

Francisco Ferrer i Guardia and Modern Education

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(translated by Paul Sharkey)

The Catalan anarchist, shot on 13 October 1909, was accused of having led the popular uprising of Tragic Week in Barcelona, an event in which he had not participated. He was the scapegoat chosen by the oligarchy and Church

Francisco Ferrer Guardia never led any popular uprising, including that which took place in Barcelona on 26 July 1909, the one that has gone down in history as Tragic Week, even though a court martial, operating without regard to rights under the law, sentenced him to death as the “author and leader of the rebellion”. In fact, those who stood Ferrer Guardia before a firing squad on 13 October that year were taking revenge on a secular intellectual, a revolutionary educationist who had defied the church’s control of education.

As writer Anatole France pronounced: “His crime was founding schools.” The shooting of Ferrer, which had a considerable impact around the globe, opened up a wide-ranging debate about the man and his intellectual merits. To some he was an anti-clerical fanatic and so-so teacher; to others he was an innovator and secular martyr. One hundred years on and even although the squabbles still rage it is possible to evaluate the man.

Urban Catalonia in the first decade of the 20th century was a teeming cauldron of several traditions – anarchist, federalist, anti-clericalism and anti-centralism. Fresh forms of collective action were emerging, spear-headed by a new populist radical republicanism led by the overpowering Alejandro Lerroux who got the workers to vote republican and who operated as an anti-Catalanist powerhouse in the very heart of Catalonia.

Workers’ *ateneos*, cooperatives, newspapers and secular schools flourished as manifestations of a popular culture that essentially targeted the clergy and the oligarchy, in which such republicanism and the labour movement (be it socialist or anarchist) joined forces. This was also the backdrop to the emergence in 1907, at the instigation of socialists, albeit with a substantial input from anarchists, of Solidaridad Obrera, the forerunner of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) which would be launched three years later. Not to mention the anti-militarist sentiments of much of

the population, fuelled above all by the Disaster of 1898 and the retention of unfair recruiting practices. All of this and much more besides culminated in The Tragic Week and virtually all of the paths that led there had been trodden in one way or another by Francisco Ferrer Guardia.

Born into a peasant family in Alella (Barcelona) on 10 January 1859, his interest in education was first awakened in Paris where he lived in exile after being implicated in a number of republican plots over the last 15 years of the 19th century. Secular or – as the bishop of Barcelona was describing them in a circular published in 1881, “atheist” schools were regarded by anarchists as avenues to proletarian emancipation and they had a sizable foothold in Catalonia even prior to 1901 when Ferrer Guardia came back from Paris and opened a Modern School in the Catalan capital. This educational experiment, which subsequently spread to several dozen locations in the province and elsewhere in Spain such as Valencia or Zaragoza were later, especially after the execution of their founder, credited with all round excellence as libertarian education, a radical and novel alternative to the Catholic Church’s control and monopoly over education. In Ferrer’s own words, they would look to reason and science for the “antidotes to all dogma.”

Such education would be free, rational and secular, rounded and egalitarian. Ferrer took the traditional precepts of modern education as enunciated by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century, with its sights set on authority and religious outlooks, and tailored them to the revolutionary message that anarchists and freethinkers were then peddling to the new social strata thrown up by industrialisation and urban expansion. With this programme, which included the practice of coeducation of the sexes “let humanity, male and female, mingle from childhood onwards”. It was scarcely surprising that the Catholic Church and ‘respectable folk’ should have bitten back. As Alvarez Junco argued a few years ago, Ferrer’s educational endeavours need to be assessed in the light of the dire educational situation in place in Spain at the time and of the obstacles which the Church and other important pressure groups placed in the way of any attempted overhaul, be it radical, such as Ferrer’s or more moderate like the efforts of the Free Educational Institute. Authoritarians and churchmen strove to apply the brakes to the influence that these new secular intellectuals were exercising over the populace and they selected Francisco Ferrer as the scapegoat in an object-lesson that had the support of many.

Quite apart from any apologia for or denigration of his activities and person, Francisco Ferrer Guardia's main contribution is that of a leading propagandist of modern education — and not merely libertarian education. It might not matter that much whether his personal ethics matched what he preached, even though his death cannot be dissociated either from certain other aspects of his endeavours as a theorist of revolution. Take his remarkable fortune, a real rarity among Spanish revolutionaries, bequeathed to him by his disciple in Paris, Ernestine Meunier, a fortune he used to fund things as varied as the bomb that Mateo Morral threw at the royal carriage on the wedding day of Alfonso XIII and Victoria Eugene on 31 May 1906, Lerroux's politicking or newspapers and workers' clubs.

With many other republicans, publicists and intellectuals well-disposed towards anarchism, Ferrer shared the belief that the labour movement, social issues and anti-clericalism were the banners under which the fight should be carried to the oligarchy and its political bossism.

No matter how much of a libertine, anarchist or anti-clerical he may have been, or seemed to be, the sentencing to death and execution of Ferrer Guardia on charges of triggering and directing a revolt in which he had not even taken part was made possible by the utter absence of constitutional rights ensured by courts martial and the machinery of repression imposition of a state of emergency in Spain.

The strike and uprising of Tragic Week (Monday 26 July to 2 August 1909) left not only 80 religious buildings torched but cost the lives of 104 compatriots and saw eight Guards wounded. Around 2,000 people found themselves arrested of which 600 would be convicted, 59 of them sentenced to life imprisonment and 17 to death, of whom only 5 were actually executed. José Miquel Baró, the only one of these who had had anything to do with leading the popular uprising was the first cut down on 17 August in the moat of Montjuich castle. The last of the 5 was Francisco Ferrer Guardia, on 13 October. Just before the officer barked the order to open fire Ferrer called out "Long live the Modern School!"

There was significant fall-out from Tragic Week. Premier Antonio Maura lost the king's trust and his political career was finished. The Church was reinforced in its ultra-reactionary stance, whilst the Army persisted with its disastrous Moroccan venture which was to have such an impact on Spanish history over the following two decades. The socialists and the republi-

cans emerged from their isolation, embarking upon a “fellow-travelling” strategy that took Pablo Iglesias into the Congress of Deputies. And anarchists finally made syndicalism the focus of their activities, launching the CNT, an organisation which in Catalonia very soon became the labour movement’s identifying feature.

Outside Spain, there were mass protests in Brussels, Paris or Rome against this “lawful murder” and its sponsorship by “a murderous clericalism and its militarist allies” in a resurrection of the Inquisition. “Founding schools was his crime” the French writer Anatole France pronounced. “Free schools”, as Ferrer had written, where the children would investigate “the underlying causes of popular ignorance” and become acquainted with “the origins of all of the conventions that sustain the current dog-eat-dog regime”. In the Spain of 1909 that was asking too much. Even the Republic, two decades on, never succeeded in pulling that off, which underlines the rawness of the conflict surrounding education and the creation of a secular State.

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