

I feel very happy for this meeting. We have gathered here, people not only from the Balkans, but from all around the globe, people with different starting points and routes, sharing a common passion and the idea that education is a crucial political tool that can change the world for the better. For me, being here is something really positive and hopeful, especially inside the worldwide social context of our times, with - among others - the antisocial advance of neoliberalism, the Orwellian controlled mass media and the rising of alt right and neo-fascism.

In that context, I strongly believe that education has a crucial role to play in our collective resistance and goals. At the same time, I am convinced that the public sphere of education and pedagogy must not be abandoned or neglected by the radical parts of each society, as it may had happened in the past. In both the content of the courses and the educational methodology, I recognize social and political battlefields where different ideas and worldviews try to prevail.

So, today I will recall a story of such an educational and political struggle that was held by one of the most important anarchists at the dawn of the 20th century, Francisco Ferrer. The reason behind my presentation is the recent publication, for first time in Greek language, of Ferrer's testimonial book about the origins and ideals of "Escuela Moderna", the Modern School. I think you will find that story as important to be recalled nowadays as I do.

Ferrer was born in 1859, in a farm just outside Barcelona. Even though his parents were religious, he developed anticlerical ideas in his youth, mostly because of his freethinker uncle. Soon, he found another 'bad influence' in his first boss, a miller, who was an atheist and anti-military activist. Ferrer quickly became a member of the Democratic movement who aimed to overturn Monarchy, which was restored in 1874 after the short-lived First Spanish Democracy.

It was a strange period of unsuccessful coups and uprisings, in which Ferrer had an active role. As a train worker, he was delivering messages from exiled politicians and acted like a link between them and the radical democrats in Spain. Soon, though, after a failed coup in 1886, he got self-exiled in Paris, too.

Ferrer's span in Paris was decisive for his political ideas and for his turn to education as a social weapon. Serving as a secretary of the Democratic leader and ex-prime minister, Manuel Ruiz Zorrilla, Ferrer came in touch with the most influential exiled democrats and was deeply disappointed. He realized that overturning Monarchy just to establish a democratic state ruled by the bourgeoisie could not bring peoples liberation. Even though Democracy might bring some light in the monarchical darkness of oppression, an illiterate people will continue to obey different kind of masters.

Thus, Ferrer turned to Anarchism as the only ideal that can truly and fully liberate people. Especially after Zorilla's death in 1895, he came close to important Anarchists like Piotr Kropotkin, Leo Tolstoy, Jean Grave, Elisee Reclus, Louise Michel and Anselmo Lorenzo. All those figures played an important role for the development of Ferrer's thought and later would be part, directly or indirectly, of his political and educational project.

As I said before, illiterate and ignorant people will never get free from their political or religious masters. Educating people is a radical political act, an act of freedom, as Paulo Freire would put it. Quoting Ferrer, *"the most effective protest and the most promising form of revolutionary action consist in giving the oppressed, the disinherited, and all who are conscious of a demand for justice, all the truth that they've been denied, trusting that it will direct their energies in the great work of the regeneration of society"*. Indeed, the political motto of anarchists that period was referring to a social rebirth that was about to come. The children, as the future generation, had to be educated to bring that new liberated society and to live in it.

Along with the previous important anarchists who met in Paris, Ferrer also discovered the anti-authoritarian education, in the Prevost Orphanage, that was supervised by the anarchist pedagogue Paul Robin. Ferrer resolved to open such a school in Spain. That was a life-changing decision.

Being a free mason, something quite common between the revolutionaries of the time, Ferrer used to work as a Spanish teacher in Grand Orient de France. There, among his students there was a wealthy aged lady, who despite being a faithful Christian was convinced by the social and educational ideas of Ferrer. She gifted an important fund to make his dream come true.

Ferrer returned in Barcelona and at the dawn of the 20th century established the Modern School. According to him, *"it was to be, not the perfect type of the future school of a rational state of society, but a precursor of it, the best possible adaptation of our means [...] a careful experiment in the direction of imbuing the children of the future with the substantial truths of science"*.

Before we take a close look to the innovations and ideals of Ferrer's school, let's briefly mention the educational condition in Spain. Pretty much, it was still in the Dark Ages. In fact, the vast majority of the Spanish population remained illiterate. And for those who did went to schools, most educational institutions were monasteries or private schools directly ruled by the Church. Public schools were also under a ministerial council of monarchical appointed officers and highly ranked clerics. It was an almost entirely religious curriculum, which aimed to reproduce the dogmatic faith and submission to the Church and the State.

Modern School stood in direct opposition with such practices. Ferrer suggested it as a Scientific and Rational Institution to declare the fight against indoctrination and submission. He believed that social justice and reform in terms of equality and solidarity are fair and rational demands, not another form of a political doctrine. That's why he set as the fundamental stone of Modern School's courses the moral rationalism along with Nature Sciences. Subject of the courses is anything that can be proven scientifically, instead of the traditional myths, lies and dogmatic perceptions which reproduce the system.

Of course, Ferrer knew that dry Science is not enough. He realized that there is no such thing as neutral, non-political pedagogical act. As I've already said, both the educational content and the teaching attitude are political actions. Ferrer's choice not to include in his school curriculum any kind of biased, traditional myths, promoting the children's critical thinking, that was a political stand. Teaching with respect at each individual personality, without compulsion, exams or punishments was a political stand. Promoting an equilibrium between the individual person and the school community as a way of life, that was also a political stand.

For my personal perception, the key word to describe Ferrer's educational innovation is Inclusion. Maybe nowadays inclusion is familiarized by every conventional and liberal curriculum, but at that time it was a strong political term. Perhaps, later we can discuss about it and how we can make inclusion political and emancipative again. For now, I have to explain why this term is so crucial in Ferrer's view.

Modern School had innovatively common classes for boys and girls. By that time, the only cases of sexes' co-education were driven by necessity, in faraway mountainous villages, in which a single teacher was sent for all kids. For Modern School, though, it was a conscious decision. Ferrer's moral rationalism could not accept any myth about men's superiority over women. He believed that boys and girls had to work united for a society of equality, tolerance and solidarity.

With a similar reasoning, Ferrer promoted the co-education of social classes. Obviously, he wasn't trying to make another school for upper class kids that will sufficiently reproduce their upper social status. Nevertheless, Ferrer didn't want to create the opposite of it, a lower class school filled with spontaneous feelings of social vengeance and revenge. No, this would be against his moral rationalism and the critical realization of the need for social justice and equality. Co-existing children from every social class would recognize themselves as equals, no matter their different background.

In addition to the concept of co-educating, there is also another very interesting and important factor that Modern School could be a useful example in nowadays political and educational fights. Despite his typical private status – which was chosen to avoid any ministerial or clerical control – Modern School was de facto a Public School, meaning that it was an organic part of the local community, the neighborhood and the whole city of Barcelona. Courses were given in parks, factories and museums. At the same time, the school was open for everyone on Sundays for scientific and historical lectures. Soon, Ferrer’s institution became the central link of a mass enlightenment operation.

That is why, talking about belonging in a community, Modern School was not just part of its surrounding geography. It was also an active member of the whole anarchistic, self-organized community that was steadily developing throughout Iberian Peninsula, preparing the great social reform. Ferrer personally supported a lot of political projects. Inside the school, books of popularized science, philosophy and history were published and distributed throughout Spain.

The necessity of a publishing house inside the Modern School was obvious. There were no school books without the poison of the conventional, religious pedagogy. Even in the secular curriculum of the French educational system, quoting Ferrer, “*God was replaced by the State, Christian virtue by civic duty, religion by patriotism, submission to the king, the aristocracy, and the clergy by subservience to the official, the proprietor, and the employer*”. One of the most important course books for young students, was Jean Grave’s “The Adventures of Nono”, a fantasy novel about a kid travelling in the land of Autonomia, which was protected by the three fairy sisters Solidaria, Liberta and Iniciativa.

Along with the publishing house inside the institution, there was also a school for teachers, preparing them to teach in anti-authoritarian schools. Five years after the first Modern School, 120 institutions based on its model had flourished.

I believe it is clear that Ferrer’s actions made the Church and the State furious. In his face they recognized a dangerous, methodical enemy, so they continuously insulted and slandered him. On 31st of May 1906, they found the ideal incident to act against Ferrer. A bomb attack against the royal couple in Madrid caused – according to the Press – 24 casualties. The attacker was Matteo Moral, a worker in Modern School’s publishing house. Ferrer was accused as the mind behind the terrorist. He was quickly imprisoned and his property was taken away. That is how the first Modern School was closed by the authorities.

Ferrer’s imprisonment led to a huge wave of worldwide support and solidarity. Soon, he was free again, since there was no evidence against him. He left to Paris, where he wrote the book about the origins and ideals of the Modern School and established an International of Libertarian Education.

In 1909, knowing that his life might be in danger, he returned in Barcelona. It was the time of the great uprising against the mandatory conscription for the Morocco war, known as the “Tragic Week”. At the aftermath of the uprising, a military court accused Ferrer as an agitator. The trial is well known for its irregularities, where proofs of innocence were rejected, pro Ferrer witnesses were imprisoned and with a military officer testifying that he saw with his very own eyes Ferrer setting fire to a monastery that in reality had no damage at all. Despite the worldwide protests, death sentence was adjudicated and carried out. Ferrer was murdered by the State on 13th of October, 1909.

This was not the end of the story, though. After Ferrer’s assassination, the ideas of Rational and Scientific anti-authoritarian education grew even more. CNT, the Spanish Anarchistic Confederation of Workers, was heavily influenced by the educational model of Ferrer and started using it in its schools, preparing the generation of the 1930’s Revolution. Meanwhile, ‘Ferrer Schools’ were sprung throughout the globe, with a lot of important anarchists like Emma Goldman and educators like Alexander Neil spreading the idea of radical, anti-authoritarian education.

After the defeat of the Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, however, teachers and people who supported libertarian schools were imprisoned or exiled. Those institutions were forbidden. More recently, from the 1960s’ onwards, there is a new wave of interest in anti-authoritarian education. In that context, though, Ferrer’s name is mostly left out of the paradigm. Unlike other important radical educators, like Celestin Freinet or Paulo Freire, he was an anarchist and it is very hard for his political ideas to find a place and be reproduced inside the Academia.

But for me, and that’s why I am so glad to be here and discuss it with all of you, Ferrer’s ideals and actions are still in a vivid dialogue with the social and political context of our times. I find very crucial to consider them and let them give us inspiration for our work. As a teacher, Ferrer gave us some very important lessons that we should never forget. He was one of the first activists to connect pedagogy with political struggles, showcasing that there is no not-political education. He promoted co-education, inclusion, which nowadays is at risk in many parts of Europe due to the neoliberal tension of unequally financed schools, a policy that will produce class-ghetto schools against local schools of the neighborhood and the community. And, yes, finally Ferrer was promoting the ideal of community as the cell of every political struggle of his age. And in the center of that cell, there was a school. I believe that we ought to take in our hands the thread of his history and continue.

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