No God, No master, No teacher? A Comparative Analysis of La Escuela Moderna in Barcelona and the Modern School Movement in New York

Alex Hastings
Adviser: Prof. Thai Jones
Barnard History Department
Senior Thesis
April 20, 2016
# Table of Contents

Introduction.................................................................................................................. 3
   Anarchism in Education ......................................................................................... 6

Chapter 1 | La Escuela Moderna .................................................................................. 12
   “Letters are learned with blood”: ...................................................................... 12
   Francisco Ferrer and La Escuela Moderna in Barcelona................................. 14
   Co-education and political participation.......................................................... 19
   Reaction of Church Authorities to the Ferrer School ...................................... 22

Chapter 2 | The Modern School in New York ................................................................. 24
   The Vocational Education Movement in New York.......................................... 24
   The Ferrer Association Establishes the Modern School in New York.......... 29

Chapter 3 | Curriculum and Authority in the Modern School ..................................... 33

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 39
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Martha and Shannon in the Barnard Archives; Katie, Ali, Aida, and Allie, my supportive thesis seminar, and Thai, my thesis adviser, who was really supportive despite my inability to meet deadlines. I would also like to thank all of Barnard’s adjunct professors, contingent faculty, teaching assistants and research assistants, without whom this college could not function.

Lastly, I would like to thank a small group of rad Barnard women, my classmates since my first year. This semester they organized for fossil fuel divestment, won $15 an hour for all student workers, taught peer health workshops to Barnard students, wrote their theses and simultaneously created a web of unfailing support for each other at the toughest moments. I’m so happy to continuing learning from them.
Introduction

In July of 1909, Barcelona was on fire. The anarcho-syndicalist labor union, Solidaridad Obrera, mobilized a general strike that interrupted city transit and communication lines. Trade unionists, socialists, and anarchists, both men and women, clashed with police, halted the tram system, and slashed telegram wires. On the morning of July twenty-seventh, wealthy Catalonians awoke to the charred remains of forty Catholic convents and churches, burned by agitators during the night.

Writing for *La Protesta*, the daily newspaper of the Argentine Regional Workers’ Federation, one spectator described the uprising: “It was a spontaneous outburst of the indignation of men and sorrow of women on account of the corruptly engineered war, which fell on the poor.” Another anarchist publication, based in New York and writing about the activity nearly eight years later, marveled that “the whole city of Barcelona was on strike, and the workers were masters of the city for four days”.

This revolt, a culmination of working class frustration towards a corrupt government, the autocratic rule of the Church, and a gratuitous war, became known as “La Semana Tragica”. While affluent residents successfully evaded enlistment, Spain’s constitutional monarchy ordered Barcelona’s working class across the Mediterranean Sea to fight in Morocco. The rebellion was anti-war, but also anti-clerical: exasperated by a political authority that acted on behalf of a wealthy, clergy class, discontented Catalonians seized the capitol city. In a letter to Fernando Tarrida del

---

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Marmol, a Cuban anarchist and professor, Anselmo Lorenzo interpreted the “tragic week” as a frenzied upheaval not coordinated by a specific political group: “A social revolution has broken out in Barcelona, and it has been started by the people…no one has led it. Neither Liberals, nor Catalan Nationalists, nor Republicans, nor Socialists, nor Anarchists.”

The regional government imprisoned nearly 3,000 men, women, and children across Catalonia for participating in the riots. However, the Civil Guard soon fixated on one figure as the alleged instigator of the violence: a middle-aged schoolmaster and moderate anarchist named Francisco Ferrer I Guardia, who was charged as “author in chief” of the insurrection. Ferrer was indicted by a military council, sentenced to death, and executed on October thirteenth, 1909 in Montjuic Fortress, overlooking the beaches and docks of Barcelona. After dedicating the last decade of his life to teaching and managing over fifteen libertarian, secular, free thought schools, including a radical publishing house, in Barcelona and at the city’s outskirts, Ferrer found his books and teaching from Las Escuelas Modernas cited as evidence in his trial and used as justification in his sentencing.

Ferrer’s execution by firing squad received international attention. Torrents of radicals and free thinkers across Europe seethed through the avenues of London, Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Geneva, taking the streets in protest. In New York, anarchists founded the Francisco Ferrer Association and began producing literature and pamphlets about La Escuela Moderna and Ferrer’s

---

11 “Estate Inventory of Francisco Ferrer Guardia” (February 22, 1912). Francisco Ferrer Collection; Sol Ferrer. Box 2, Folder 2. UC San Diego Archives and Special Collectives.
life and work, eventually founding the Modern School in New York. Members of the *Federacion Obrera Regional Argentina* (Argentine Regional Workers Federation) composed a Flamenco-style ode to the late Spanish libertarian and distributed the ballad on 45rpm vinyl records\(^\text{13}\). The one-year anniversary of Ferrer’s lethal punishment even secured a full-page spread in the *New York Times*\(^\text{14}\).

The establishment of free-thought and “libertarian” schools inspired by La Escuela Moderna demonstrates Ferrer’s most permanent legacy. Although Europe hosted a number of libertarian, secular schools before Ferrer’s death, the most famous perhaps being Leo Tolstoy’s Yasnaya Polyana\(^\text{15}\), disciples of Barcelona’s controversial educator consolidated resources and mimicked Ferrer’s model of education in American cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, and Salt Lake, Utah. Although these schools employed alternative pedagogy in different ways, it was not uncommon for Ferrer’s name and tradition to remain attached: Eva Bein, the daughter of two IWW members and student at the Ferrer School in New York City and Stelton, New Jersey, recalled a framed portrait of “martyr Ferrer” hung on the classroom wall in both locations\(^\text{16}\).

Focusing on textbooks, teaching outlines, and classroom schedules, this paper will compare the curriculum of Francisco Ferrer’s Escuela Moderna to the Modern School in New York and demonstrate how the schools’ pedagogical differences reflect distinct class dynamics in New York and Barcelona at the turn of the twentieth century. The major pedagogical departures between La Escuela Moderna and the Modern School indicate that teachers and community members used

---

\(^{14}\) “Word-Wide movement to honor memory of Ferrer: Anniversary of Spanish educator's execution to be marked by extraordinary demonstration in all nations --Haeckel and Anatole France to lead it.” (1910, July 31). The New York Times.


curriculum to challenge specific ruling class influences over the municipal and public education systems of Spain and New York respectively. While Ferrer’s schools in Barcelona prioritized reading instruction and secular subjects such as natural science and biology lessons that were previously limited in clerical schools, the Ferrer School in New York and Stelton New Jersey focused curriculum on community-based, hands-on outdoor activities, rejecting the vocational expectations common in that era.

As primary evidence, I use oral histories of students who attended the Modern School in New York, collected by Paul Avrich, a historian and professor at Queens College, and the monthly bulletins published by La Escuela Moderna and the Modern School. I use photographs from the Rutgers Archives and Special Collections, illustrations, letters, and manuscripts from the UC San Diego Archives and Special Collections, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and the Historic Archives of the City of Barcelona.

For secondary material, I draw on Paul Avrich’s extensive work on anarchist organizing and the Modern School movement, the literature of Judith Suissa on the relationship between Anarchist ideology and authority in the classroom, important histories of New York’s public schools by David Tyack and Larry Cuban, Carolyn P. Boyd’s writing about politics and national identity in Spain, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’ book, Schooling in Capitalist America: Education Reform and the Contradiction of Economic Life.

**Anarchism and Education**

Practices of “unschooling” and anarchist inspired pedagogy are not monolithic, and La Escuela Moderna and the Modern School Movement in New York are historical examples that provide necessary nuance to previous literature on free school movements. In her book *Class War,*
Megan Erickson critiques “unschooling”, which she defines as an educational philosophy in which children are allowed to determine the course of her own curriculum and day-to-day lessons. For Erickson, a New York City public school teacher and counselor, “unschooling” promotes an even more de-centralized national education system in a realm that is already decentralized due to private reform efforts. Erickson argues that “students need scaffolding, in the form of modeling, direct teaching, and prompting, which is gradually removed as students become adept at self-evaluation and metacognition”. She continues, “There’s another aspect of the argument for unschooling that I find troubling…there is value in being pulled out of a daydream. There is value in learning to cope with a little coercion, in knowing what it means to cooperate on a daily basis with someone who doesn’t love you, someone who’s not your family member.”

Although she specifically addresses mid-twentieth century and contemporary alternative education models, Erickson’s main criticism of unschooling and its “anarchist heroes” such as intellectual Paul Goodman is its lack of structure and guidance, which creates a classroom setting void of conflict and resolution. Understandably, Erickson advocates for fixing the country’s public school system over finding alternatives. However, her judgments of unschooling and free-school tactics that she presents in her book are not true for early twentieth century anarchist education, which Avrich explains was based on lifting the student’s mind from the strictures of authoritarian society and rote learning of dogma:

“As to his pedagogical theories, Ferrer drew heavily on both precursors and contemporaries, from Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel to Kropotkin, Tolstoy, and Robin. He was in the direct line of an education tradition which, rooted in eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century romanticism, involved a shift from emphasis on rote instruction to emphasis on the process of learning, from teaching by rote and memorization to teaching by example and

---

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Before Francisco Ferrer imagined a school free of religious dogma and centered on principles of individual choice and self-autonomy, enlightened thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau laid the foundation by openly criticizing teaching methods that disengaged students’ imaginations and involved grueling, “rote” memorization. Rousseau in particular emphasizes the interlacing of experience and learning, an idea that manages to survive through the 18th and 19th century to educators like Leo Tolstoy and Kropotkin, who write similarly on the importance of experimental and practical learning.

Judith Suissa broadens Avrich’s commentary and highlights the historic emphasis on education as part of anarchist visions for organizing society. The Ferrer Association in New York, and La Escuela Moderna both emphasized primary education, as well as lectures and discussions for adults as a method of building a community that did not rely on, but instead challenged, corrupt governing institutions:

“Bakunin and other nineteenth-century social-anarchist thinkers shared certain liberal assumptions about human nature and a liberal faith in the educative power of social institutions...yet such thinkers did not believe that such a society was possible within the framework of the state- however liberal. The focus of their educational thought and experimentation, therefore, was on developing active forms of social interaction which would constitute an alternative to the state. In so doing, however, the conceptualization of education which informed their views, was not one of the education as a means to an end but a more complex one of education as one of the many aspects of social interaction which, if engaged in a certain spirit, could itself be part of the revolutionary process of undermining the state and reforming society on a communal basis.”

---

21 Suissa, J. (2010). Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective Oakland, CA, PM Press. p. 54
22 ibid.
Suissa claims that maintaining anarchist pedagogy did not necessarily signify a complete lack of authority in a political organization or, for that matter, a classroom. She refers to the theory of “operative authority,” in which the license to make executive decisions and determine order in a space materializes from the bottom up, to illustrate how authority has historically functioned in anarchist zones. This theory of a “functionally specific authority” can be applied to understand how teachers, staff, and students at La Escuela Moderna and the Modern School in New York interacted and operated their classrooms:

‘This acceptance, by anarchist thinkers, of certain kinds of rational authority explains how they can, while rejecting the state, nevertheless coherently acknowledge the legitimacy of certain rules of social organization.”

According to Avrich, prominent anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tolstoy maintained a strong influence over Ferrer’s views on free education. Tolstoy, although himself not a self-identified anarchist, oversaw a primary and secondary school in which outdoor play, learning through interactive experience, and student-led curriculum were central. Both Kropotkin and Bakunin felt strongly that schools were gutted of their creative functions by the state, to reproduce the workforce. Kropotkin in particular, valued free education:

“Kropotkin pinned his hopes on the education of the young. His vision of the new society presupposed a thorough overhaul of the existing educational system. The present school was a ‘university of laziness’, he complained. ‘Superficiality, parrot-like repetition, slavishness and inertia of mind are the results of our method of education. We do not teach our children to learn’…instead of being taught from books alone, children would receive an active outdoor education and learn by doing and observing at first hand, a recommendation that has been widely endorsed by modern educational theorists.”

---

23 ibid.
24 Sometimes called the “authority of competence”.
Interestingly, Ferrer was not alone in his quest for free education at the turn of the century in Spain. A caste of other anarchists had opened similar institutions across Europe, with almost identical mission statements of free, “libertarian” education and secular thought. However, Ferrer’s execution propelled him into an international spotlight, drawing attention from anarchists around the globe. What Avrich calls Ferrer’s “martyrdom” emerges as a key factor in the American Modern School Movement’s exaltation of Ferrer’s ideology and name within their movement.27

Chapter 1| La Escuela Moderna

“Letters are learned with blood”: Public education in Spain at the turn of the twentieth century

A nineteenth century Spanish proverb forewarned students, “la letra, con sangre entra”: letters are learned with blood\(^\text{28}\). The dictum alluded to physical violence as a common practice of punishment and enforcing order in the classroom. By the early 1900s, Spain’s municipal run schools adhered to strict disciplinary tactics and vigorously religious instruction, and were afflicted by inadequate funding and poor resources.

In 1847, the Spanish Cortes passed “Ley Moyano”, the first extensive national law on public education. Although the charter mandated a basic curriculum for primary schools, it was a hollow attempt by the Moderado oligarchy to appease the interests of both the ruling state apparatus and the Catholic Church, and by 1901, the required subjects included Catholic doctrine and “sacred history”\(^\text{29}\). By the turn of the twentieth century, Spain’s adult illiteracy rates hovered between 55-60%, an extremely high percentage compared to other European countries such as Germany, France, and Great Britain. The majority of primary schoolmasters made less than 500 pesetas a year, many rural teachers averaging an annual salary of 125 pesetas.\(^\text{30}\) If the municipality could not afford to hire sufficient teachers, priests, monks, or nuns filled the responsibility. Almost twenty percent of children between four and twelve went to a Catholic private school, and those that did attend a state funded school could often expect their teacher to be somehow affiliated with the Catholic Church. “The School-houses in Spain, are, if possible, ever a greater disgrace than the wide-spread illiteracy”, alleged an

\(^{29}\) *Ibid.*  
editorial in the Modern School monthly magazine from 1916. “Such dingy, ramshackle buildings can scarcely be classed as schools…None had sunlight”\textsuperscript{31} The bulletin also noted a salient absence of playgrounds.

Spain’s “three-tiered” state education system reflected the country’s social inequalities; working class children were lucky to receive a primary education, while children from wealthy families often continued through secondary education\textsuperscript{32}. Public schools were financed through a combined effort of municipal and provincial governments, with some assistance from the state, which lacked capital to finance national education on its own. Overall, funding per primary school student came to twelve pesetas year; compared to 52 pesetas in France, 44 in Italy, and 26 in Greece.\textsuperscript{33} The situation resulted in learning by memorization: “Given their lack of preparation, the impoverishment of both students and schools, and the high student-teacher rations, schoolmasters relied on pedagogic techniques that maximized efficiency and discipline. The basic instruction at all levels was memorization and oral recitation of a catechism, textbook, or reader; in the poorest schools, children brought papers or family documents from home to practice reading”\textsuperscript{34}. Municipalities with over five hundred inhabitants were required to provide free primary schooling for all children between six and nine\textsuperscript{35}; in provincial capitals and large cities like Barcelona, law obligated state-run upper primary schools for students between the ages of ten and thirteen.

It was rare, however, for poor children to enroll in public or private primary schools, and hardly any continued through secondary school and attended university. The Catholic

\textsuperscript{31} Modern School Magazine, October 1916. p. 115.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
Church dominated municipally run schools and saw national education as a major opportunity for exerting social control. Carolyn Boyd explains: “A final explanation of the failure of the state educational system lies in the continuing influence of the church in Spanish political and social life. The Spanish church remained suspicious of all schooling not firmly under its control... through its network of schools, it isolated the middle class from the deficiencies of the public school system and thus curtailed its demand for reform.”

Thus, on the issue of education, there was little class solidarity as middle class and elite families could afford to send their children to private schools, or hire a personal tutor. Despite this, before the turn of the century, the urban middle classes were making the strongest demands for expanded state education and saw it as a means of social mobility. By the twentieth century, lower classes began to insist on better options for municipal schools; “education began to expand as an industrial bourgeoisie on the periphery confronted the lack of a skilled labor force and the working classes began to perceive the liberating potential of education.” In this climate, Ferrer was

---

37 International Institute of Social History, Francisco Ferrer Collection, Box 6.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
impelled to start his own school.

**Francisco Ferrer and La Escuela Moderna in Barcelona**

In 1901, Students attending the newly established Escuela Moderna, which sat in the shadow of Barcelona’s Montjuic fortress near cobble-stoned Avenue Parralel, could expect to find many of their books translated from French to Spanish.\(^{40}\) If students came from a Catalan-speaking family, they would have had a difficult time keeping up with lessons: Ferrer opposed teaching classes in Catalan, accusing one man who suggested making Catalan the official language of La Escuela Moderna of being “afflicted with a zeal for local patriotism”, and even proposed using Esperanto as an alternative to Barcelona’s preferred language.\(^{41}\) Nearly fifty copies of red-jacketed booklets on topics ranging from arithmetic, geography, and natural sciences comprised the school’s library.

Despite an emphasis on outdoor activity and play, the school installed rows of desks in at least two classrooms\(^{42}\), with an instructor’s desk and blackboard near the front. In a room nearby, Ferrer set up a radical publishing house and operated a printing press that produced material for both children and adults, including the school’s monthly bulletins\(^{43}\). Although students were given freedom to determine the course of their studies and their day-to-day schedule, the neat wooden benches and tables and the tightly bound textbooks implied that students were expected to learn to read and to follow some form of a more traditional education while also traversing outdoors and testing their curiosity. At the turn of the twentieth century,

\(^{41}\) Ferrer, Francisco. The Origins and ideals of the Modern School, p 18.
\(^{42}\) Photo: “La Escuela Moderna de Barcelona”, Library of the Francisco Ferrer Foundation.
child illiteracy rates in Spain were very high\textsuperscript{44}; in 1908, over half of Madrid’s population of
30,000 children did not even attend school, let alone read or write\textsuperscript{45}. Because of illiteracy, La
Escuela Moderna placed a particular emphasis on teaching children to read that state run schools
could not supply.

However, students were not simply taught to read; textbooks, even math primers, conveyed
moral or political principles as well. One of the first books adopted by the Modern School was a
storybook called The Adventures of Nono.\textsuperscript{46} Written in 1901 by Jean Grave, a French anarchist
and follower of anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin, the illustrated child’s fiction depicts a young
boy who wakes up one morning and finds himself transported from his home to a mythical
land. Separated from his family, he wanders about his surroundings, enjoying the natural beauty
and talking to animals and other children he meets along the way. He soon discovers that the name
of the land is “Autonomie”, and he begins attending a local school with the other boys and girls who
live there. To name just a handful of characters, “Labor”, “Liberty”, and “Solidaria” are all teachers
or fellow children Nono encounters.

Science lessons are scattered throughout the book; for example, Nono learns how bees
make honey and how seeds germinate so that flowers can grow. For the children of Autonomie,
there is no such thing as punishment or reward, and labor is split equally among all. Much detail is
spent describing different games children would play, with particular attention to children
overcoming gender differences:

“When all was in order, the children spread throughout the garden, discussing the games they
would play. Most of the girls wanted to play mom or schoolmistress, vague memories of their
games before arriving in Autonomie,

\textsuperscript{44} Archer, William. The Martyrdom of Ferrer, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{45} “Schools and Teachers”, essay in the Modern School Bulletin, October 1916. P. 115
\textsuperscript{46} Ferrer, Francisco. The Origins and ideals of the Modern School, p. 91
the young men at leap-frog, at tag; and after discussing it well, they ended by organizing themselves in groups according to their preferences. But, little by little, some of them broke away from the groups of which they were a part, attracted by others nearby, which seemed to suit them better; some boys let themselves be attracted by the pleasures of playing with dolls; some girls, among the most impish, hitched up their petticoats, and played fearlessly at leapfrog. Gradually the groups were mixed.47

Grave’s children’s book illustrated many of Ferrer’s pedagogical inclinations: “mixed” education in terms of gender and class, an equal and fair distribution of classroom labor, and the autonomy of children to choose what they would like to learn and for how long. The world of Autonomie rejects capitalism as an economic system and scheme for organizing labor: in another scene, Nono faces a math problem that asks him to determine the price of a commodity. Solidaria, the teacher, prompts him to reframe the question:

“At some point, it was Nono’s turn to read. And he dictated one that he recalled having done at school, where it was a question of a merchant who, having bought so many pieces of cloth, so many meters in length, for such and such a sum, asked what he would have to charge per meter to make a given profit. “Your problem is well posed,” said Solidaria, who had just appeared among the children, “but it is posed according to the selfish rules taught in the schools of a world where we only speculate with an eye to speculating on our fellows. Here, the problem is posed differently; in your place, I would say: “Given that a man has so many pieces of cloth, that he can, from each piece, make so many garments, how many of his friends can he please, by giving one to each?”48

Grave’s colorful book offered students of the Modern School not only new possibilities and directions for their education, but also a template for their visions of a society without class conflict, exploitation, and infallible religion. For Ferrer, the book embodied key values of La Escuela Moderna.

As Ferrer sought to expand the Modern School’s library, he consulted fellow radicals,

scientists, and even university professors. He placed an advertisement in the Bulletin encouraging readers to send ideas regarding textbooks and manuals suited for rational education. The Compendium of Universal History by Clemence Jacquinet, an ex-governess who Ferrer appointed as directress of the first Escuela Moderna, was chosen as the school’s first history textbook.

Ferrer and Jacquinet worked closely to build the library of the Modern School. In fact, Jacquinet dedicates her book to the project: “La Escuela Moderna inaugurates the series of its publications in paying homage to those who have suffered and suffer in the evolution and progress of humanity, while at the same time affirming its ideal of justice and peace.” The book follows the history of “Western Civilization” from the Roman Empire to the French Revolution, with particular attention to themes such as patriotism and religion. Jacquinet criticizes the Church, writing, “Christianity, has always, throughout the course of history, placed obstacles in the path of progress. Similarly, The Note Book and the Colonization and Patriotism were anthologies from various European countries speaking to the “injustices connected with patriotism, the horrors of war, and the iniquity of conquest.”

Similar to the way Solidaria asked Nono to reimagine his math problem outside the bounds of capitalist logic (with the ultimate result of the equation representing redistribution instead of profit), teachers at Ferrer’s Modern School arranged word problems without reference to wages and profit, instead focusing on sharing, production, and distribution. Ferrer explains: “The way in which arithmetic has hitherto been generally taught has made it a powerful instrument for impressing the pupils with the false ideals of the capitalist regime which at present presses

---

49 Ferrer, Francisco. The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School, p. 62.
50 Archer, William. The Life, Trial, and Death of Francisco Ferrer (1911) pp. 49, 306.
51 Jacquinet, C. The Compendium of Universal History.
so heavily on society. The Modern School, therefore…requests those friends of rational and scientific instruction who are especially occupied with mathematics to draw up a series of easy and practical problems, in which there shall be no reference to wages, economy, and profit. These exercises must deal with agricultural and industrial production, the just distribution of the raw material and the manufactured articles….52. As students’ essays published in The Bulletin of La Escuela Moderna demonstrate, pupils were taught through every discipline to be critical of the status quo.

While the library of over forty books53 may have seemed harmless for left-leaning members of Barcelona’s first libertarian school, the city’s clerical class accused Ferrer of brainwashing children, instructing them to “kill and pillage”, and poisoning their minds with political schemes. Although no passages from the textbooks were read at either of his trials, all printed material was confiscated from the Modern Schools after they were forced to close in 190654.

Ferrer and other educators at the Modern School envisioned a radical pedagogy that grounded all subjects in anti-capitalist ideas and lessons. Students did not simply learn math for the purpose of learning math, nor did they practice arithmetic to understand profit and wage exchange. Instead, pupils could apply their studies of natural science, mathematics, and geography in their visions of a free society absent of exploitation, class inequality, and war.

54 Archer, William. The Martyrdom of Ferrer. 52.
Co-education and political participation

A thirteen-year old female pupil comments on co-education in an essay for the Bulletin:

‘the mixed school, for both sexes, is supremely necessary. The boy who studies, works, and plays in society of girls learns gradually to respect and help her, and the girl reciprocally; whereas, if they are educated separately, and the boy is told that the girl is not a good companion and she is worse than he, the boy will not respect women when he is a man, and will regard her as a subject or a slave, and that is the position in which we find women. So we must all work for the foundation of mixed schools, wherever it is possible, and where it is not possible we must try to remove the difficulties’.

The Modern School valued a “mixed” education in two senses: classes were integrated both by gender and class. On opening day, September, 1901, 12 girls and 18 boys, a total of 30 students, were in attendance. After the third year, 51 girls and 63 boys (a total of 114 students) regularly attended the school. Ferrer envisioned a co-ed school that provided an education for both elite and working-class children. Tuition operated on a sliding scale, “with free lessons for some and different charges for others”. Why did Ferrer believe in integrated education by class and gender? Reflecting during his time in prison, he writes, “It needs very little reflection to see that

---

55 Online archives of the Fundacion Francisco Ferrer, www.ferrerguardia.org/es-biografia-ferrer-guardia
57 Bulletin of the Escuela Moderna, 30 September 1905; also Ferrer, Francisco The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School.
58 Francisco Ferrer, Origins and Ideals of the Modern School, page 46.
a school for rich children only cannot be a rational school. From the very nature of things it will tend to insist on the maintenance of privilege and the securing of their advantages. The only sound and enlightened form of school is that which co-educates the poor and the rich, which brings the one class into touch with the other in the innocent equality of childhood, by means of the systematic equality of the rational school”. Compared to State and municipal-run schools, which would have almost always separated by gender (except in the few cases when a village was small and the locality couldn’t afford to hire both a male and female instructor), Ferrer fervently believed that boys and girls should receive equal education, and he objected to the Church’s patriarchy.

In addition to hands-on teaching methods, the School organized programs that encouraged students to take interest in Barcelona’s political activities. In December of 1903, plans were made for delegates from the Congress of Railway Workers to visit the School for a day. Members of the Worker’s School at Badalona also participated in school activities and held class with students in 1904.

Student contributions were typically included in the Modern School’s magazine, the Bulletin. These essays highlight how pupils understood their lessons in relation to their daily life. In one essay, a young girl reflects on the death penalty: “A criminal is condemned to death…it would be better, instead of punishing a criminal by committing another crime, to give him good advice, so that he will not do it again. Besides, if we are all equal, there would be no thieves, or assassins, or rich people, or poor people, but all would be equal and love work and liberty”. A twelve-year old boy takes a stance against war and capitalist exploitation: “to be called civilized, a nation must be free from the following: 1) The coexistence of poor and rich, and the resultant exploitation. 2) Militarism, a means of destruction employed by one nation against another, due to the bad
organization of society. 3) Inequality, which allows some to rule and command, and obliges others to humble themselves and obey”.

It was also not uncommon for female students to write about the benefits of co-education. One thirteen-year old student wrote: “Fanaticism is the outcome of the state of ignorance and backwardness of women; on that account Catholics do not want to see women educated, as they are the chief support of their system”. Another young girl shares this sentiment: “Among the faults of mankind are lying, hypocrisy, and egoism. If men, and especially women, were better instructed, and women were entirely equal to men, these faults would disappear. Parents would not send their children to religious schools, which inculcate false ideas, but to rational schools, where there is no teaching of the supernatural, which does not exist; nor to make war; but to live in solidarity and work in common.”

Similarly, a ten-year old pupil reflects on her education without “distinction of classes” (as the Modern School taught the children of university professors as well as children of working-class families): “We are reunited under one roof, eager to learn what we do not know, without distinction of classes”.

Clearly, students of all ages felt the benefits of learning among a diverse group of peers (in terms of class and gender) and understand the school’s reason behind a mixed education. Finally, a sixteen-year old student, a young woman, calls on her fellow pupils to eradicate class inequality:

“What inequality there is in the present social order! Some working from morning to night without more profit than enough to buy their insufficient food; others receiving the products of the workers in order to enjoy themselves with the superfluous. Why is this so? Are we not all equal? Undoubtedly we are; but society does not recognize it, while some are destined to work and suffering, and others idleness and enjoyment. If a worker shows that he realizes the exploitation to which he is subject, he is blamed and cruelly punished, while others suffer the inequality with patience. The worker must educate himself; and in order to do this it is necessary to found free schools, maintained by the wages which the rich give. In this way the worker will advance more and more, until he is regarded as he deserves, since the most useful mission of society

---

depends on him.”

Photos of the primary and secondary classes at La Escuela Moderna, taken between 1903 and 1906.

**Reaction of Church Authorities to the Ferrer School**

Since the second year, the annual programs of the Modern School were published in both the Bulletin and local journals such as Noticiero Universal and the Diario de Barcelona. For the city’s clergy, outrage ensued at this mixed school where children were being taught there was no God: “We have seen the prospectus of an educational centre established in this city, which professes to have nothing to do with ‘dogmas and systems’. It proposes to liberate everybody from ‘authoritarian dogmas, venerable sophisms, and ridiculous conventions’. It seems to us that this means that the first thing to do is to tell the boys and girls it is a mixed school— that there is no God, an admirable way of forming good children, especially young women who are destined to be wives and mothers”.

On Good Friday, April twelfth, 1906, almost two thousand students, teachers, and parents picnicked by Plaza Espana in celebration of secular, libertarian education. After an afternoon of food and merriment, in which men and women ate not only meat, but dishes of fish and

---


meat, a serious infraction on such a holy day, Ferrer led 1,7000 students in a procession around the city, parading through the streets on the most sacred weekend of the Catholic calendar and causing an uproar among the clerical establishment. The fact that Ferrer, his fellow free school educators, and over a thousand boys and girls held a public banquet while other Catalonians mourned and fasted angered clergy, who began strategizing ways to detain the schoolmaster. Two weeks later, Ferrer was arrested and imprisoned for a year, charged with taking part in an assassination attempt of the King Alfonso XIII and his soon to be wife. Mateo Morral, an active anarchist and ex-librarian of the Modern School, threw a bomb disguised as a bouquet of flowers at King Alfonso XIII and his bride during their wedding procession. His assassination attempt failed, but killed at least fifteen bystanders. Ferrer was tried as a suspected accomplice, despite having no involvement in the incident. During his incarceration between 1906 and 1907, the city closed his schools and confiscated their material.

Francisco Ferrer on trial.

---

63 “Modern School Magazine”, January 1917, Volume III, No. 6, p. 137
Chapter 2 | The Modern School in New York

The Vocational Education Movement in New York: “breeding schools for scabs”

By the turn of the twentieth century a militant labor movement gripped the country, with major uprisings such as the Haymarket Square Riot in Chicago in 1886, the Carnegie steelworkers Homestead Strike in 1892, and the nationwide Pullman Strike nearly two years later. New York’s financial elites, noticeably shaken, experimented with new methods besides employing private security forces and the National Guard for subduing their workforce and reasserting control over labor. It was in this context that corporate moguls such as John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie began contemplating public education^64.

While Spain’s state and municipally-run schools were governed by the doctrine of the Catholic Church, in early twentieth century New York, business and professional elites were determining the fate of the city’s public education^65. Progressive era education reform emphasized two key modifications to Manhattan’s public schools: a reorganization of the old, nineteenth century ward-based school district system to a centralized city school board overseen by a smaller committee comprised of a superintendent and staff, and a re-engineering of school curriculum to track certain students into pre-industrial, vocational training programs. Basing their new decision-making process and model for the city’s schools on the management apparatus of a modern business corporation, the motivation to re-order the institutions that oversaw the city’s schools stemmed from a number of social changes.

One such upheaval was the rise of labor power. In the early 1900s, administrative progressives and the city’s most affluent businessmen had concocted a strategy to diminish workers’ power in their workplaces and deflate the momentum of the labor movement: the vocational education movement, a proposed series of reforms that advocated for separate tracks within public schools (and, at the most extreme, distinct schools entirely) to segregate blue collar training programs from college preparatory courses for “superior” students. In 1906, the National Association of Manufacturers, a trade association founded by the former president of the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, assured members of its committee on Industrial Education: “It is plain to see that trade schools properly protected from the domination and withering blight of organized labor are the one and only remedy for the present intolerable conditions.”

Regarding which students were intended for each track, the Superintendent of Schools in Cleveland speculated:

“It is obvious that the educational needs of children in a district where the streets are well paved and clean, where the homes are spacious and surrounded by lawns and trees, where the language of the child’s playfellows is pure, and where life in general is permeated with the spirit and ideals of America- it is obvious that the educational needs of such a child are radically different from those of the child who lives in a foreign and tenement section.”

Defenders of the vocational education movement supported different curricula for working class, immigrant students, meant to funnel them into industrial-sector and menial jobs and ensure that each new batch of employees had been trained without the oversight and influence of organized labor. Labor detested the vocational school movement, with Samuel Gompers,

---

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
President of the American Federation of Labor, vocally opposing vocational programs and the Secretary of Cigarmakers Union No. 144 vehemently decrying trade schools as “breading schools for scabs”\textsuperscript{71}. The Secretary of the Twist and Warp Lace Makers Association warned an audience that vocational education “would be rather a curse than a blessing by placing at the disposal of every capitalist bent on grinding down wages to the lowest point an unlimited number of skilled out of work, to supercede those who might resist his tyranny”\textsuperscript{72}.

Xenophobia and discrimination towards immigrant and tenement families dominated the discourse of the vocational education movement. By 1907, immigration through New York’s primary entry point reached its highest, with 1.2 million men, women, and children passing through Ellis Island\textsuperscript{73}. New York’s factory owners and corporate executives needed preparation for a new capitalist workforce, and as immigrants arrived and settled in neighborhoods around Manhattan, elites, fearing a loss of power, decided that a ward-based school system – in which elected officials had control over district school boards – would no longer work. Under the nineteenth century ward-based system, new parents would have had some voice in the operation and management of neighborhood schools. Advocates of vocational programs and elites pushing for centralized control of the city’s schools feared that poor children from neighborhood slums would integrate the schools by ethnicity and class, corrupt Manhattan’s classrooms, and reduce the elites’ political power. David Tyack, a historian of urban education, explains:

“As neighborhoods became increasingly segregated by income – and often by race and ethnicity as well – election by wards reduced the percentage of positions on the boards available to urban elites...but if members were elected at large under a


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Coan, P, M. Ellis Island Interviews, xvi.
‘non-partisan’ system which was independent of place of residence or party endorsement, leading businessmen and professionals could use the media and their reform associations (women’s clubs, etc.) for publicity to give name-familiarity and hence an edge at the ballot box.”

Statistics on school board membership in cities after the centralization movement indicated that business and professional men did indeed predominate on urban boards. Scott Nearing found in 1916 that more than three fifths of the members of city committees were merchants, manufacturers, bankers, brokers, real estate men, doctors and lawyers.75

These “Administrative progressives”, businessmen and professional elites who proclaimed themselves “experts” on education, called for more centralized school boards and an end to ward-

75 Ibid.
based school committees. By the 1910s, city school boards were being directly modeled after the corporation’s board of directors and order of managers. The general support for these reform measures did not come from recent immigrants or middle-class New Yorkers, but from the city’s most wealthy citizens. This corporate interest in education continued after World War I with a new focus on students and testing. Between 1920 and 1940, the Carnegie Corporation would donate nearly $3 million dollars to study the efficacy of testing in schools; the Rockefeller Foundation supported similar studies. The purpose of testing was to “track” students into specific programs and determine “curriculums” depending on the outcome of their tests. One report from the Carnegie Corporation concluded that “certain groups have similar abilities and can be segregated and given a more appropriate curriculum”.

By the turn of the century, city elites had joined forces to stamp out Manhattan’s ward-based school system and implement a centralized authority for overseeing the city’s public schools. By concentrating administrative power in a central body that consisted of wealthy New Yorkers, including university presidents, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and other professionals, as opposed to the old system which allowed wards to elect representatives to the board, wealthy New Yorkers solidified their social capital and appeased their racist panic over the influx of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe flowing into New York City. Around the exact time the Ferrer Association was establishing its first school on the Lower East Side, New York’s public school teachers and students were facing new difficulties as executive decisions were made by wealthy

professionals, whose main interests were protecting their class interests and cementing their political capital.

**The Ferrer Association Establishes the Modern School in New York**

Ferrer’s execution enflamed anarchists and radical educators in Europe and across the Atlantic. A year after his death, *The New York Times* ran a full page spread on the late educators life, trial, and sentencing to commemorate the anniversary. The “Ferrer Association”, founded in 1909 by anarchists living and organizing in the city, was a New York collective meant to memorialize Ferrer and continue his work posthumously. The Modern Schools of New York surfaced as part of this project.

Between 1911 and 1914, newspaper coverage of the establishment of the Modern School and adaptation of Ferrer’s curriculum was marked by anticipation. The egalitarian principles underlying the curriculum were presented by publications as diverse as the Hartford Daily Courant, New York Tribune, New York Times and St. Louis Dispatch. In 1911, an article in the

---

81 “Word-Wide movement to honor memory of Ferrer: Anniversary of Spanish educator's execution to be marked by extraordinary demonstration in all nations --Haeckel and Anatole France to lead it.” (1910, July 31). The New York Times.
New York Times written by Bruce Calvert compared the New York City school system to a "slave school" and exhorted that, "Under the rational school system it will be different. Every rational school should be located in a twenty-acre field. Give the child nature. Let him construct his own universe. Let him learn to think." A 1915 article on the campaign to establish a school of "modern education" in St. Louis evoked emotions of patriotism and explicitly referred to founders of the Ferrer Center in New York, stating the school "cultivates the spirit of Liberty, of emotion, and expression. It leaves the child entirely free to express himself and takes away entirely the spirit of suppression. It is on the spirit of free expression fostered by this school, says [Alexander] Berkman, that society must depend to give back to the individual the real joy of life that has been taken from him by those who rule."
Not all press portrayed the Ferrer School positively. Judge Mary Bartelme, originally a Chicago School teacher who became one of the city's first female attorney's and then the first woman judge in Illinois, expressed dismay in an interview with the New York Times at a school system that would permit socialist ideas to infiltrate the curriculum: "I do not know what the board of education is about in permitting the dissemination of the doctrine taught by Emma Goldman and the ex-convict Alexander Berkman, but it is certain that in this institution of learning, the fire was kindled by that rather engaging looking boy, Tannenbaum."85

After the Lexington Avenue bomb in July 1914, mainstream publications engaged more negatively with the Modern School. By March 1915, the New York Tribune reported that the Modern School at 63 East 107th Street would close if the Center did not receive immediate funding of $250.00, and a further $1000.00 to keep the school open through the Spring86. Later that same year, the school relocated across the Hudson River to New Jersey.

Despite deteriorating support from less politicized New Yorkers, the Modern School and accompanying Ferrer Center were beloved by those who called it home. Between 1910 and 1915, the Modern School had three locations; starting at St. Mark’s Place on the Lower East Side, moving to East Twelfth Street, finally trekking to East Harlem at 63 East 107th Street. The Modern School occupied the third floor of a brownstone on East 107th, with the Ferrer Center on the first floor, and rented rooms and temporary housing in the basement and second floor87. The Ferrer Center provided additional programs such as night classes, tea rooms, and acted as a general venue for community events.

The majority of students attending the Modern School lived in the neighborhood, and were predominantly from working class and immigrant families\textsuperscript{88}. Paul Avrich, a historian and professor at Queens College, interviewed fifty-four men and women who either taught or attended the Modern Schools across the East Coast. Of the 54 interviewees, 25 had been part of the New York Modern School, the Ferrer Center community, or the early Stelton Colony between 1910 and 1925. Nineteen of them, almost eighty percent, were from immigrant families or had emigrated themselves (this excludes one interviewee who did not mention at all where they were from); many participants were from Rumania, Poland, Russia, and a handful from Italy, England or Scotland\textsuperscript{89}. Seven people had parents involved in the labor movement, or they themselves were part of local unions and affiliated with the I.W.W. Clearly, the ideological shifts in education and the fears of proponents of vocational education were directed specifically at families and students attending the modern schools.

In 1915, The Modern School moved to Stelton, NJ because of police infiltration and harassment after a bomb meant for Rockefeller’s mansion was accidentally detonated in a six-story tenement house a ten minute walk from the Ferrer Center\textsuperscript{90}. The school would remain a hub of intellectual and anarchist activity until it closed in 1958.

\textsuperscript{89} Data from Avrich, P. \textit{Anarchist Voices}, (1995) Princeton University Press.
\textsuperscript{90} Jones, T. \textit{More Powerful than Dynamite}. (2012). p. 41
Monthly Bulletins from the Modern School, in which students assisted with publishing, printing, and contributing material\textsuperscript{91}.

Unlike the city’s public schools, a central school board did not have jurisdiction over the Ferrer School’s day-to-day operations, which gave them the freedom to teach material of their choosing. Similar to the Spanish Ferrer School’s teaching methods, The Modern School in New York refused to punish students for misbehavior. Instead of being disciplined for acting out in class, one student was told to play outside until he was ready to rejoin his peers\textsuperscript{92}. For the next two days he roamed the play yard, and, growing tired of occupying himself, eventually returned to classes with other students.

For Maurice Hollod, a twelve-year old student at P.S. 188 on 106th and Madison Avenue, the Ferrer School between Lexington and Park just a couple blocks away seemed to offer a much more interesting school-day. Disregarding his mother’s pleas and to “not throw away”

\textsuperscript{91} Rutgers University Archives and Special Collections, the Modern School Collection, Box 2, Folder 3. \textsuperscript{92} Avrich, Anarchist Voices, p.192.
his education, Holod began attending the private anarchist school and eventually grew fond of both the school and the Ferrer Center\(^93\). Some children, like London-born Benjamin Benno whose parents were anarchists and father was a bricklayer, felt more suited to a free-school pedagogy than public schools and chose to leave traditional-public education for the Ferrer Schools promise of choice and self-autonomy. Amour Liber, the first pupil to attend the Ferrer School on East Twelfth Street, was enrolled by his father, a Rumanian physician and anarchist\(^94\). Although some students were encouraged by their parents, others actively pursued a libertarian education and chose to leave the restrictions of a traditional public school setting. “It was like going to the zoo!” recalled Revolte Bercovici, who attended the school in 1911, and remembered vividly learning about life and death from the school’s janitor Frank “the Crank”, who cut off a cat’s head to teach a biology lesson\(^95\). Gussie Miller, a public school teacher in Manhattan, chose to teach additional classes during the week at the Ferrer School because she enjoyed the environment.\(^96\)

Because of the high illiteracy rates in Spain, Ferrer was interested in teaching pupils how to read. This was in contrast to many of the testimonies of students who attended the Modern School in New York, where it was normal for students to graduate without knowing how to read at all. Administrators of the Modern School in New York rejected traditional schooling forms because they felt strongly against creating a place that just prepared people to be docile workers; however, in Spain, Ferrer was responding to the widespread failure of municipal schools to teach reading.

In the school’s monthly bulletins, teachers and community members with The Modern School and Ferrer Center responded to changes made by New York’s elites to the city’s public

\(^93\) Ibid., p. 198.
\(^94\) Ibid.
\(^95\) Ibid.
\(^96\) Ibid.
education, specifically, the addition of vocational programs and the consolidation of the city school board. An article published by the Modern School magazine from October, 1916 indicates teachers and founders at the Ferrer Center understood that Progressive Era reform efforts were being funded by the very union-busting, corporate titans that many anarchists were risking their livelihood to fight and organize against: “Do you think such a school as ours could be created by the big gifts of one or two rich people? It could not. The only people in the world who can create this kind of school are people who know what struggle means, people who see the imperative need of revolutionary change. They alone can create a libertarian school…but they can’t do it unless they will unite, organize, cooperate…Our Rockefellers and Carnegies will not furnish it. It can furnish by the freedom-loving workers and idealists of America, if they are in earnest.”

Another edition featured excerpts from a lecture by David B. Liber titled “Objections to the Prevailing School Education”, and challenged New York’s centralized school board and its jurisdiction over curriculum: “Why should a child learn geography? Is it because the Board of Education says so?”

Responding to concerned parents requesting classes in modern subjects such as stenography and typography, Robert Parker explained in an opinion piece titled “Education, A Modern Superstition and Modern Vice”:

“Fear has been expressed on the part of many that we would teach the children ideals only, and leave them unfitted for the battle of life. Others have so far misunderstood our aims and objects that they have suggested we star a preparatory school for Regents’ Examinations; and still others suggested that we teach typewriting, stenography, etc...we have nothing to do with commercialism in any shape or form, and far from trying to increase the numbers of parasites and non-producers of wealth, our great aim is to abolish them.”

The vocational school movement clearly impacted the Modern School’s decisions about

---

97 “The Modern School”, October 1916. p. 117
curriculum and course offerings, for both adults and children, in which teachers avoided subjects that catered only to industrial jobs. In the early 1900s, clerical and secretarial jobs were on the rise; and the Modern School refused to focus its curriculum on skills that would only prepare students for these types of professions. “Our ideas are not machine-made”, one blurb in the monthly bulletin proclaimed. In an age of Taylorism and scientific management, the Modern School was fighting against mechanization of life.

Students of the first Modern School on East Twelfth Street and, later, in East Harlem, experienced learning techniques that public schools did not incorporate. Art classes and molding clay, with some of the most renowned artists of the time such as Robert Henri and George Bellows, were part of the “lunatic fringe” of the Modern School and Ferrer Center, remembers one student. One girl recalled frequent trips to Central Park, using the most of what the city had to offer in terms of nature.

Of course, students challenged the school’s libertarian pedagogy and often provoked teachers to their last nerve. In a scuttle with Will Durant, one of the Bercovici siblings tested the educator’s libertarian values by climbing onto a windowsill and threatening to jump from the second-story classroom. Even with free-school curriculum, it was impossible to completely avoid authoritative relationships between students and teachers.

As the school uprooted to New Jersey, a number of the original founds and teachers also left New York, although in the opposite direction. It was not uncommon for members of New York’s anarchist community to flee to Russia to participate in the Revolution. For students who

---

100 The Modern School”, October 1914, p. 20
102 Ibid.
may have attended both the Ferrer School in New York City and the newly established Stelton Colony, they would have encountered many new teachers, some, traveling as far as California.

Students woodcuts from the “Voice of the Children”, a magazine published at the Modern School Stelton, New Jersey.103

103 “Friends of the Modern School”, www.friendsofthemodernschool.org
Conclusion

Although Megan Erickson may claim otherwise, a number of schools in New York City are fighting contemporary education reform and dramatic increases in standardized testing by harking back to anarchist roots in their pedagogy. The Manhattan Free School, which sits just a few blocks away from the original Ferrer Center in East Harlem, is one such school. So is the Brooklyn Free School, founded by Alan Berger in 2003. Although these schools are somewhat comparable to the modern schools scattered across the east coast throughout the early 1900s, they also embody a number of differences stemming from the distinct historical contexts.

In 2011, This American Life sent journalist Jyllian Gunther to cover the Brooklyn Free School for a radio episode titled “Kid Politics”. Much to her surprise, Gunther found herself sitting in a school-wide meeting, surrounded by students, listening to them debate and reach a consensus on whether or not she should be allowed to report on their daily life at the school. In the end, the majority of students voted 38 to two (with three obstentions) to allow Gunther to sit in on their everyday activities and get to know students, teachers, and the BFS community on a more personal level. Some examples of everyday activities highlighted by the radio program include the common practice of calling “all school democratic meetings”-sometimes as many as “six a day”-to resolve conflict, the process of teachers suggesting potential classes and students voting on whether they would like to include the course in the semester’s course offerings, and the dismantling of grade levels.

While the Brooklyn Free School does not advertise itself as an anarchist school, the prioritizing of creativity, outside play, and student-directed agendas reflects the early Modern School’s structure for free and independent learning. As Avrich explains, “These Ferrer schools-
or Modern Schools, as they were called- differed from other educational experiments of the same period in being schools for children of workers and directed by the workers themselves. Their founders, moreover, were mostly anarchists, who sought to abolish all forms of authority, political and economic as well as educational, and to usher in a new society based on the voluntary cooperation of free individuals."\textsuperscript{104} The legacy of early twentieth century free schools continues, and contemporary iterations of the Modern School movement similarly force us to confront the detriment that current education reform efforts have on children, teachers, and national education as a whole.