Setting the stage: the Ferrer play of 1909

In the last days of October 1909, a play celebrating the life and work of Francisco Ferrer was performed in Beirut. A Spanish social and political activist whose ideas combined elements of anarchism and socialism, Ferrer had been executed three days earlier. A pedagogue, he had created a modern curriculum and established modern schools in Barcelona based on the principle of “class harmony,” a project very similar to the ideas behind the popular universities that appeared in France and Italy at the same time. Ferrer’s ideas enjoyed tremendous popularity throughout the world, both in terms of his pedagogy and his ideology, which combined freemasonry, freethinking, a strong class consciousness, anarchism, and anticlericalism. He became an icon of the world’s leftist movements in 1909, when he was falsely accused by the Spanish church and condemned to death for his alleged involvement in an anarchist “terrorist” attack. His trial and conviction triggered demonstrations and protests throughout the world, from Italy to Argentina.

In Beirut, the project of a play commemorating Ferrer’s life and condemning his death was improvised on the spot. Written in four hours by Daud Muja’is and Emile Khuri, the script was promptly memorized by

2 The first school established by Francisco Ferrer opened in Barcelona in 1901.
the actors. Remarkably, the cast consisted of 60 people, most of whom must have been non-professional actors recruited locally. The leading role, however, was played by ‘Aziz ‘Eid, a well-known Syrian actor based in Egypt who had a predilection for controversial roles. The play, which Muja‘is proudly branded the first of its kind throughout the world, was performed by Jam‘iyyat Ihyâ‘ al-Tamthil al-‘Arabî on the stage of the New Theater. According to the organizers,

it was greatly appreciated by the people who filled its seats…the history of the last Spanish revolution was acted and that of the martyr Ferrer, his imprisonment and condemnation, with an explanation of his principles and those of true socialism…the play was written by two local authors so that it serve as a school for the people (al-sha‘b) who still ignore everything about the principle of general freedom (hurriyya ‘umûmiyya), and of general brotherhood.

In the first act of the play, “Ferrer” appeared on stage draped in a banner covered with slogans (“Liberty, Fraternity, Equality,” “No poor man ever hungered without a rich man profiting from it,” and “Long live the free popular schools”). During that act, “Ferrer” gave a speech on socialism (khutba ishtirâkiyya) that lasted around ten pages, while “the people” on stage “kept interrupting him with screams of excitement…asking for freedom and justice, and protesting against the Marrakech campaign.” At one point, the battle between the “soldiers” and “the people” on stage became so heated that some actors were slightly injured.

Public intellectuals gave speeches during intermission and after the play. The poet Shibli Mallat, owner of al-Watâ‘an newspaper, recited a poem entitled “The Eternity of Ferrer” (“Khulûd Freira”); Felix Faris, owner of Lisân al-Ittihâd and a well-known member of the Committee of Union and Progress’s local branch, explained what socialism was.

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6 For more information on ‘Aziz ‘Eid, see Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, “Theater and Radical Politics in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria, 1860–1914,” CCAS Occasional Papers (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Fall 2006).

7 This was highly unlikely; in fact, there was a “Ferrer” play performed at Gaité Montparnasse in Paris in October 1909, and there were probably quite a few performances in Spain, Italy, and South America that preceded the Beiruti play. See Bianco, L’Affaire Ferrer, 20.

8 “Masrahiyyat Francisco Ferrer.”

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 254. The “Marrakech campaign” referred to the Spanish-Moroccan war launched by Spain in 1908 and against which there had been many demonstrations in Spain in July 1908.

11 All seem to have been in fushâ rather than colloquial Arabic.