The Modern School

by

Carl Zigrosser.

Ferrer Colony, Stelton N.J.

The FERRER MODERN SCHOOL

The past century has witnessed many struggles on the part of the workers to emancipate themselves from the evils of poverty and slavery which are the common lot of their class. It also has witnessed many failures, and with each failure has come a little clearer vision as to the wrongs from which they suffer, and the methods of relief. With this enlarged vision has come the recognition that if a race of really free people is to inhabit the earth it is necessary to practice freedom with children in order that they may grow up to be the free men and women of tomorrow. Habit and custom are among the strongest factors in the life of man, and as most men and women are trained from childhood to respect authority and all its privileges, it is inevitable that the accepted standards and privileges of one generation are passed on to the next with almost imperceptible modifications. It was with these ideas that Francisco Ferrer, the famous Spanish educator, started his Modern School at Barcelona, and it was with a clear recognition of the fact that those in control of the education of children control the mind of a nation and are able to keep intact the system of industrial and political slavery of modern society that the ruling class of Spain, acting through the government, put Ferrer to death on October 13, 1909, outside the fortress of Montjuich at Barcelona.

The legal murder of Ferrer, for such it is now almost universally admitted, was followed by a recrystalization of the question of libertarian education and its transcendent imporance to the working classes in their struggle for emancipation. Granted that there is a desire on the part of certain individuals or groups to change the relations of men and establish a new society through the agency of libertarian education, there are, as Ferrer put it, two methods open to work for the desired end. "To work for the transformation of the school by studying the child, so as to prove

scientifically that the present organization of education is defective, and to bring about progressive modification, or to found new schools in which shall be directly applied those principles corresponding directly to the ideal of society and of its units as held by those who eschew the conventionalities, prejudices, cruelties, trickeries and falsehoods upon which modern society is based." Ferrer chose the latter method upon the ground that "Governments have ever been careful to hold a high hand over the education of the people. They know better than anyone else, that their power is based almost entirely on the school. Hence they monopolize it more and more. The time is past when they opposed the diffusion of instruction and when they sought to restrain the education of the masses. These tactics were formerly possible, because the economic life of the nations allowed the prevalence of popular ignorance which rendered mastery easy. But circumstances have changed. The progress of sciences, discoveries of all kinds, have revolutionized the conditions of labor and production. It is no longer possible for a people to remain ignorant; it must be educated in order that the economic situation of one country may hold its own and make headway against the universal competition. In consequence, governments want education, they want a complete organization of the school, not because they hope for a renovation of society through education, but because they need individuals, workmen, perfected instruments of labor, to make their industrial enterprises and the capital employed in them profitable."

It was not an accident that in this country where, excepting pre-revolutionary Germany, whose system of education we copied, intellectual docility has reached a point where to be a college student is to be a potential scab against striking workingmen, that the death of Ferrer should be followed by a movement to establish Modern Schools along the lines of those at Barcelona; extremes ever and always meet. Passing from a series of protest meetings against the killing of Ferrer, an organization was formed in New York called the Francisco Ferrer Association, on June 10, 1910, as a memorial to Ferrer and to carry on his ideas of education. On January 1st of the following year, a permanent headquarters were opened at No. 6 St. Marks Place, which became at once classroom, committee-room, clubroom, lecture hall and library all in one. These activities were for adults only, but the Association moved to 104 E. 12th Street, on October 1st, and on the 13th, second anniversary of the death of Ferrer, a school for children was opened with one pupil; the number was soon increased to eight, at which point it remained more or less for a year.

The high rent downtown and a desire to be near Central Park where the children might find a more stimulating and creative atmosphere than is possible in the backyard of a slum dwelling such as the school was compelled to occupy, caused the Association to move to 63 E. 107th Street in October, 1912. With the slightly improved physical conditions the school grew until it had twenty-five pupils in daily attendance and, assisted by the adult classes in art, literature, sociology, languages, and its activities in classes in the general revolutionary movement, the Ferrer Association became known to an ever increasing number of people.

As time went on a feeling grew among some of the members that necessary as adult education was and is — and never for a moment have the men and women who have struggled to build up the school felt that the economic struggle should be slackened, on the contrary it should be stimulated—the two activities should be conducted separately and distinctly. So when a proposal was made in August, 1914, to found a colony and move the school to the country, it found many members receptive and ready for a change.

It was felt to be unfair to the children and harmful to their development as free spirits to grow up in an atmosphere of violent partisanship and fierce revolutionary ardor inevitable with men and women engaged in a daily struggle with the powers of darkness. We were not then and are not now neutral where liberty is violated and economic injustice prevails, but where children are concerned, less passion and calmer judgment should prevail, if we would have them grow into rational and liberty loving men and women.

The work of organizing the colony proceeded through the fall and winter of 1914 and 1915, and in May, 1915, the children's school was formally moved to its present location near the village of Stelton in the state of New Jersey about thirty miles from New York City. At first the colony land consisted of sixty-eight acres, an old farm house without modern conveniences, a barn and some old cow-sheds; the latter were soon torn down to make way for a dormitory to house the thirty children brought from the city. Nine acres of land and the buildings were set aside as a permanent home for the school; later more land was acquired and sold in one and two acre plots, as the first parcel had been, until the colony has in all 143 acres, twelve of which now belong

to the school, besides the buildings heretofore mentioned, a new school house and small farming equipment, consisting of several hundered chickens, cow and calf, and two acres of land under cultivation as a garden to raise vegetables for the children in the Living House of the school.

The Dormitory was built entirely on credit, as, when the children were taken to Stelton, there was hardy enough money to pay their railway fares, and the five and a half years at Stelton have been one long and continuous struggle against poverty. John Stuart Mill pointed out long ago that truth has no inherent quality that makes it superior to error, for men have died as valiantly for the one as for the other, and the success achieved at Stelton has been due solely to the zeal of those who have worked for the school. This zeal on ths part of the members of the Modern School Association and the fast growing recognition on the part of lovers of liberty that it is idle to expect free men and women to come out of institutions of learning saturated with the spirit of authority and an anti-social attitude which is destructive of all the finer instincts of the individual, has brought the school to its present position.

The child has as much right to itself as has the adult, and the personality of the child, during the sensitive and hazardous years of early youth, must be kept free from the intrusive hands of those who would mould and feshion it according to preconceived models, who would thwart this quality and divert that, in order to fit the child into the ideals of the teacher, that is, assuming the teacher has an ideal, which far too often he has not. Ambition he may have, but ideals are for the most part an obstacle in the path of material gain, and that is the aim and object of modern society.

To instil in the minds of children a slave morality which insists that there is but one way to achieve emancipation from the hardships of life, and that is to have someone else perform them, to practice a ruthless individualism and preach altruism, is the cynical attitude of most men and women of to-day. Mutual Aid and Solidarity have been practiced for ages by men and women, and none know their value more than the workers in the shop, the union or the radical club, yet every public school in the land ruthlessly suppresses these things in the individual pupil and punishes him if he tries to assist a comrade.

Education should be the great experiment of life, for nothing can surpass the joy of discovery through experience or personal observation. This is well-nigh impossible in schools conducted under religious or governmental auspices with their cut and dried rules and regulations that make teaching a drudgery and destroy all joy and initiative in the pupil. Over them hangs the pall of capitalist ethics; to maintain the status quo in social relations and hold out to the child the hope of material reward as a basis for its future action. All children are sensitive and impressionable, quick to observe and understand the relativity of theory and action, and the more sensitive the child the more quickly it sees that the ethics taught in the classroom bear no relation to the lives of those who advocate them. Children are not wood or stone where a piece of poor workmanship can be thrown aside without serious loss to the community; they are an aglomeration of nerves and sensations capable of good or evil according to the manner in which they are handled. The ruling classes know this, and, the time having passed when it pays to keep the masses in ignorance, they now use education as an instrument to mislead the masses and keep them in subjection. The fact that helpless children are used to further this aim is of no consequence, for every method and every tactic is legitimate with them if it helps to preserve and maintain their privileges. Once it was possible for the ruling class to disregard or ignore the people in making war; now they distort the issues and mislead the people while pretending to consult them. So with the school; here, while pretending to uplift the chidren, history is misrepresented and every child inspired with the spirit of the gambler by making it believe that equality of opportunity is the figment of a disordered brain, and life a tooth and claw fight where struggle is the order of the day. These are capitalist ethics, and it is this theory that dominates every public school in the land, either consciously or unconsciously. As this essay is being written, the great question of the day is a social theory commonly designated as Bolshevism. If education is, as we believe it to be, the great experiment, it follows that a fair and impartial presentation of this theory should be given to every school child seeking information on the subject. Not only has this not been done but the very nature of the public school makes it impossible; Bolshevism is a social theory diametrically opposed to the existing order, and as schools are the reflection of the ruling classes, not only is this theory not presented impartially; it is misrepresented or forbidden, and the teacher who attempts to present it in the light of his or her understanding and not as he or she is told, is dismissed from the service and branded as "un-American" and an enemy of the social order.

The trustees and teachers at Stelton make no attempt to instill the principles of Bolshevism into the minds of children entrusted to their care any more than they seek to instill the principles of patriotism, for two very distinct and logical reasons. First of all, the ages of the children vary from five to thirteen, and to dogmatize with them as to the best social system would be a violation of the freedom of the child as well as of common sense; and, second, the trustees and teachers realize that social systems are dynamic and fluid, not static, and to assert that this or that system is the last word on the subject is an act of stupidity they decline to commit.

The members of the Modern School Association came to Stelton five and a half years ago with plenty of good will, but very little experience in education. They know many things now that were unknown to them when they came, and they are conscious of the fact that they have many things yet to learn. They have disclaimed at all times that they were academicians, or were trying to establish a new system of pedagogy; all they have ever claimed was that they were trying to apply the principles of liberty to education. Holding classes in private houses, the old barn, and, during the summer, in the open air, the chilhren who have stayed with us have grown and prospered so that, when they left us to go to High School and had to stand a test with children of the regular public school, they have shown themselves to be far in advance of those children. Looking back over the nine years of the school's existence it is possible to say that some things have been accomplished, and that those things have been appreciated is shown by the support accorded the school so that today a twelve thousand dollar school house adorns the Ferrer Colony and stands as a monument to the principles of libertarian education.

To create for our children an atmosphere of love, liberty and solidarity, and make them feel that the world can be made a worth while place to live in, and that the esteem of one's fellows is more important than heaping up wealth and bitterness; that in a world peopled with free men and women insisting at all times on their right to live and to be themselves, makes for the highest form of social organization. This is our object, this is our aim. It is not pretended that a school with sixty pupils can revolutionize education and change the economic and political conditions of its times, but the members of the Modern School Association at Stelton are pioneers and as such have blazed a trail to be followed and broadened by those who come after them. For

generations children have been raised in "our image" and for generations poverty and misery have been the common lot of the mass of men. It is time that those who toil should realize that social systems are not changed over night. And, as each new generation overlaps the old, more attention must be paid to children or they will neutralize most of the work done by the parents when they grow up and go out into the world. The organization of trade unions to protect the interests of man as a producer, and of co-operative societies to protect his interests as a consumer, are being more and more recognized as foundation stones of the new social order. With those two ideas is slowly rising that of libertarian schools for children; schools where the principles of liberty, solidarity and the dignity of labor in its truest sense will be taught and lived, and when that time comes, labor will be invincible.

To this end the delegates to the Second Annual Convention of the Modern School Association of N. A. held at Stelon on Labor Day, 1919, decided to appeal to organized labor to help them build the school there and to spread the principles of libertarian education among their members. The appeal has been answered in part and we are encouraged to believe it will be answered still further as time goes on, for the workers realize more and more that the school as at present organized is being used to undo the work they are doing. We are aware that the realization of these plans will be difficult, but as Ferrer said more than a decade ago, "we want to begin, convinced that we shall be aided in our task by those who are everywhere struggling for human liberation from dogmas and conventions which assure the support of the present iniquitous social organization."

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