of the fanatical Spanish clergy, who are crying out for revenge for the storming of the Barcelona monastery and are dragging before the bar of a court-martial all those who, through their anti-clerical agitation, have fueled their hatred... As a man who fought against the monastic regime, who, although innocent, died firmly for his views, Ferrer deserves our full sympathy." (Vorwärts, Berlin, October 17, 1909)

"Those responsible are the Jesuits, namely Cardinals Merry del Val and Vives. If the condemnation of Ferrer comes from the Jesuits If the Jesuits are to blame for the horror that gripped the entire civilized world in one hour, if the Jesuits have once again offered the world an example of savage cruelty, then justice demands that the treatment that is intended to be accorded to the Spanish ambassadors and consuls be accorded to them. We are fortunate to have two Jesuits of the truly Spanish ilk in Rome, Merry del Val and Vives y Tuto, who also wear the cardinal's purple; it is they who exert their influence against the new Italy on the Vatican, who perhaps forbade Pius X from obtaining a pardon for Ferrer. Therefore, the stay in Italy of these two gentlemen must be made impossible. Remember this! (Avanti, Rome, October 14, 1909)

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Pierre Ramus
Francisco Ferrer
The Modern School

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