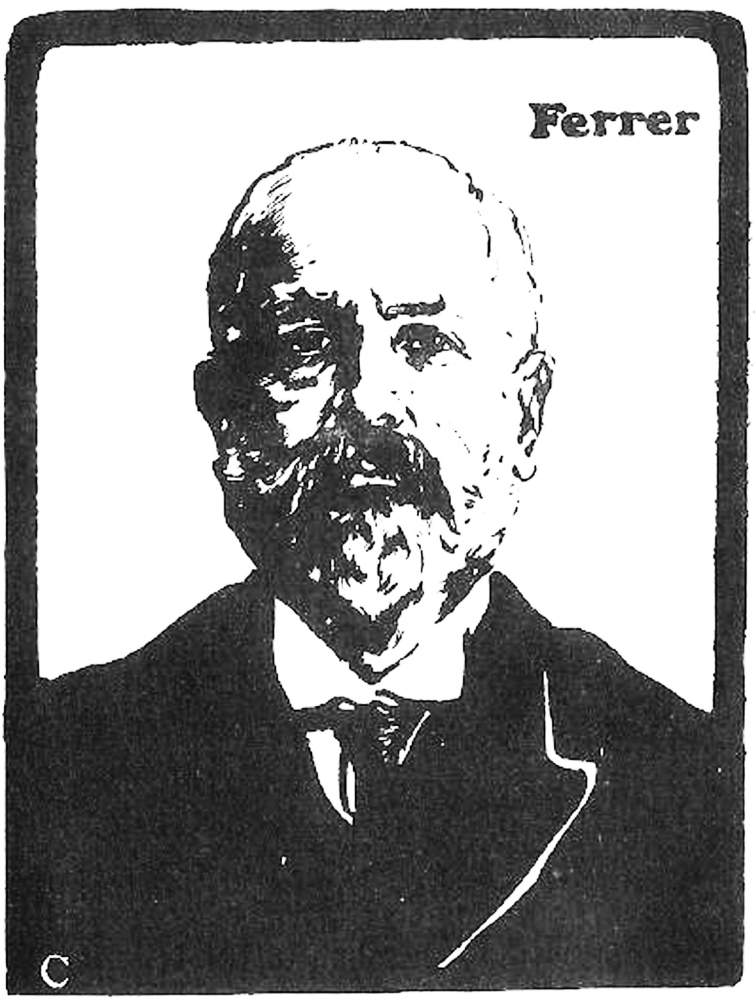
THE MODERN SCHOOL

By FRANCISCO FERRER



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WHAT I BELIEVE

BY EMMA GOLDMAN

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The Modern School

TO those who wish to renovate the education of children two methods are open: 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.

The first method certainly offers great advantages. It corresponds to that evolutionary conception which all men of science defend, and which alone, according to them, can succeed.

In theory they are right, and we are quite ready to recognize it.

It is evident that experiments in psychology and physiology must lead to important changes in matters of education: that teachers, being better able to understand the child, will know better how to adapt their instruction to natural laws. I even grant that such evolution will be in the direction of liberty, for I am convinced that constraint arises only from ignorance, and that the educator who is really worthy of the name will obtain his results through the spontaneous response of the child, whose desires he will learn to know, and whose development he will try to further by giving it every possible gratification.

But in reality, I do not believe that those who struggle for human emancipation can expect much from this method. 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, that ignorance which renders mastery easy. But circumstances have changed. The progress of science, 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 more and more complete organization of the school, not because they hope for the 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. And we have seen the most reactionary governments follow this movement; they have realized perfectly that their former tactics were becoming dangerous to the economic life of the nations, and that it is necessary to adapt popular education to new necessities.

But it would be a great mistake to suppose that the directors have not foreseen the dangers which the intelligent development of the people might create for them, and that it was necessary for them to change their methods of keeping the mastery. These methods have likewise been adopted to the new conditions of life, and they have labored to keep a hold over the evolution of ideas. At the same time that they seek to preserve the beliefs upon which social discipline was formerly based, they have sought to give to conceptions born of scientific effort a signification which could do no harm to established institutions. And to that end they took possession of the school. They who formerly left the priests in charge of the education of the people, because the priests were perfectly suited to the task, their instruction being at the service of authority, now took up everywhere the direction of scholarly education.

The danger, for them, lay in the awakening of human intelligence to the new outlook on life; the awakening, in the depths of men's consciousness, of a will towards emancipation. It would have been foolish to combat the evolving forces; they had to be driven into channels. That is the reason why, far from adhering to the old procedures of government, they adopted new ones, and evidently efficacious ones. It did not require great genius to find this solution; the simple pressure of facts led the men in power to understand what they must oppose to the apparent perils.

They founded schools, labored to spread education on all sides, and if there were those among them who at

first resisted this impulse—for its diverse tendencies favored certain antagonistic political parties—all soon understood that it was better to yield to it, and that the best tactics were to assure the defense of their interests and their principles by new means. Forthwith began terrible struggles for the conquest of the school; in every country these struggles are still continuing with intensity; here, bourgeois republican society triumphs; there, clericalism. All sides know the importance of the game, and recoil at no sacrifice to secure a victory. Everyone's cry is: "For and by the School." And the good people ought to be touched by so much solicitude! Everybody thirsts for their elevation by education, and, consequently, for their—happiness! Formerly some could say: "These others want to keep you in ignorance that they may the better exploit you: we want to see you educated and free." Now that is no longer possible; they have built schools on every corner, for every sort of instruction.

It is in this unanimous change of ideas among the ruling classes in respect to the school, that I find reason to be suspicious of their good-will, and the explanation of the facts which actuate my doubts as to the efficacy of the methods of renovation which certain reformers want to put in operation. These reformers are, moreover, very indifferent, generally speaking, to the social significance of education; they are men very ardent in the search of scientific truth, but who avoid all questions foreign to the object of their studies. They study patiently to know the child, and will some day tell us—their science is young yet—what methods of education are most suitable for its integral development.

Now this, in some sort, professional indifference is very prejudicial, I think, to the cause they intend to serve. I do not mean to say that they are unconscious of the realities of the social environment, and I know that they expect the best results for the general welfare from their task. They say: In trying to discover the secrets of the life of the human being, in seeking the processes of its normal physical and psychic development, we give education a form which can not but be favorable to the liberation of energies. We do not wish to devote our attention directly to the liberation of the school: as savants moreover we cannot, for we are not yet able exactly to define what is to be done. We shall proceed by slow degrees, convinced that the school will be transformed just in proportion to our discoveries, by the force of events

themselves. If you ask us what are our hopes for mankind, we agree with you in foreseeing an evolution in the direction of a wide emancipation of the child and of humanity through science; but in that case again we are persuaded that our work must be directed entirely toward that end, and will attain it by the most rapid and direct course.

This reasoning is apparently logical, and no one would dare to contradict it. And yet it is mixed considerably with illusion. Yes, if the governing powers had, as men, the same ideas as benevolent reformers, if they were really concerned for the continuous reorganization of society in the sense of the progressive disappearance of slavery, we might admit that scientific effort alone would improve the destiny of nations. But we should reckon without our host. We know too well that those who dispute for power, have in view nothing but the defense of their own interests; that they busy themselves only with conquering what they want for themselves, for the satisfaction of their appetites. Long ago we ceased to believe in the words with which they mask their ambitions. Certain naïve persons still refuse to believe that there is not among them, all the same, some little sincerity, and imagine that they, too, sometimes desire the happiness of their fellows. But these become fewer and fewer, and the positivism of the century has become far too cruel for us to deceive ourselves longer as to the intentions of those who govern us.

Just as they know how to get out of the difficulty, when the necessity for education became evident, in such a way as to prevent that education from becoming a danger, just so they will know how to organize the school in accordance with the new discoveries of science, that nothing may endanger their supremacy. These are ideas which are certainly not received without difficulty; but when one has seen, from close by, what takes place and how things are in reality arranged, one can no longer be caught by the whistling of words.

Oh, what have people not expected, what do they not expect still, from education! The majority of progressive men expect everything from it, and it is only in these later days that some begin to understand that it offers nothing but illusions. We perceive the utter uselessness of this learning, acquired in the schools by the systems of education at present in practice; we see that we expected and hoped in vain. It is because the organization

of the school, far from spreading the ideal which we imagined, has made education the most powerful means of enslavement in the hands of the governing powers to-day. Their teachers are only the conscious or unconscious instruments of these powers, modeled moreover according to their principles; they have from their youth up, and more than any one else, been subjected to the discipline of their authority; few indeed are those who have escaped the influence of this domination; and these remain powerless, because the school organization constrains them so strongly that they cannot but obey it. It is not my purpose here to examine the nature of this organization. It is sufficiently well known for me to characterize it in one word: *constraint.* The school imprisons children physically, intellectually, and morally, in order to direct the development of their faculties in the paths desired. It deprives them of contact with nature, in order to model them after its own pattern. And this is the explanation of all which I have here set forth: The care which governments have taken to direct the education of the people, and the bankruptcy of the hopes of believers in liberty. The education of to-day is nothing more than drill. I refuse to believe that the systems employed have been combined with any exact design for bringing about the results desired. That would suppose genius. But things take place precisely as if this education responded to some vast entire conception in a manner really remarkable. It could not have been better done. What accomplished it, was simply that the leading inspiration was the principle of discipline and of authority which guides social organizers at all times. They have but one clearly defined idea, one will, viz.: Children must be accustomed to obey, to believe, to think, according to the social dogmas which govern us. Hence, education cannot be other than what it is to-day. It is not a matter of seconding the spontaneous development of the faculties of the child, of leaving it free to satisfy its physical, intellectual, and moral needs; it is a matter of imposing ready-made ideas upon it; a matter even of preventing it from ever thinking otherwise than is willed for the maintenance of the institutions of this society; it is a matter of making it an individual strictly adapted to the social mechanism.

No one should be astonished that such an education has this evil influence upon human emancipation. I repeat, it is but a means of domination in the hands of the

governing powers. They have never wanted the uplift of the individual, but his enslavement; and it is perfectly useless to hope anything from the school of to-day.

Now, what has been resulting up until to-day will continue to result in the future. There is no reason for governments to change their system. They have succeeded in making education serve their advantage; they will likewise know how to make use of any improvements that may be proposed to their advantage.

It is sufficient that they maintain the spirit of the school, the authoritarian discipline which reigns therein, for all innovations to be turned to their profit. And they will watch their opportunity; be sure of that.

I would like to call the attention of my readers to this idea: All the value of education rests in respect for the physical, intellectual, and moral will of the child. Just as in science no demonstration is possible save by facts, just so there is no real education save that which is exempt from all dogmatism, which leaves to the child itself the direction of its effort, and confines itself to the seconding of that effort. Now there is nothing easier than to alter this purpose, and nothing harder than to respect it. Education is always imposing, violating, constraining; the real educator is he who can best protect the child against his (the teacher's) own ideas, his peculiar whims; he who can best appeal to the child's own energies.

One may judge by this with what ease education receives the stamp they wish to put upon it, and how easy is the task of those who wish to enslave the individual. The best of methods become in their hands only the more powerful and perfect instruments of domination. Our own ideal is certainly that of science, and we demand that we be given the power to educate the child by favoring its development through the satisfaction of all its needs, in proportion as these arise and grow.

We are convinced that the education of the future will be of an entirely spontaneous nature; certainly we cannot as yet realize it, but the evolution of methods in the direction of a wider comprehension of the phenomena of life, and the fact that all advances toward perfection mean the overcoming of some constraint,—all this indicates that we are in the right when we hope for the deliverance of the child through science.

Is this the ideal of those who control the present school organization? Is this what they, too, want to realize? And they, too, do they aspire to overcome restraint? Not

at all. They will employ the newest and most effective means to the same end as now, that is to say, the formation of beings who will accept all the conventions, all the prejudices, all the lies upon which society is founded.

Let us not fear to say that we want men capable of evolving without stopping, capable of destroying and renewing their environments without cessation, of renewing themselves also; men whose intellectual independence will be their greatest force, who will attach themselves to nothing, always ready to accept what is best, happy in the triumph of new ideas, aspiring to live multiple lives in one life. Society fears such men; we therefore must not hope that it will ever want an education able to give them to us.

* * *

What, then, is our own mission? What method are we going to choose to contribute to the renovation of the school?

We shall follow the labors of the scientists who study the child with the greatest attention, and we shall eagerly seek for means of applying their experience to the education we wish to build up, in the direction of an ever fuller liberation of the individual. But how can we attain our end? Shall it not be by putting ourselves directly to the work favoring the foundation of new schools, which shall be ruled as much as possible by this spirit of liberty, which we forefeel will dominate the entire work of education in the future?

A trial has been made which, for the present, has already given excellent results. We can destroy all which in the present school answers to the organization of constraint, the artificial surroundings by which the children are separated from nature and life, the intellectual and moral discipline made use of to impose ready-made ideas upon them, beliefs which deprave and annihilate natural bent. Without fear of deceiving ourselves, we can restore the child to the environment which entices it, the environment of nature in which he will be in contact with all that he loves, and in which impressions of life will replace fastidious book-learning. If we did no more than that, we should already have prepared in great part the deliverance of the child.

In such conditions we might already freely apply the data of science, and labor most fruitfully.

I know very well that we could not thus realize all our

hopes, that we should often be forced, for lack of knowledge, to employ undesirable methods; but a certitude would sustain us in our effort, namely, that even without reaching our aim completely we should do more and better in our still imperfect work than the present school accomplishes. I like the free spontaneity of a child who knows nothing, better than the world-knowledge and intellectual deformity of a child who has been subjected to our present education.

What we have attempted at Barcelona, others have attempted elsewhere, and we have all seen that the work is possible. And I think it should be begun without delay. We should not wait until the study of the child has been completed, before undertaking the renovation of the school; if we must wait for that, we shall never do anything. We will apply what we do know, and, progressively, all that we shall learn. Already, a complete plan of rational education is possible, and, in such schools as we conceive, children may develop, happy and free, according to their natural tendencies. We shall labor to perfect and extend it.

Moreover, as soon as circumstances permit, we shall take up again the work begun in Barcelona, we shall rebuild the schools destroyed by our adversaries. In the meantime, we shall labor to found a normal school in Barcelona, for the training of teachers destined to second us later; we shall create a library of the modern school, in which such books will be published as will serve for the education of the educators, as well as for that of the children. We shall also found a pedagogic museum, containing a collection of all the necessary materials for a renovated school.

Such are our plans. We are aware that their realization will be difficult. But 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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In his early life he was an active military revolutionist, but in later years he became a Freemason and saw that triumphant revolutionists often became greater oppressors than the powers they overthrew. Hence, he turned his attention to the education of the young as being a more practical, though slower, method of bringing about beneficial changes in the government of his native land.

With this in mind, he wrote many small books and pamphlets and organized a propaganda of what he called **"A Modern School."** One of his most important pamphlets is named **"The Modern School."** It consists of twelve pages.

I enclose you a copy of it for your examination, and I may say that I have 600 copies for free distribution among the readers of **The Jeffersonian.** Any reader of your paper, therefore, who writes to me and requests a copy shall receive one—as far as they go.

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