

# **The Modern School Movement**

**Historical and Personal Notes on the Ferrer Schools in Spain: Contributions by Pura  
Perez, Mario Jordana, Abel Paz, Martha Ackelsberg**

Abe Bluestein

1990

# Contents

The Modern School Movement . . . . .	3
Foreword . . . . .	3
Recollections . . . . .	4
Memories . . . . .	7
My Experience in the "Nature School" . . . . .	9
Humanitarian Rationality . . . . .	11
Juan Puig Elias, Rationalist Teacher . . . . .	12
My Experiences as a Student at Eleven Years of Age . . . . .	13
The Nature School (1933-1935) . . . . .	13
General Considerations . . . . .	17
Education, Preparation, and the Spanish Revolution . . . . .	17
Education as Preparation . . . . .	17
Creating Institutions for Literacy and Culture . . . . .	18
Education as Empowerment . . . . .	22
Back cover text . . . . .	23

## The Modern School Movement

Historical and Personal Notes on the Ferrer Schools in Spain: Contributions by Pura Perez, Mario Jordana, Abel Paz, Martha Ackelsberg.

With a foreword by Abe Bluestein

Published by Friends of the Modern School

c/o Abe Bluestein, 55 Farrington Road, Croton-On-Hudson, NY 10520

### Foreword

Abe Bluestein

May 1990

This pamphlet deals with a significant chapter in the history of education—the Modern School movement and the role it played in fostering freedom in education. We wish to highlight the intimate relationship of education and the spirit of freedom. Francisco Ferrer was the founder, the inspiration of the Modern School and his teachings are cherished in the Libertarian movement.

Francisco Ferrer y Guardia is remembered by lovers of liberty all over the world. He is remembered for his pioneering work in opening in 1901 a Modern School in Barcelona, Spain, which became the model for two hundred or more modern schools in that country. All the schools were supported by unions and Liberals and Libertarians who wanted to end the centuries-old church control of education by rote and memorization.

Ferrer also established a Libertarian educational publishing house to provide secular textbooks for the modern schools. This was the most effective educational work in Spain.

When Ferrer started his educational work, about two-thirds of the people of Spain were illiterate and the Church regarded its future as threatened if the Spanish people learned to read and to reason for themselves.

Between 1901, when Ferrer opened his first Modern School, and 1909, when he was executed, the Church and the Spanish State initiated three legal actions against Ferrer. The third trial condemned Ferrer to death under false accusations and he was executed October 13, 1909. There was a worldwide condemnation of the unjust trial and execution. Modern Schools were organized in many countries to honor his memory and his work.

More schools were established in the United States than any other country. The Modern School in the Ferrer Colony, Stelton, New Jersey, existed longer than any other Ferrer Modern School from 1911 to 1915 in New York City and then from 1915 to 1953 in Stelton, New Jersey. Most of those who went to the Modern School in Stelton remember their years at the school with warmth and love. Growing up in freedom, they enjoyed memories of the Modern School that are among the most treasured of their lives. Friendships formed while they were in the Modern School remained strong over the years.

In 1972 the first reunion of former pupils, teachers, parents and colonists was organized by Paul Avrich who tapped the unsuspected richness of memories of living in the free environment of the Ferrer Modern School. Nearly two hundred of us gathered. The years since leaving the school slipped away as we relived the experience of freedom in the school and the colony that had been established to honor the memory and work of Francisco Ferrer y Guardia—A man who had accomplished so much in pioneering the Modern School in Spain at the cost of his life.

The school offered a program for children of pre-high school age who left the Ferrer School for high school as they reached age 13 or 14 years. At any one time, the school had fewer than 100 children. Nevertheless, nearly two hundred former pupils, teachers, parents and colonists came to the first reunion which was held at Rutgers University. Our memories of the early years at the school and in the colony were so rich, our shared recollections of those early years were so warm and vivid, that there was a spontaneous decision to meet again the following year.

From 1972 to 1989 we have gotten together for what has become an annual reunion—for sixteen of the last seventeen years. Former pupils and teachers compete with one and another to share memories of life at the school. Nellie Dick, one of the earliest teachers at the school, was a lively ninety-six at the latest reunion in 1989. Paul Avrich, who wrote a book on the history of the Modern School movement, has contributed much to the interesting and stimulating program each year.

If we question whether the Modern School and a free education were important in the lives of those who went to the school in their childhood, the answer is found in the experience of the reunions. Although the school was closed in 1953 and the earliest pupils left the school before 1920, between one hundred and two hundred people have come to the reunion each year from all parts of the country. One hundred and forty came to the reunion in 1989.

This last reunion was especially interesting as three former pupils of the Modern School in Spain presented papers on their memories of the Free School in Spain. The three alumni of the Modern School in Spain, later renamed the Nature School, were enlisted in this project by a good friend and comrade, Federico Arcos. We deeply appreciate his assistance in helping us share this experience in free education. We also thank the three former pupils of the Modern School—or Nature School—in Spain for sharing their memories of free education with us as we had done earlier among ourselves. I have translated the three memoirs of Pura Perez, Diego Camacho and Mario Jordana from Spanish.

We are grateful to Martha Ackelsberg for her generous permission to include the essay on Education, Preparation and the Spanish Revolution.

## Recollections

Pura Perez

July 1989

The last paragraph in the letter that Francisco Ferrer wrote in the "Model Prison" in Madrid on June 1, 1907, says

"The Rationalist and Scientific teaching of the Modern School embraces the study of everything that supports the freedom of the individual and the harmony of the collective, with the goal of a regime of peace, love and well-being for all without distinction of classes and sex."

When he faced execution, blindfolded, his spiritual vision gave him the courage to cry out to the world: "Long live the Modern School!" The echo of that cry reached all corners of the earth and assured the continuation of his work in education.

Everyone knows the response to his death. And everyone must come to understand that Francisco Ferrer's decision to open his Modern School in Spain came at the time when Spain was suffering its greatest social repression, with conflicts of work stoppages, exploitation and repression against the proletariat; when the Liberal progressive movement was practically crushed.

Ferrer's work and determination can only be described as heroic. Francisco Ferrer was not unaware of the obstacles and difficulties that awaited him at every step, especially the reactionary forces whose attacks finally led to his death. After his death these reactionary forces fought to close down the Modern School and all Liberal and secular schools in Barcelona and other parts of the country.

By 1910, when the government was changed, the neglect of education had resulted in the illiteracy of two-thirds of the population. To overcome this, the Liberals strongly desired to create Ferrer schools and to open the closed schools and centers again. With Ferrer's school as a model, the Liberals launched a campaign to open the closed centers (Ateneos) again. In 1910 the Liberal institutions joined with Labor to open many unions (Sindicatos) and their Rational Schools. Anselmo Lorenzo was the leading promoter of these schools. He enjoyed the highest reputation among anarcho-syndicalist militants for his knowledge of education.

At the end of 1917, *Solidaridad Obrera* published the following note, "We are informed as 1917 comes to an end that the Union 'La Constancia' of the Textile Industry, is opening its School on January 2, 1918. The School will be located at 12 Municipal Passage, in the Clot District."

This was the beginning of the Rationalist School called "Nature School". It soon came to be called the lovingly popular name, "La Farigola" (Catalan for a fragrant lovely flower). It is rumored that it got this name because the boys and girls in the school brought bunches of the beautiful flowers home after hikes or picnics in the mountains. Professor Juan Puig Elias was the directing figure in the Nature School from the beginning until July 1936. At that time, Puig Elias became President of the Popular Council in the New Unified School and the Nature School was transferred to a new tower and a better building.

When my sister and I began to attend night classes at "La Farigola" in September 1933, she was twelve years old and I had just turned fourteen years of age. We had gone to Barcelona in January 1933 from Jativa, a town in the province of Valencia, where we had lived our entire childhood. Luckily we had been able to go to public school. When the Second Republic was proclaimed in 1931, I had the opportunity to attend High School until the Railroad Company for which my father worked transferred him to the capital of Catalonia, Barcelona.

At first, we encountered many difficulties—great social conflicts, scarcity of housing. As a result, we had to find work immediately. After a few months, we found a less expensive place to live and moved to the Clot District where we became acquainted with the Nature School and registered right away. I remember that we were received very cordially. Professor Puig Elias asked us a few questions and directed us to our seats. He told us that they did not demand much study or set standards or have examinations. I was greatly surprised when asked what I wanted to study. At first I did not understand and took some time to answer—it was so unexpected for me. I was used to being told what I had to learn, what materials to read and study, what to memorize, and to be prepared to compete to win first place in the class. I was speechless when I learned that none of these practices existed in the Nature School.

The classes were stimulating. We found it very easy to establish a relationship with other students. There was no pressure for competition. And I did not observe any propaganda orientation. (My parents had been advised about this because the school was sponsored by the union but there never was propaganda of any kind.)

My preferences were to study science, anatomy and geography. If we needed books that they did not have at the school, we were told to go to the Ateneo Library. There they had every type of book that we could borrow. We also went to the Ateneo on holidays because there were always

recreational and cultural activities. This continuous contact helped strengthen the good bonds of friendship and respect. We were able to carry on discussions and be with friends. Adolescence was fading away with all the things we were learning. Social questions were so pressing and absorbing that we were led to dream of a future of justice and freedom.

The schools were all based on the same principles and goals, whether they were called "Integral Education" as Paul Robin wished to call it, "Modern School" as Francisco Ferrer called it, or "Rationalist School" as Juan Puig Elias of the "Nature School" called it. The important emphasis was the instruction of the children without external authority. Pupils found their own truth. These were schools where the teachers were patient and pleasant guides indicating the roads that lead to the desired goal. In conventional traditional schools, individuals have little initiative, are passive and ready to follow others, because they spend so many years without expressing their own personality or their own energies.

After July 19, 1936, our customary lives changed and we left the school to take on other urgent, necessary tasks. We returned to Valencia once more in June 1937. In Valencia, I was asked to work as a teacher in a collective. Although I did not have the title, the fact that I had studied at "La Farigola" in Barcelona was a true credit. I accepted on condition that I would be the judge of my work since I was not sure if I would be satisfactory. I remained there until the end of the war.

The Director of the school was an Italian comrade, Vicente Consoli. He came to Spain to fight, but, because of his advanced years, they suggested that he work at his profession and he was sent there. His Spanish was very good and with the passing of time, he perfected his accent. The people in the collective regarded him with much affection and in addition to his work as a teacher, he advised them in matters of administration. It should be remembered that, because of the war, many men were away from their homes. Many young people were also away, working on other things. Agricultural workers predominated in the collective and many hands were needed for the work. Women filled the need and children were also asked to help at times with easier tasks. Many adolescents worked full time so that night classes were started for them. There was also a daily meeting for an hour where those who had something to say could discuss conflicts or problems that had arisen during the day.

The school, located in the town plaza, had two large floors. The lower floor was used for meetings and lectures. The upper floor was divided for two classes, with students grouped according to their development. I had a class of 30 of the youngest children. It was my idea that the children's tables be placed in a circle so everyone's face would be in view. This broke with traditional custom but the children loved it. We had various materials that the children worked with their hands. We also had a microscope that was used by the older children and a supply of scholarly materials. Everything went well and the pupils were happy. They suggested what they wanted to do or to learn. Every month we displayed what the classes did downstairs. The parents were satisfied. The days were peaceful. We went to see the vegetable gardens and the orange trees where pupils were able to see the fruit and plants grow. The following day they made drawings of what they had liked. If it had not been for the ghost of war, everyone would have been happy because they were living one of the most desired goals of the revolution. As part of our recreational and cultural activities we developed an artistic group to do important projects including stage scenery in other communities. What the collective produced was exchanged with other collectives although most of the supplies were sent to the fronts.

Little by little, more refugee children began to come to the school. We had to find another teacher and volunteers to help us. The number of refugees increased daily. We had to take care

of children who were destroyed psychologically by the war. As tragedy followed us, our work took on a very different turn. In some cases it was necessary to leave a sister or mother with the children in the school for several days. Our pupils helped us to help these children like no one thought was possible. The activity was beyond the normal—but there it was and it had to be taken care of. The children of the village brought their own clothes and toys and accompanied the refugee children to their temporary housing. These were spontaneous acts of solidarity and brotherhood that moved everyone.

This was a part of my life, unique and unforgettable, a time that Albert Camus characterized as "The time of Hope." With all these experiences I understand most clearly the importance of the work of a conscientious teacher. I understand why feelings and sentiments of those who have gone to a free school are different from others who did not have such an education. Those who have had such an education are moved by a sense of solidarity and justice toward the oppressed of every class.

## Memories

Mario Jordana

May 1989

Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859-1909) was born in Alella (Barna). He was an educator and Spanish revolutionist of anarchist ideas. As a young man he worked in business and as a railroad inspector. When he was twenty five years old, he joined the Masonic Lodge "Verdad" (Truth), took part in a republican uprising led by General Villacampa, migrated to Paris, worked as Ruiz Zorilla's secretary, and later became a teacher in Paris. In 1901 he inherited an estate from Ernestine Meunier, one of his pupils in Paris, and that same year founded the "Modern School" in Barcelona.

This move brought difficulties for him. In 1906 he was accused and acquitted of participating in the attempt on the life of King Alfonso XIII in Paris and in Madrid. In 1909, however, he was condemned to death on the (false) accusation of being responsible for the "Tragic Week" in Barcelona and he was shot at Montjuich.

In the year 1932-1933 when my whole family moved to the neighborhood of Clot in Barcelona, we immediately registered in the school—known as the "Nature" School. The "Nature" School was located on Municipal Street above the Textile Workers Union (CNT). The school was directed by Professor Juan Puig Elias together with his comrade, Senora Roca. His daughter Libertad was also a teacher in the school.

As a disciple of Ferrer y Guardia, Juan Puig Elias' method of teaching was that of the Modern School. The activities of the "Nature" School were, therefore, different from all the other schools in Clot and Barcelona. A child coming from another school immediately recognized the difference from other schools that he/she had attended.

It was an educational revolution to change everything in the schools as was done in the Modern School. For one thing, it was the only school in which boys and girls attended classes together, from the youngest to the oldest. Boys and girls shared the same classes, according to age. They went to school happy each day that they learned something new. They literally breathed their desire to learn at school.

They did not know of physical or moral punishments. In the Modern School, if something happened that required chastisement, it was done with an oral reprimand understood only by the transgressor (since no one was ever named). It was a lesson that no one forgot.

The Modern School taught children to be free, to love their fellow beings, not to harm nature or mistreat animals—in other words, to love life. They were taught to respect older people. We learned to ask an older person with more experience in life to teach us what we do not understand because we are so young. Out of respect for older people, we were taught that we should do what we can in the street and in public transportation by giving them a seat or our hand for support.

Teaching for whatever age grew gradually from year to year. No teacher had a class of more than 15 children. This assured that every student achieved understanding sooner or later of the subject matter. No one moved on to another subject until all members of the group mastered the subject being studied—the natural sciences, mathematics or whatever. All the children in the group read a paragraph. Then, one by one, they talked about what they had read, with the book closed. In this way, what they read became engraved in their minds. Each child also kept a diary which was treasured more each day, shaping it into a book to be read another day as a memoir of what had been learned or had happened. (What wouldn't I give to have that diary.) Like all games, the studies were suggestive. The children did not tire of participating. They loved to learn.

The teachers at the "Nature" School were advanced. At that time, no primary or secondary school had a human skeleton but the first thing that a visitor to a classroom saw was a human skeleton. Every child in the older group knew the name of all the bones in the body. Many visitors were surprised to find that the pupils had learned to read and understand the human skeleton. (It was a pleasure to be able to answer the teacher's questions for our visitors.) In addition, there were identical copies of our body, made in synthetic materials, separated from the body and in the proper colors that could be opened at the chest, for example, to look inside the body and locate vital organs, such as the heart, the lungs, or the liver. In turn, these opened up so they could be studied in greater detail showing the veins, the sections, and so forth. There was also physical and chemical equipment, as well as for astronomy. All of the apparatus was studied. A student of the oldest group was prepared to go to the university. Let us remember that many went on to be teachers.

Almost every Thursday, we had an excursion, sometimes to the mountains, sometimes visits to the museums. There was explanation and comment on what we saw as we walked along. In the mountains there might be discussion of a point a student might raise, or an explanation by the teacher of plants, flowers, insects, trees, and so on. Above all, the teacher would tell us things we should avoid doing, such as killing animals or bringing harm to the mountain by burning trash on the mountainside. The teaching was both visual and tactile.

Lunch or a picnic in the mountain was followed by children's games. The return to school was joyful—singing songs. The excursions were always hikes; it was our good luck that there were no cars then—invading everything, contaminating the roadways. Who does not remember the streams of pure crystalline water that satisfied our thirst? That will never come back any more!

Every year at the end of the school course, dramatic presentations and dances were performed in the theatres in Barcelona and neighboring towns for the benefit of the Colonies—communities in the country that provided for summertime vacations (I was a comic actor many times.) Going to the Colonies meant that a group of boys and girls would spend the month of August in the Pyrenees, staying in a country house located in the town of Ribas de Fresser, high on the mountain. The boys and girls lived there with some of the teachers. There was a large open space in



front of the house where the children played without fear of hurting themselves. They could play all types of games in the fresh air. They also arranged entertainments, such as dances and poetry functions, when their parents came to visit them. Excursions were organized to look for mushrooms, strawberries, and wood or to bathe in the river. There was always something to do—long hikes, two-day trips, going up Puig-Mal (the highest mountain in Catalonia, El Tagamanen). We went to the Valley of Nuria, entered France. How marvelous when one stops to think of all we experienced in our childhood!

Public functions were organized in Ribas de Fresser, one of which was bound to be on the theme "Fight Against War." Programs were performed in Puigcerda, where the people received us with love in their homes, giving us their best desserts. How happy we were! The Modern School was doing well and it left its imprint on the people. What did they call the house where we stayed? They called it "Mon Nou," Catalan for "New World." The lettering at the entrance to the estate was painted and repainted each year by the children. Every letter had a special meaning—for example, the letter M was a boy or girl, the O was the World.

We would look at the clear brilliant sky after supper and have lessons in astronomy. The North Star, the Milky Way—how beautiful it all seemed to us little ones! We had many stories and memories from that period of our lives. And many were recorded in our diaries.

Let us not forget that before we started our vacation the end of the course was celebrated. This was a time of great joy for the students. The best work of the students was put on display in the great hall, their best writings, their best works of art, their best manual work, and so on. The school was visited by many hundreds of people, starting with parents and relatives and then friends and people curious to see what went on. Everyone left full of enthusiasm for the high quality of what they saw going on in that school.

To complete the program, the remaining members of the class were given parts to perform such as dancing and recitations of poetry. To end the program, finally, Juan Puig Elias was called upon for closing remarks and he was very popular with the pupils. After refreshments, everyone left happily because many were looking forward to starting for the Colonies the following morning.

At the beginning of the new class, everyone was a little older, some had changed their group and made new friends. New techniques were to be learned, more advanced knowledge for the juvenile mind. This was the Modern School and it was never static.

It shall be remembered: it was the only school that taught adolescents, starting at 12 years of age, lessons completely taboo even today about sex. For the most part, parents did not discuss the subject with their children. On their own young people developed distorted ideas about sex based upon what they heard in discussions among friends who had unclear ideas about sex. The classes taught them to think clearly. Sex is the union of two very small cells (feminine and masculine, egg and sperm)—the start of life in the world. In conclusion I say: There is no "Modern School" at this time and the way things are going there may not be again. The "Nature School" unfortunately ended its course on July 18, 1936. I saw the finale of a period of teaching that taught the world it was possible to live without wars or hatred, but instead culture and liberty were guillotined.

## **My Experience in the "Nature School"**

A Living Memory of Rational Pedagogy  
Diego Camacho (Abel Paz)

May 9, 1989, Barcelona

The anarchist movement was stable and strong throughout Spain, especially Barcelona. Digging into the roots and origins of the labor movement since 1870 was not new. The International Working Men's Association (I.W.M.A., the First International) was free of the Marxist dogmatic conception from the beginning and took on the federalism of Proudhon and the radical anti-authoritarianism of Bakunin. The synthesis of Bakuninist and Proudhonian thinking appealed to the Spanish people. Their roots were deep in the historic development of the Spanish State and nationality. They rejected state centralism, the Catholic religion and private property. The anarchist character of the labor movement in Spain placed a greater emphasis on human dignity than the class struggle. For the anarchists the class struggle was one of the ways to achieve the abolition of classes in a society of free human beings who are masters of their own destinies—Spanish working men and women fought constantly for autonomy and federalism. The anarchists knew that they must free themselves of all the prejudices of the dominant class if they wanted to achieve a Libertarian society, including their culture. This meant the creation of a counter-culture and an aesthetic of art inspired in freedom.

The hundreds of workers' associations organized during the period 1870-1900 and the tens of publications give ample testimony to the energetic anarchist activity designed to destroy bourgeois, state and religious influences among workers. Taking the first Modern Schools as a model, they were duplicated all over the country. They became identified as part of the workers' associations. Let us see how this was done.

In the second half of 1903, two years after the opening of the first Modern School in Barcelona, a group of people with advanced ideas, living in Murcia province, planned a rationalist school in that area similar to the one in Barcelona. They immediately wrote to Ferrer asking him for an explanation of some of the teaching methods used by his school. He sent a reply written by hand, saying:

Without rejecting the professional politicians, because their support can be helpful to you at times, and even welcoming them with a certain warmth, you should make every effort to neutralize those who try to obstruct our projects.”

Don't lose sight of the character of our teaching; keep our schools free of all political or religious influence. We must maintain the integrity of our program of study, to prepare for the abolition of all superstition and all privilege.

Rationalist teaching cannot be similar to religious or state political teaching. First, because science has demonstrated that creation is a legend and that the gods are myths. They abuse the ignorance of the parents and the credulity of the children by perpetuating the belief that the creator of the world is a supernatural being to whom one must kneel in prayer in order to obtain all types of favors.

Neither can our teaching be similar to that of state political teaching. We want to raise individuals in full possession of all their faculties. Political instruction subordinates them to other people. Just as religions, recognizing a divine power, have created an abusive power that makes human emancipation more difficult, political systems hold men and women back in their striving for emancipation. Their supposedly superior energies are restrained by the tradition or routine of working for the government.

Even in infancy, while a person is dependent on another, abuses are committed and slavery and tyranny exist. It should be the purpose of free schools to study the reasons for such a lack of solidarity, to draw the attention of the pupils to what they actually see.

Let us not lose time asking an imaginary god for what only human effort can obtain for us.  
Let us not lose time asking others to give us what we can obtain ourselves.

## **Humanitarian Rationality**

Six years ago when we had the immense satisfaction of starting the Modern School of Barcelona, what stood out for us was that its system of teaching would be rational and scientific. I had to make a public declaration that since science and reason were the antithesis of all dogma, no religion would be taught at my school.

I expected that this declaration would provoke the hatred of the priestly caste. They would oppose me with all the weapons of deceit and hypocrisy that they employ, abusing the ignorance of their believers and the powers of government.

The general clamor raised by the religious press against the Modern School, for which I shall probably pay with a year in prison, shows me that our method of teaching is right. All of us rationalists should reinforce our efforts to continue the work we have begun with more energy than ever and to spread the word as far as our resources enable us.

In the meantime it must be stated that the mission of the Modern School is not limited to freeing our minds of religious prejudice. We know that such prejudice is one of the worst obstacles to the intellectual emancipation of individuals as we prepare humanity to be free.

If the workers free themselves from religious prejudice and maintain their feeling about property as it exists today; if they accept the Christian belief that there will always be the poor and the rich; if rationalist teaching is limited to knowledge about hygiene, about the natural sciences, and to prepare good apprentices, good employees and good workers in all trades, we could live among more or less healthy, strong atheists depending on reduced nutrition that they could obtain with their low salaries. We would be living with the slaves of capital.

The Modern School tries to destroy all the prejudices that obstruct the complete emancipation of the individual. That is why we choose humanitarian rationalism. It stresses the need to know the origin of all social injustices so that, knowing them, we can oppose them and destroy them.

Humanitarian rationalism is opposed to fratricidal wars, whether they be civil wars or foreign; it rejects the exploitation of man by man, and the position of inferiority of women. It fights against all enemies of human harmony: against ignorance, evil, pride and other vices and defects that divide men between tyrants and the tyrannized.

Rationalist, scientific teaching embraces everything that can help the liberty of the individual and the harmony of the collective as we work for a regime of peace, love and well-being for all without distinction of class or sex.

F. Ferrer Guardia  
Model Prison, Madrid  
January 5, 1907

The establishment of the Modern School had a powerful effect on a society grown stiff in its joints from the reactionary forces that led it. This is not just a demagogic argument on my part; it is a statement of historic reality. Queen Isabel II and the Vatican signed a concordat in 1854 that gave the Catholic Church in Spain the role of policeman of culture and public instruction in general. This law was promulgated by the Minister of Public Instruction, Moyano, and was in force until 1931, when it was annulled by the Republic.

The historian F.G. Bruguera in his *Current History of Spain*, referring to the effects of the Moyano Law, says: "the Prelates must report to the government the ideas that are taught in the Universities, Institutes and Schools by professors and teachers when they are prejudicial to the education of the young. Or, to put it another way: no freedom in the lecture hall and keep an inquisitorial vigilance. This law was welded into a disaster: there were 9,000,000 illiterates in Spain in 1898 out of a total population of 17,000,000 residents."

The Spanish working class had to invent its own framework but always under the systematic vigilance and repression of the Church and State. These structures were the Workers' Centers, opened during more or less liberal periods (1850-1865). They were centers for night classes, originators of the efforts for workers' culture. Beginning in 1870, when the First International (I.W.M.A.) was started in Spain, the workers' cultural circle grew with the night classes in local centers associated with the International or the federal republicanism of Pi y Margall.

It was, then, in the Spain that we have just described, that Francisco Ferrer came forth with his Modern School, whose teaching and pedagogic methods were prohibited by the official "status quo" state and religion. It was logical that the reaction would follow to hold back the growth of all Ferrer's movements and his school. He had to be crushed at the first opportunity which was not long in coming. In 1906, when King Alfonso XIII got married, an anarchist, Mateo Morral, made an attempt against the life of the king and his bride. The authorities used the relationship that Morral had with the Modern School, pointed to Ferrer as the one who had encouraged the attack and arrested him. A great international protest in support of Ferrer succeeded in destroying the monarchist plot and releasing the prisoner.

But in reaction, the Catholic Church did not yield its determination to destroy rationalist teaching. It used the great labor protest against the war in Morocco in 1909 to accuse Ferrer of being the leader of that protest. In spite of great international objection, the government of Prime Minister Antonio Maura and King Alfonso XIII refused to withdraw the order to execute Ferrer by a firing squad on October 13, 1909.

### **Juan Puig Elias, Rationalist Teacher**

Among young workers who breathed the social atmosphere in the early days of the century and knew something of rationalist teaching was one by the name of Juan Puig Elias, a native of Gerona. I do not know, although I can imagine, what roads this young man took to become a teacher. There was a free school called "Nature School", (also known as "La Farigola"), in the San Martin-Clot District of Barcelona at Municipal Street. It made rationalist teaching known. This took place during the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-1930). From the beginning, the school relied on support of anarchist groups in the San Martin-Clot District (Barcelona), particularly the "Sun and Life" group which had some of the outstanding figures in the labor movement and in Catalan anarchism among its members.

With the proclamation of the Second Republic on April 14, 1931, union organizations and political parties regained their legal status. The CNT and anarchism returned to the public light. The Rationalist Schools, which had survived quietly, also became public and achieved great importance. There were two hundred such schools in the country and the Balearic and Canary Islands. The "Nature" School was associated with the powerful Textile Workers Union of Barcelona, with seventy thousand members.

Many important militants in the union lived in the San Martin-Clot District. At the same time they formed part of the "Sun and Life" Group. It was entirely natural that the Textile Union should be the patron of the Nature School and should name a Pro-School Commission composed of comrades Costa, Rillo and Talon. This was the situation when I was able to get into the Nature School after a long wait because there were many more requests for admission than space to accommodate them.

### **My Experiences as a Student at Eleven Years of Age**

I had two very brief experiences as a school boy. The first was when I was 5 years old. My mother started to take me to a school run by an old national teacher who opened a private school to earn a livelihood. The teacher belonged to the old school. He understood that the "letter dipped in blood enters." I ran away without looking back until I reached my house and told my mother what happened. That was in Almeria. But it was also in Almeria that an old retired woman school teacher took me in hand. She taught me to read and interested me in arithmetic. Thanks to her I learned how to spell and to write, poorly, but on my own. The second school was in Barcelona, also a private school in San Martin-Clot District, where my family lived. The method of teaching was the same as the national schools, archaic and full of religious teaching. During the week that I went to school, the sister started by declaring that I must go to the First Communion or I could not continue in the school. My parents refused and I was not able to go to school. Then I was enrolled in the waiting list of the Nature School. I must say that while I was outside the school, however, I continued to study on my own, reading, writing, and arithmetic, helped by an uncle of mine.

### **The Nature School (1933-1935)**

The Nature School followed the model started by Francisco Ferrer y Guardia in 1901 under the name Modern School. With the passage of time the name was changed to Rationalist Schools. The Nature School was started by Juan Puig Elias during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship. Together with the school he published children's review, "Floreal." Puig Elias was married to "La Senora Roca" who was a teacher of piano and music and singing for the student body, with principle responsibility for beginners in a class next to the principal. The school became larger after the proclamation of the Republic. The big Textile Workers Union of Barcelona took the school under its protection and gave it economic support. This distinction transformed it into the main school of all the rationalist schools located around Barcelona. The most active militants of the CNT registered their children in this school. This included a child of the Ocana's-Natura, the son of Ricardo Sanz, of Climent, Antonio Sarrau's children, and others. The main room of the school was enormous, sunny, with white walls. The student body was mixed, boys and girls, seated at small individual tables. This was a great novelty. (Other schools had classic benches and desks such as I had in Almeria.) When my grandmother took me to the school, it was in full activity. We walked past tables until we reached the one where Puig Elias was seated—a beautiful man. He was tall with a dark black beard, well cared for. He had a friendly look that inspired immediate confidence. I don't know exactly what my grandmother said to him. I stood at this table for some moments and he told me to go play on the patio. There was a fountain on the patio and a turtle which distracted me when it came out of the water. I remained alone for a few minutes, but I was

soon joined by a boy about 15 years old named Gracia. We sat down on a bench and he asked me what I could do, if I had gone to some other school—a sort of examination. I told him my history. He asked me to read from a book that he gave me. He dictated some words for me to write. He finished by giving me some arithmetic problems to do—addition, subtraction, multiplication. The examination lasted an hour. He left me on the patio for a short time and he went into the classroom to speak with Puig Elias. My examiner was in the third grade with Diez, a painter, rather than a teacher.

Gracia took me to my place, my table, beside a girl who was approximately my age, named Mir. Her brother was also a teacher at the school. Each class had a teacher and Puig Elais was a general coordinator of the school. Gracia gradually brought me a number of books. One of these, a general text, was called "Instructive Readings" prepared by the great internationalist, Celso Gomis (member of an early branch of the I.W.M.A. in Spain), a former teacher in the Modern School. Then there were various manuals, one on the human body, another on zoology, one on geography and geology, and an arithmetic book. In addition there was a notebook with a text on every page that had to be copied, a sketch book for drawing and a history book where we were to write stories every Monday—and, naturally, pens and pencils, erasers, and so on. I imagined that all this would cost quite a bit of money and I said so to Gracia, indicating that my uncle was not rich. The boy broke into laughter, slapped me on the shoulder and calmed me down, saying: "No one here comes from a rich family. The majority," he insisted, "have poor, unemployed parents. Some of the parents are in jail." He spoke to me as if I were an older person, who could understand that there are people in jail who are not murderers or thieves. In reality I was prepared to understand this because my uncle had also been in prison and he was not a murderer or thief.

When Gracia left me to myself, the teacher Diez approached me. He asked my name and told me that I would like the school a great deal. After all this, it was now twelve noon, when the class closes down until 2 p.m. La Senora Roca got into the middle of the class, all the pupils standing in a ring around her and we sang "El Picapedrero" under her direction. It was a gymnastic song, sung with exercising. I believe that she composed it.

We went out to the street where I soon met a friend, Jaime, who lived on my street. He knew me, but I had never noticed him. He was also in my class. We walked together and when we separated we agreed to meet again in the street to go to school. He told me it was better to leave early in order to play soccer at City Hall square before entering the school.

When I got home, my uncle had not yet arrived from work; but when he reached my house, my uncle stayed a while to ask me how things had gone at school. There was little to tell except to mention the cost I thought we faced for the quantity of books we had to buy. My uncle did not seem to be concerned about this but was interested in my impressions of the school. When I told him in detail what I had experienced and that I liked it, he was happy. He said the important thing for him was that I had liked what I had seen and experienced and that I observed how much was needed to get an education. He felt that I had learned quickly in view of my age and the fact that I had entered the school. He felt that I would be able to learn a trade in any industry I would enter. When I returned to school in the afternoon of my first day, I found that as it was Monday, the afternoon was devoted to literary composition. The pupils got up in turn to sit next to the teachers, each one reading his or her composition on some freely chosen subject. It could be a film, an excursion, a book just read or something that happened on the street that made an impression. The themes were varied. After each reading, the teacher (Diez in this instance) asked

the reader questions and then he asked if anyone else wanted to ask questions of the reader. When the compositions had been read, they were given to the teacher to correct. Between the reading of the compositions and play on the terrace, the three school hours passed quickly.

During the recreation period Jaime introduced me to some of his friends who did not live far from our house. I made good friends with them immediately and at the end of the school day the whole group of us came out making a lot of noise, running around in the street wildly. When we got into the street I was surprised to see various groups of workers coming out of the same door, in discussion. Jaime explained that this was the time when the workers went to the union, after work. We greeted one of them whom he called Costa.

Costa was one of the comrades who was a member of the Commission concerned with the school. Later I found out that the Union named three comrades—Rillo, Costa, and Talon—to learn what the school needed by way of new teaching materials. With Puig Elias' help and agreement, they purchased the new materials with moneys given to the school by the Union. Their last purchase was a plastic man more than a meter high that could be taken apart into pieces—lessons were given about the human body, its parts, and functioning. Purchases were only part of their responsibility. They also had to get displays of archaeology and mineralogy for our small museum. They had the responsibility to be animators on Saturdays, the day set aside for motion picture films, conferences, or lectures. I remember the geologist Alberto Carsi and the astronomer Comas y Sola at the school giving lectures on their subjects. At other times, miners from the mining district of Sallent spoke to us about mining and the work done in the mines, or farmers spoke to us about planting and the decisive factor of the change of seasons. A book given to the pupil for general instruction was one of the texts selected by Francisco Ferrer y Guardia for the Modern School. The author, Celso Gamis, was part of the First Internationalist group established in Barcelona in 1869 together with Farga Pellicer, Antonio Pellicer and Sentinon. Until 1915, when he died, his name was on all the anarchist publications of that period. He was a member of the editorial board of "Acracia" (Anarchism) in 1887, among others. When Puig Elias started the "Nature School" in 1924, he was given the teaching material of "The Modern School" publishing house. He also brought out a new children's review, "Floreale," in 1929. The artist Ramon Acin was a diligent collaborator. My real adaptation as a student began the second half of January when everything had settled down. I had no difficulty continuing my rhythm of study. My school comrades were more or less at the same level of reading, writing and arithmetic. Diez wanted to push me quickly to the subject level of the others and assigned me to a boy from the sixth grade who took me in hand to work intensively. We made a general review of all the books and I was soon familiar with their contents. This kind of work lasted several months. I worked to the limit, as much at home as in the school, reviewing the lessons. There were things I had to commit to memory, such as the names of 200 bones of the human body. A skeleton that we had in the school helped a great deal because we worked with the same material. We had to memorize the organs of the body and we followed the same method with the disassembled plastic man. All this was new for me as was learning about the atmosphere, the change of seasons, the different ages of the earth, and the development of man. With all the limitations that science may have, the studies were based on the most advanced hypotheses available, which was reflected in our school books. It was evident why it was called rationalist education—the Sacred History, with its legends of Adam and Eve, the serpent, God, and Paradise, were all ignored.

When the teachers judged that I was ready, I joined the routine of the class although I confess that I did not feel as confident and secure as the rest of my companions. Actually, I moved slowly.

It was not easy for me and I did not do better until much later, thanks to the pressure I put on myself and Jaime's help. He was the one who came to my house to study together and prepare our lessons for the following day. Many boys dream of dropping out of school, but I would never do so. On the contrary, I liked it. I would never miss a day of school without a justifiable reason. Sometimes I thought what good luck I had to have learned what I did and in the way I did it. Actually, I started going to school late and was therefore mature for that level of schooling, otherwise it would have been impossible for me to succeed in reaching the level of my companions in such a short time. I know it would have been impossible to achieve in another school because of their methods and their backwardness. I believe that ours was the most complete of all the nearly 200 rationalist schools in Spain at that time. I will explain.

I do not remember the exact number of pupils in the classes, but we might have had two hundred and fifty. The youngest were separated from us and in the care of Senora Roca and Dalia, another teacher. Let us say that there were two hundred older pupils and without counting Puig Elias there were 8 teachers. I remember the names of some of them—Call, Perez, Diez, Soriano, Mir. When I was there, Soriano was the only teacher with a license. The others were students in the Normal School of Teachers studying to get their license, but in the meantime they were performing as teachers in the school. This great richness of teachers permitted us to have smaller classes and receive more attention. This would have been impossible in any other school because of the wages that would have to be paid. This was not a problem in the Nature School because the majority of our teachers worked for no wages. They did not expect to be paid until they obtained their license. They went into towns where the local CNT Union had opened a school and needed a teacher. As far as I understand, the Nature School had become the source of rationalist teachers for the CNT. In the three years I attended the school I saw at least five or six teachers leave—like Diez to Mallorca and others to towns in Catalonia.

No one was compelled to do anything at the Nature School, yet compulsion was common practice in all other schools. I never saw anyone chastised, which does not mean that there were no sharp reproofs. I myself suffered a reproof from Puig Elias for whom a lot of us had great respect. The reproof happened by accident. He passed me seated at the table and picked up my storybook, surely because he wanted to see my list of subject. There were a number of blotches. Frankly, it was not in a presentable condition. With his eyes fixed upon me, he said, "Do you know that all your notebooks are on display for everyone to see at the fiesta at the end of this course? You have two options—present these as they are or buy another book and copy it from the beginning. You decide." I felt humiliated. If I had been simply criticized it would not have hurt so much. I criticized myself for sloppiness. I had to consider copying the entire book as well as buying another book. I knew that we were short of cash in my house. I thought about it for a long time and finally decided to buy another book. As I have said, at the Nature School, there was no sanction, no command, but observations such as Puig Elias made of me could be hard. Considering everything, however, Puig Elias' approach helped one to self-correct and improve.

The class came to an end in July. The room was decorated with drawings and paintings. The tables were lined up end to end displaying the materials we worked with all year. The families, naturally, were interested to see the work done during the year. As always, the celebration had a play, a dance, and singing, all of it produced by Senora Roca. Refreshments and pastries were enjoyed and a brief farewell by one of the teachers closed the festival until the new year.

The Nature School had a large house in a colony in Puigcerda. Many of my school friends had enrolled for the two months of vacation there. I neglected to inform my family about this



opportunity and since places were limited it was clear that I would have to spend two months of vacation in Barcelona. Jaime had also forgotten to enroll himself, so it was not too bad as the two of us invented ways to pass the time until class opened again.

## **General Considerations**

Although it is strange, it should be recognized that the anarchist movement was repressed as much, or more, during the Republic as under the monarchy. This repression had serious repercussions for the Rationalist Schools. Because of lack of funds, many of the schools functioned in union offices and workers' centers during the day. When these closed down, for whatever reason, the schools were also closed and caused great hardship. The Nature School did not have this problem because we had the support of the local, independent community. The autonomous Catalan government, however, placed difficulties in the way of the Nature School by such things as setting hours for examinations, although subjects were studied according to the Nature School's schedule. There were also pressures on Puig Elias to submit the school to the official framework fixed by the Cultural Council. In addition, in spite of the Republican Constitution of 1932 separating Church and State, the attacks against rationalist teaching were constant. Articles were published presenting the Rationalist Schools as the focus of moral corruption because the classes were mixed. And this was not all—it was reported in a paper such as "El Dia Grafico" (1933) that the rationalist schools taught how to make bombs and handle a pistol, and further that the school song was "Arroja la Bomba" (Throw the Bomb). This campaign to discredit the schools never reduced the support that the workers gave the rationalist schools; and so far as the effect on these schools goes, particularly during the period 1931 to 1936, they were positive in every way. I never heard anarchism spoken of in the school that I attended nor experienced any attempt to bring this movement into the school. The simple fact was that I was taught to be a person prepared to face my future.

## **Education, Preparation, and the Spanish Revolution**

Martha Ackelsberg

The years from 1868 to 1936 served as preparation for the social revolution which broke out in response to the generals' rebellion against the Spanish Republic in July, 1936. In February of 1936, the CNT—Confederacion Nacional Del Trabajo—boasted a membership of approximately 850,000 members, organized in non-hierarchically structured unions, federated both by industry and by region. The movement as a whole did not limit itself to union organizing in the narrow sense. During the same period, it was supporting and developing educational programs for both adults and young people, which included a network of storefront schools and cultural centers; a broad-based national youth organization; and journals and newspapers which made anarchist critical perspectives on culture, politics, and social issues available to large numbers of people throughout the country.

### **Education as Preparation**

Spanish anarchists recognized the need for more "formal" education. The commitment to self-direction meant a focus on education. Given the high levels of illiteracy in Spain at the turn of the

century, it was clear that a movement committed to working-class development through direct action and self-organization would have to devote at least some of its energies and resources to adult and child literacy. It was one of the great strengths of the anarchist movement—and one of the achievements of which members were most proud—that it developed a network of schools, journals, and cultural centers to address these issues.

To teach people to read and write was to empower them socially and culturally; it became, truly, a revolutionary act. At the end of the nineteenth century, traveling activists who attempted to teach rural landworkers to read were persecuted and jailed in southern Spain, Andalusia and Extremadura. It was with this perception of the importance of education that Spanish anarchists (and later *Mujeres Libres*, Free Women) embarked on a massive program to educate working people, both rural and urban. Although many of these programs were undertaken by unions, and initially directed toward union members, they served a population considerably larger.

Anarchist-supported educational institutions took a variety of forms during this period. Schools, cultural centers, journals, newspapers—all aimed to encourage people to “think for themselves, and to develop their sense of responsibility, commonality, and criticism.”

### **Creating Institutions for Literacy and Culture**

Levels of illiteracy varied markedly in Spain at the turn of the century. But everywhere, literacy rates for women lagged between 10 and 20 percentage points (and sometimes as much as 30 points) behind those of men. By 1930, with greater access to education, rates of illiteracy fell for both men and women, but still ranged from highs of approximately 50 percent of men and over 60 percent of women in the southern provinces to lows of 25 to 30 percent of women and 20 to 25 percent of men in the Basque provinces.

Official “state” education was of little help in meeting these deficits. Republicans, socialists, and anarchists had pressed for the establishment of secular, nonreligious schools as early as the mid-nineteenth century, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful until the educational reforms of the Republic in 1931. Church-run schools concentrated on discipline and rote memorization. Periodically—in 1873-74, during the 1880s, and again in the early 1890s—efforts had been made to change the relationship of church and state, so that the church no longer controlled the curriculum. But since the church provided most secondary education, even when schools were not officially run by the clergy, church-trained teachers tended to define their structure and function.

Clara Lida has argued that efforts to articulate and implement an alternative educational philosophy—of *enseñanza integral* (integral education)—can be traced back to republican and Fourierist schools in the 1840s and 1850s, and to anarchist and secularist schools in the 1870s and 1880s. Very few of these were financially accessible to the children of workers, however, and even if financial aid were available for the children, it was a rare family that could spare the income (however meager) that a working child could bring into the family. In addition, these lay schools fought a continual (and usually losing) battle with the state over their very right to exist.

One response of anarchists to the effective inaccessibility of lay-controlled education was the founding of “rationalist schools.” Although these have been associated most notably with the name of Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, they were the direct descendents of efforts at *enseñanza integral*. Born in Barcelona in 1859, Ferrer spent sixteen years in exile in Paris, where he came in contact with the educational ideas of Paul Robin, Tolstoy, Jean Grave, and others. He returned to Spain in 1901 to found the *Escuela Moderna* (modern school) in Barcelona. His goal,

”to form a school of emancipation, which will be concerned with banning from the mind whatever divides men, the false concepts of property, country, and family, so as to attain the liberty and well-being which all desire and none completely realizes.”

Consistent with both anarchist principles and advanced educational theory at the time, Ferrer was committed to establishing a school which reorganized education as a political act. If one hoped to enable children to live in a free society, the educational system itself had to be based in, and encourage, freedom to develop and explore. Science and reason were key concepts in the schools; and children were to be stimulated to direct their own education. Consistent, too, with his understanding of libertarian principles, Ferrer was firmly committed to coeducation (a practice virtually unheard of in Spain at the time), and to mixed-class education, which would provide a context for people to learn to live with diversity. Given the rigidity of the existing system in Spain and anarchist suspicion of both church and state, it should not be surprising that Spanish libertarians attempted to establish ”alternative schools”—institutions which, true to the anarchist belief in direct action and propaganda by the deed, would not only educate students but also serve as models for a very different educational philosophy and practice. Ferrer’s *Escuela Moderna* opened in Barcelona in September 1901, and lasted (though with frequent closings because of state censorship) through 1906, when it was closed definitively. Cristina Piera, who, at the age of nine, attended the school for about a year, described the confusion: ”The police would come to close the school, and then... we couldn’t go. I went to the *Escuela Moderna*, and learned a fair amount there; but, since they were always closing it, I ended up without much of an education.” The school was supported by parental contributions—according to what each family was able to pay. The classes were mixed by socioeconomic background, and completely integrated by sex, as well. All students, regardless of background or sex, studied a ”scientific” curriculum, which also included sex education, manual work, and the arts. Ferrer recognized the need for appropriate textbooks and began publishing them himself in 1902. The books were in great demand and came to be used in rationalist schools and *ateneos* throughout the country. In addition, the school building served as much more than a place for small children to go during the days—it was a library and community center for adolescents and adults, as well, offering classes, discussions, excursions, and the like for those of all ages who wished to learn.

While Ferrer’s name has come to be the one most prominently associated with the rationalist school movement, rationalist schools certainly pre-existed the *Escuela Moderna*, and hundreds were established throughout Spain in the early years of the twentieth century. Igualdad Ocana, together with her father and four brothers and sisters, started and taught in such a school in Barcelona in 1934-35. Her description of what it meant to teach children in a free and open environment can, perhaps, provide some sense of the ”modernity” of the ”modern school movement.”

”In our school, we tried to get a sense of each child’s particular nature or character. We would tell them a story. And through this story, they would reflect themselves... they cried and they laughed... we never had to yell at them. People talk about exercising ’authority.’ But what authority can they have if they don’t know how to control them with feeling, with love?... You can help little creatures to become active, productive people, productive in ways that are true to themselves, because you have studied them, seen what they enjoy... We taught mechanics, music, arts... We had mechanical toys, for example, to see whether, when he was playing with them, a particular child would awaken to a desire, a positive inclination to activity of that sort...”

Not surprisingly, given the type of attention they devoted to their students, teachers in rationalist schools were often revered, both by students and by other members of the community. They

functioned as powerful models, much as the "obreros conscientes" or traveling teacher/preachers had served for rural workers in 19th century Andalusia. Sara Berenguer (Guillen), who studied with Felix Carrasquer in the "Eliseo Reclus" school, Pura Perez, who studied with the noted Juan Puig Elias in the "Escuela Natura," and others I interviewed all vividly recalled their experiences with teachers they thought of with great respect. Igualdad Ocana reported that students she meets now, forty years later, still talk of their experiences in the school her family ran. And Ana Cases discovered, during the course of research she was doing in 1981, that many of those who had studied with Josep Torres (known as Sol de la Vida ) in Arbeca, a small village in Lerida, still had the notebooks and workbooks they had used in the 1920s.

Many young people who eventually became militants in the anarcho-sindicalist movement attended one or another of these schools; but attendance was clearly not limited to anarchists or anarchist-sympathizers alone. Since they offered an alternative to the highly rigid structures and rote-learning methods of the dominant school system, the schools attracted considerable numbers of children from the progressive middle and upper classes as well.

Aside from the somewhat formally structured rationalist schools, the anarchist and anarcho-sindicalist movement created and supported a large number of ateneos, or storefront cultural centers. Many neighborhood educational/cultural centers were started by CNT locals; almost every working-class barrio of Barcelona had one during the early years of the Republic. For those who had never been to school, the hundreds of ateneos which sprang up around the country offered a chance to learn to read and write. Most had classes during the day for young children, and in the evening (usually 7 to 9 pm) for older people, who would come after work. In the words of one participant,

"The education in the school was a totally different kind of education... Each person would talk about what he had read (which often varied a great deal, since sometimes we didn't understand what we were reading!); and then we would all talk about it, and think about what each had said... As far as I am concerned, the school and the books were probably the greatest factors shaping my development."

In addition to its importance as a place for learning basic skills and competencies, the ateneo had important social functions. Ateneos were popular "hangouts" for young people, particularly during times when they could not afford even the 10 centimos to go to a movie! Because they were at least formally separate from the unions, many were able to remain open during periods of political repressions, when unions were forced to close their doors and/or go underground. Consequently, they also served as important centers of communication.

Further, virtually all ateneos included theater, recreation, and—particularly for those in urban barrios—trips out of the city. In addition to offering opportunities for exercise and fresh air, these excursions were thought to provide moral and intellectual benefits—giving young people a chance to see, at first hand, the mountains, valleys, and rivers they might have learned about in classes; overcoming the narrowness of vision that comes from living in crowded urban environments; providing an occasion for them to experience "the influence of nature on the human spirit." Exposure to nature, one writer explained, will "allow young people to experience freedom, so that they will want to live it and defend it."

As community-based organizations, ateneos offered opportunities for preparation which were particularly important for working-class women, who had relatively fewer contexts than did men to gain such experiences. Those women who became activists in the CNT and/or in Mujeres Libres reported virtually unanimously that their experiences in ateneos, schools, and cultural

activities were crucial to that process. They learned to read and, equally important, developed meaningful peer relationships with boys of their age—an experience that was otherwise closed to them in the highly sex-segregated Spanish society. Through the ateneos many young people experienced that “cambio de mentalidad” (consciousness-change) which was a crucial step in their becoming militants in the movement.

”The building belonged to the union (textiles). The Escuela Libre (“Escuela Natura” of El Clot) was upstairs, and the sindicato and our group, I think, were downstairs... My sisters and I went to school at night (we couldn’t go during the day, because we had to work). And—remember this detail, because it’s important—in order to save money, the union had the women do the cleaning... Afterwards, there would be meetings of Sol y Vida (the cultural group)... True, people went to union meetings, but relations within the group were more intimate, the explanations more extensive. That’s where we were formed most deeply...”

In addition to the schools and cultural centers, the anarcho-syndicalist movement supported an enormous array of newspapers, magazines, and clubs which challenged conventional norms and provided channels for bringing alternative perspectives to a broader audience. Movement newspapers, *Solidaridad Obrera*, *CNT*, *Tierra y Libertad*, combined political commentary with extensive cultural criticism. Almost every issue had an article dealing with some aspect of education; and, in the years before and during the war, many carried articles devoted specifically to women. *Tierra y Libertad*, for example, published a “women’s page” each week, in which many of the women who were to be active in *Mujeres Libres* tested out ideas and had an opportunity to communicate with the larger anarcho-syndicalist community. Magazines such as *La Revista Blanca* (Barcelona), *Natura* (Barcelona), *Estudios* (Valencia), and *Tiempos Nuevos* carried both stories and informative articles on a range of issues from collectivist politics to birth control, nudism and vegetarianism.

Particularly for people who lived in places relatively isolated from organized anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist activity, the press provided important sources of information, and a “route in” to the anarchist community. Soledad Estorach, for example, who came to Barcelona at the age of 15, alone and isolated in her interest in what she termed “communism,” read *La Revista Blanca* and, through it, made her way to the ateneo

”I was reading newspapers and magazines and trying to find “communists.”... The first person I went to see, in fact, was Federica Montseny’s mother, Soledad Gustavo, because she was a woman! I didn’t know how to get in contact with these people. And I figured that those people who were writing about communism must, somehow... live differently. I had been reading *La Revista Blanca*, and I saw that this woman Soledad Gustavo wrote for them; so I went to the address given in the magazine and asked to see her. I was shown right in—I guess they thought I was a compañera. She received me without any understanding... I can’t even remember just what I asked her: probably, ‘How do I find people?’ And she said, ‘all you have to do is find an ateneo in your barrio,’ and she more-or-less threw me out... Anyway, I went to the ateneo. The first man I met there was Saavedra—the grandfather of Enriqueta and the others. He was very old even then. But I fell in love with him immediately... He showed me the library... I was entranced by all those books. I thought that all the world’s knowledge was now within my reach.”

## Education as Empowerment

For all that ateneos provided in the way of opportunities for young and old to learn to read and develop some "culture," probably their most important long-term effect was the creation of a community—a community of people who believed that they could effect change in the world. The network of friends and comrades established there provided participants important sources of both moral and material support through their years of struggle in the movement and during the Civil War. Men and women who had participated in these groups as boys and girls referred to their experience with words and expressions similar to those one might use to describe a lost love. Even those who had become most cynical, and/or isolated from the larger movement in the intervening years, spoke of those experiences with a near reverence. No doubt, their recollections have been romanticized over the years. But the experience of participating in these groups—groups in which people attempted to interact with one another as they hoped they would in the "anarchist paradise" they were struggling to create—had obviously marked them deeply.

For some of the girls, in particular, the experience of equality between men and women was especially energizing. It impelled considerable numbers of them to insist on their equality within the context of the larger movement. As Enriqueta Rovira noted, the ateneos provided both an incentive and a model for what was to be *Mujeres Libres*.

"I always felt strongly that women had to be emancipated. That our struggle was—and still is—more than just the struggle against capitalism... We used to talk about that a lot (in the ateneo), insisting that the struggle was not just in the factories, in the streets, or even in the ateneos. That it had to go into the house. The boys/men would sometimes laugh and make fun of us when we'd say those things. They said, it is the struggle of all of us, and we all should struggle together. But I would say, no, it's not just that. We want/need to express our own selves, to be who and what we are. We're not trying to take things away from you, but we need to develop ourselves, to demand our own rights."

Since the groups formed out of the ateneos were primarily young people's groups, they provided youth with opportunities to act at least somewhat independently of their parents—an almost unheard-of experience in Spain of that time. Even anarchist families had difficulty with the freedom their daughters asserted.

"We had to ask permission every week when we were going to go on these excursions. Don't think that just because our parents were libertarios that we were free to do as we pleased! No, none of that! Every week we had to ask. And if the answer to 'where are you going?' was something like 'camping,' then, whoa! None of that. No, there were lots of controls, even of our activities in the ateneo."

Azucena and Enriqueta, two sisters in a committed anarchist family, developed ways around their parents' efforts at control. Often, they put skirts on over their bermuda shorts, rode on their bikes until the edge of town where they would no longer be seen by adults, then removed the skirts and continued with the group to the mountains or the seashore!

In short, through both formal and informal institutions, Spanish libertarians created contexts for individual and communal empowerment, and facilitated the development of networks for people to learn and act together. As the memoirs and recollections of those who participated in these schools make clear, education was not simply preparation for revolution, it was a crucial aspect of the revolution itself.

## Back cover text

### The Modern School Movement

Inspired by the many reunions of former students and friends of the Ferrer Modern School of Stelton, New Jersey, this publication reflects the ideals and aims of libertarian education.

The idea for the Modern School Movement in America grew out of the Modern School Movement in Spain. Some two hundred modern schools were established in Spain. They provided a secular education in co-educational schools for the first time in centuries. These innovative schools helped break the log-jam of illiteracy that condemned more than fifty percent of the Spanish people to ignorance and a life of superstition and fear.

Francisco Ferrer y Guardia broke the shroud of fear and superstition by establishing the Modern School which, in a spirit of freedom, taught new generations of young people science, art, literature, and modern knowledge in many subjects. Juan Puig Elias made significant contributions to this movement.

These first-hand accounts of the memories of three children educated in the Modern Schools of Spain point to the similarity of spirit and goal between the Modern Schools of Spain and those in the United States.

Published by Friends of the Modern School

c/o Abe Bluestein, 55 Farrington Road, Croton-On-Hudson, NY 10520

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Abe Bluestein  
The Modern School Movement  
Historical and Personal Notes on the Ferrer Schools in Spain: Contributions by Pura Perez,  
Mario Jordana, Abel Paz, Martha Ackelsberg  
1990

Friends of the Modern School, Croton-On-Hudson, NY, 1990, 37pp. (scanned from original)

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)