

# The spatiality of geography teaching and cultures of alternative education: the ‘intuitive geographies’ of the anarchist school in Cempuis (1880–1894)

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## Abstract

As part of current studies focusing on geographies of education and spatiality of teaching and learning, this article addresses the didactic experiences of historical anarchist schools, which opened in several countries at the end of the 19th century. The article deals especially with the example of the Cempuis School (1880–1894) in France, which was run by the anarchist activist and teacher Paul Robin. The aim here is twofold. First, the article clarifies the function of space and spatiality in the teaching and learning practices of the anarchist schools, at least according to the available sources; second, it reconstructs the international cultural transfer, still little known, of the geographical knowledge produced by scholars like Reclus and Kropotkin in the field of educational practices. Finally, the article hopes to contribute to the understanding of spatial educational practices in current alternative, democratic and radical schools.

## Keywords

anarchist education, cultural transfer, geographies of education, geography and anarchism, spatiality of teaching and learning

## Introduction: spaces of alternative education

This article addresses the spaces of teaching and learning within the experiences of the schools that took part in the anarchist education movement, often called ‘Modern schools’ or ‘Ferrer Schools’, which opened in the late 19th century in several countries of Europe,<sup>1</sup> North America<sup>2</sup> and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> If the most famous example of this movement was the Barcelona Modern School (1901–1906), run by

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Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859–1909), a teacher and activist who was murdered by the Spanish state under the pretext of his supposed participation in the 1909 anti-colonialist riots in Barcelona,<sup>4</sup> the truly pioneering one was undoubtedly the orphanage of the town of Cempuis in Northern France, which was directed from 1880 to 1894 by Paul Robin.<sup>5</sup>

To discuss this subject, I draw on the international literature that posits spaces and geographies of education as constitutive elements of learning, teaching and playing practices from the level of primary school, as well as of their social contexts.<sup>6</sup> These studies argue that

geographies of education and learning need to examine the historical and contemporary policies of education . . . This requires that we look into different education and learning spaces, and examine the links between these and other facets of life in diverse (and interrelated) local, national and transnational contexts.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of socio-spatial contexts and childhood practices in which the ‘social geographical importance of schools extends well beyond their physical boundaries’<sup>8</sup> is also stated by these authors when they consider that

rather than relying on adultist formulations which cast young people as the objects of education, geographies of education which draw on insights from social-cultural work on children, youth and families will need to focus on the voices and subjectivities of young people.<sup>9</sup>

The case study that I have chosen for this article contains an early affirmation of these principles in terms of a child-oriented pedagogy.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, I engage with Peter Kraftl’s works addressing the spaces of teaching and learning as subjects having an agency in building practices for ‘alternative’, ‘democratic’ or ‘radical’ education, and I assume the author’s statement that ‘space does not refer simply to the physical spaces in which learning happens, but to spatialities, that combine materials, interpersonal relationships, feelings, habits, practicalities, policies and more-than-social-processes’.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, according to Kraftl, several present alternative schools consider outdoor activities as very important moments for making children ‘able to flow freely between indoor and outdoor learning environments’.<sup>12</sup> On the side of mainstream education, a French-speaking literature addresses the question of classroom spaces as a mechanism by which authoritarian social and educational practices take place.<sup>13</sup>

Early experiments of anarchist education are rarely addressed in recent English-speaking literature, excluding the better known experience of Summerhill.<sup>14</sup> Authors like Farhag Rouhani argue that ‘anarchist perspectives on education [have] been ignored within the domain of critical pedagogies’.<sup>15</sup> This article is a contribution for further exploration, from historical experiences, of anarchist and libertarian spaces for teaching and learning.

On a methodological standpoint, I mobilise simultaneously the conceptual tools of cultural history and history of education, analysing a corpus of primary sources produced by the Cempuis School in the context of the pedagogies of that time and of cultural and historical geography to understand the role of spaces and places in the Cempuis School’s practices, with a special focus on the teaching of geography. For this task, I draw on the Sarah Mills’ discussion on the use of archives for historical research in children’s geographies, namely, where the author argues that ‘thinking about historical research can challenge children’s geographies to consider other types of encounter from that of the (embodied) encounter between a researcher and a child’.<sup>16</sup> Even if the corpus which I address is a rather traditional one, essentially constituted by correspondences, bulletins and reports where children were anonymised, I engage with the ethical questions discussed by Mills about the ‘politics of archive’,<sup>17</sup> by considering that a great part of the materials which I analyse

were conceived for propaganda aims. This furnishes an interpretation key on the militant and public dimension of the Cempuis School, namely, if we recognise, following an established literature, that archives are not only bulks of sources but also research objects in themselves.<sup>18</sup>

My main argument is that early anarchist education had its own spatiality, largely based on outdoor practices and in unconstrained open-air activities, and inspired by the idea that the best way to help free individuals in their growing is to encourage their direct approach to both social and natural environments. This owed, on the one hand, to the tradition of Pestalozzi and Fröbel, which was introduced into French-speaking countries by James Guillaume, Ferdinand Buisson and others,<sup>19</sup> and, on the other, to the works by the anarchist geographers Charles Perron, Elisée Reclus and Pyotr Kropotkin, who called for the implementation of freer methods in geographical teaching and proposed a different approach to maps and textbooks. The present article also aims to contribute to the recent international literature which has rediscovered the historical and epistemological links between anarchism and geography, by stressing the central role that education played in the development of this relation.<sup>20</sup>

In the first part of my article, I address the historical educational context in which the Cempuis School was founded; in the second part, I analyse the spaces of learning at the Cempuis School, based on external activities and pedagogical walks and trips. In the third part, I explore the specific teaching of 'intuitive' geography at Cempuis, considering as well the examples of its closest avatars, namely, the Barcelona Modern School (1901-1906) and Lausanne's Ferrer School (1909-1919). I conclude by arguing for the importance of this case to present debates on cultural and educational geographies.

### **Geography, intuitive method and 'integral education'**

The first educational ideas of European anarchists were inspired by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), the first person to even declare himself an anarchist.<sup>21</sup> These anarchist ideas sprang from Proudhon's proposal of a 'polytechnic education', a concept that was meant to build a specific form of knowledge for the working class, one which was not limited to 'high culture' but which integrated technical and intellectual capacities to improve the process of social emancipation. Proudhon's set of ideas on education was then reinterpreted by Paul Robin, under the label of 'integral education'.<sup>22</sup> A teacher and political exile under the Second Empire (1851-1870), Paul Robin (1837-1912) was later part of the networks of Internationalists in French-speaking Switzerland, together with Charles Perron (1837-1909), the future anarchist geographer who was to work alongside Elisée Reclus.<sup>23</sup> Perron and Robin were the first, within the First International (the IWA - International Workingmen's Association), to emphasise education as a priority field in the struggle for social emancipation.<sup>24</sup>

In subsequent years, Robin participated in the network of another French exile he met in Switzerland, Ferdinand Buisson (1841-1932), close to the left-libertarian wing of the 1871 Paris Commune,<sup>25</sup> who later assumed institutional responsibilities under the Third Republic (1870-1940) and became director of the department of public instruction, in collaboration with the Republican minister Jules Ferry (1832-1893). In this role, he served as the editor of the mammoth *Dictionary of Primary Education*,<sup>26</sup> considered the symbol of the secularisation and democratisation of the French school system, which was realised in the following decades by left-republican governments.<sup>27</sup>

Buisson involved in his enterprise anarchists like Robin and the Swiss polymath James Guillaume (1844-1916), who saw the idea of working to build the French system of public education in the name of the shared principles of popular and secular education as consistent with their