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JOSÉ PEDRO VARELA

(1845–79)

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In the beginning was democracy

In 1830, the Eastern Republic of Uruguay adopted its first Constitution as an independent country. Starting from that year, there were three constitutional presidencies, notwithstanding the disturbances they had to face. These unstable presidencies were followed by eleven years of war.

By 1830, the country had only 74,000 inhabitants. In 1852, after these eleven years of war, the first national census recorded almost 132,000. Basically, the countryside had been left deserted by a great wave of migration to Brazil and Argentina. New migrants made up a little more than one-fifth of the population. The 1860 census recorded 221,248 inhabitants, 35 per cent of whom were foreigners. In Montevideo itself, almost half of the population was foreign (48 per cent).

The immigrant population played a very important role in shaping political and social thought in Uruguay. The presence of these people not only affected demography but also contributed new ideas, customs and world-views. This was to be particularly evident in what was subsequently to be called the religious issue.

The personal aspirations of the first political leaders, the activity of the political parties, headed by those same leaders, and their confrontations, led to long periods of disturbance and disorder. A natural result of this institutional instability was meagre economic development and even impoverishment. During this period marked by chaotic situations, the European powers kept a watchful eye on the unfolding of events, while the cultured, educated minority gradually became Europeanized.

Uruguay at that time had an institutional structure that was cast in the most distinguished moulds of the political thought of the day. But social practices were not fashioned by those moulds. The new republic did not have the republicans needed to make it credible. It seemed impossible to modernize the country under such circumstances. This was the situation confronting José Pedro Varela when he set himself the task of establishing a common system of education. It was clearly on the basis of mass education that the democratic system enshrined in the Constitution could be made viable.

Under a despotic government, the human faculties are maimed and paralysed. In a republic, they grow with intense force and are created with unstoppable momentum. [. . .] Hence, the ignorance of the people under a despotic government leads to disgrace, decline and impotence, but is not a threat; whereas ignorance under a republican government is a constant threat and an imminent peril. [. . .] Ignorance under despotism produces a sick state of affairs which Alfieri called a soulless existence; under a republic it spawns riots, demonstrations, endless uprisings, lawlessness, perversion of institutions, [. . .] with chaos masquerading under the names and the ostensible structures of free institutions.

He goes on to add:

A democratic and republican government is founded on the assumption that the people have the necessary abilities to govern themselves [. . .] Universal suffrage presupposes universal awareness, and universal awareness presupposes and requires universal education. Without it, the republic falls apart and democracy becomes impossible.³

A man of his time

To give the exact measure of Varela on the basis of the information customarily used by biographers would be pointless. Such an attempt would merely reveal that he was the son of a business family, himself a businessman, a juvenile poet and a journalist, who subsequently became a politician and an educational reformer thanks to his fortunate acquaintance with a number of prominent contemporary figures (Sarmiento, Horace Mann and Victor Hugo).

But his intellectual training and personal life story followed a unique path.

He was born on 19 March 1845 in the besieged city of Montevideo. The country was experiencing what was known as the 'Great War'. In a sense, it was a civil war that pitted some Uruguayans against others, the besieged against the besiegers. But it was also much more than this. It was a regional conflict involving neighbouring countries, their governments and their armies. However, it also involved the major European powers. In other words, it was a French and British war as well, with the European political centres deciding at one time on the direct participation of Garibaldi, who was subsequently destined to play a leading role in achieving Italian unity. Uruguay was, perhaps as at no other period in its history, the focus of international attention.

It should be added that Argentinian immigrants, the foremost exponents of the intellectual movement in their country and persecuted by the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas, found refuge in the besieged city. Over and above the belligerent confrontation, the 'Great War' provided a context for fruitful ideological debate.

This was the background against which the Varela family joined forces with the defenders—the besieged. In the midst of the war, Varela's father translated a French work on the proper teaching of the mother tongue. We believe that these are significant clues to the social and family climate, imbued with political and cultural considerations, in which Varela began his training.

In 1865, José Varela began to publish a series of polemical articles on religion in the *Revista literaria* [Literary Review]. In that same year and in the same journal, he published an article on the gauchos, which already revealed the influence of Sarmiento that would later be explicitly acknowledged. Adopting a sociological approach, he analysed one (but not the sole) cause of moral and material stagnation:

We do not need an excessively large population; what we need is an enlightened population. The day when our gauchos can read and write, and think, our political convulsions may cease. It is through the education of the people that we can arrive at peace, progress and an end to gauchos. Then, ennobled by labour, the country-dweller who is today stupefied with idleness will convert his horse, today an element of primitive living, into an element of progress and use it to plough the furrow that will bring productivity to the land which until today has remained barren; and the immense national wealth, worked by the energy of the labouring and enlightened people, will build up the vast pyramid of material progress. The enlightenment of the people is the true driving force of progress.⁴

If we refer exclusively to this passage, we find a Varela who is hostile to revolutions. And, in one sense of the word, this could be so. He was opposed to the savage uprisings in which the leaders used popular support fuelled by ignorance to further their interests. But it is useful to remember that in that same year and in the same journal, he equated progress with genuine revolutions:

Battles of the mind, battles which are slow but tenacious, and which take place in the midst of apparent peace and tranquillity, conquer the moral world; and then comes the day when new ideas start teeming in every head, striving to supersede the errors and crimes of the past. That is when the resistance of the past gives rise to the revolution, but we should not blame it for the blood and sacrifices that it costs the world; we should blame, rather, the despotism and crime that try to stem the civilizing tide of progress.⁵

The *Revista literaria*, that had in Varela one of its most distinguished contributors, ceased publication in May 1866. A short time previously, in December 1865, Varela had handed in his resignation because the editor had deleted a number of paragraphs from one of his articles. The

review practically went out of existence with the departure of Varela. Proof was furnished of his resolute support for the principle of the freedom of the press.

Nevertheless, he promptly resumed his work as a publicist. In 1866, he wrote for the newspaper *El siglo* [The Century], in whose pages he took sides in the controversy over the life and work of the Chilean Francisco Bilbao, a forceful thinker who had a decisive influence on his philosophical development. Such were the features of Varela's rationalist stage. It was through Bilbao that he was influenced by the Christian rationalist thinkers Laménais, Michelet, Quinet and Renan. They make up the French side of Varela's rationalist thought. In the first of these articles, 'Francisco Bilbao y el catolicismo' [Francisco Bilbao and Catholicism], he juxtaposes the teaching and life of Bilbao with the intolerant practices of Catholic clericalism:

The enemies of new ideas, representatives of a dreary past who none the less want to appropriate all the progress made in the world, take pleasure in wounding one by one all the men who have fought and are fighting to break some of the links in the dreadful chain of unfounded fears. [. . .] Catholic doctrine is bad; it is disastrous; but the Catholic priest who sacrifices himself and dies for it is noble and worthy of consideration and respect. Such is the rationalist doctrine, and that is what we would ask of Catholicism if the petty circle of Catholic beliefs allowed its followers to understand the greatness of tolerance.⁶

In the second article, the title of which was 'La iglesia católica y la sociedad moderna' [The Catholic Church and Modern Society], he declared, among other things:

Democracy is the modern ideal. The kingdom of heaven has come down to earth. A God who, like Jupiter, will not budge from his throne and remains unmoved by the joys and sorrows of humankind, is no longer enough for human activity. What is needed is a God incarnate in everyone, who lives and throbs with the heart of the people. Not a God of death but a God of life. [. . .] We do not profess any religion, but follow the religion of the future with our gaze fixed on the star of justice lighting our way; we shall move steadily forward, preparing for the establishment of the democracy in which the people, having themselves become priests and kings, will have freedom as their guide and their God.⁷

At the end of this phase of metaphysical rationalist consolidation, his concern for the people and their education, for democracy and for freedom in all spheres was clearly mapped out, together with his reproach of Catholicism.

The year 1867, in which he gained experience through travelling to the United States via Europe, added fresh elements to his philosophical education. On his journey he wrote articles for the newspaper *El siglo*. Of his time spent in Europe, he always recalled the interview with Victor Hugo who, twelve years earlier, had gone to the island of Guernsey as a political exile. This is how Varela recounts their conversation:

'What is the present state of your country?'

'Not very good, sir.'

'But you do have freedom of the press?'

'Yes, complete freedom!'

'Have you a parliament?'

'According to our Constitution, we should have, but on the grounds that we are at war with Paraguay, our present Government has not yet constructed the country.'

The dialogue continued, and Varela explained the division between the political parties: 'Wars take place between parties rather than between nations', as a result of the eagerness, according to Varela, to imitate France.

'We are a caricature of France', he added, to which Victor Hugo replied: 'No, you are a caricature when you copy its bad examples; but you are its favourite sons, its heralds in the young America, when you continue the spirit of the revolution.'⁸

From his journey through the United States we are left with his impression of North American education and of the strength of democracy:

just about anybody can become a candidate for the presidency and aspire to direct the affairs of the country; citizens must know, not just how to read and write but (let us establish the difference) how to think.

The idea generally held by French thinkers responsible for mass education is that it is highly beneficial because the intelligent worker produces more than the ignorant one. The greater the ability, the greater the benefit [. . .] The idea of the United States is to exploit all the wealth in the mine [. . .] That is why the Americans send their young children to school, their adults to college, their young people to meetings and the press, their men to legislatures and congresses. The plan is one of lifelong work and study, whereby individuals can shine at any age and in any sphere whatsoever.⁹

Varela seems to be talking about a country that has already achieved the modern ideal of lifelong education.

But he also enthusiastically records his impression of the mass education system. This fits in smoothly with the rationalist conceptions that are part and parcel of Francisco Bilbao's thought.

Its goal is to breathe life into that inert entity known as the masses in Europe; to make of it a harmonious whole that thinks for itself and is conscious of its actions while carrying them out. Once this idea has taken mental root, that is, once freedom has been recognized as the vital principle, the first requirement for bringing about change is the school. From the earliest days of colonization, the school, for the education of future citizens, was built alongside the temple where free thinkers discussed their beliefs. [. . .] An immense amount of intelligence and money is devoted to them [the schools], the issue of universal schooling being of vital importance in the United States.¹⁰

It is thus scarcely surprising that the subject of the resources for mass education—the budget—is of crucial importance in Varela's thought. Varela returned home in August 1868. He had spent more than six months in the United States. With surprising ease, he established connections that gave him quite a detailed knowledge of the political and social life and educational circumstances of this country, and he even published a book of poems there.

The educational debate: the affair of youth

Immediately after his arrival, he began the work of publicising and organization on educational issues. In September 1868, he published an article entitled: 'Don Domingo Sarmiento y la verdadera demagogia' [Domingo Sarmiento and True Demagoggy]: 'Writers who are unaware are fit only for peoples who are unaware. We must therefore admit the full extent of our deplorable ignorance. The one true remedy lies in the school. It teaches respect for the law, awareness of right and wrong, virtue and honour.'¹¹ At this point, it could be said that the campaign for universal education had officially begun.

A few days later, young university students founded the Club Universitario. This was the first time that reflection at university level had led to the creation of an organization, supported by all the lecturers.

Varela placed the subject of education in the wider context of the modernization of the country. He said that his ideas were not original; that they had triumphed thirty years previously in the United States and about ten years previously in most European countries. 'Education is what we really need, but it should be an education diffused through all social classes, bringing light to the darkened consciousness of the people and preparing children to be adults and adults to be citizens.'¹² A monarchy can exist with ignorant people as its subjects; a republic cannot.

For the law to be obeyed, the people must understand that it is just, and for them to understand that, they must be educated. [. . .] Most of our political instruments are on a par with the most civilized in the world. Why, then, do we live in chaos in spite of our good laws? Why is it that the great mass of our ignorant and backward population does not know, understand or respect the law? People only willingly obey what they believe to be just.¹³

As we shall see below, Varela proposes in practice a form of egalitarian education, based on sound theoretical premises. This idea is already perceptible in his public speeches in which he claims that the school which is open to all 'has, in democracies, the great advantage of bringing together and blending the social classes. Rich or poor, the children who are educated together in the same classrooms will feel neither contempt nor antipathy for one another.'¹⁴

He also pointed out that the meeting was a gathering of the converted and of representatives of the cultural élite, and that everything would be different 'if we had been able to meet here with some of the true children of people'.

He called for the co-operation of all in dealing with a problem that affected the nation as a whole: 'A great and noble idea which, as with everything that truly concerns the people, requires the co-operation of everyone without reference to religious conviction or political persuasion.'

But his most fiery appeal was to young people: 'It is to young people that I am speaking: from young people, I expect everything.'¹⁵

But matters did not come to an end with Varela's speech. The university ceremony mutated into a spontaneous assembly that elected a Provisional Committee. More than 200 participants signed the minutes.

The Committee started work. *El siglo* convened a meeting at which the first differences emerged. Some people thought that it was a mistake to see the school as a panacea. Varela's reply was published in *El siglo*:

As far as I am concerned, children do not go to school to learn but to acquire the means of learning. The school cannot be a place where children are dumped. Let us educate the people, let us educate the gaucho, but let us not start by telling them something which is by no means certain, namely, that we acknowledge their appreciation of education; for ignorance cannot appreciate education, being itself sterile, static and arrogant.¹⁶

The first Management Committee was set up in the presence of senior government officials. On that occasion he again explained education's aims and objectives:

We must raise the status of the teaching profession and expand and improve our schools, and to do this the school must become a fixture, continuous and immutable; the teacher and the pupil, the person teaching and the person learning, must enjoy physical life and mental security from the vicissitudes of our politics. Parents must be persuaded to send their children to school. The children must be persuaded to attend school. We have to make sure that adults and children, present generations and future generations, come to bless education. The *Sociedad de Amigos* will not set up schools merely in order to bring together hundreds of children, but to elevate and dignify the teacher and the school in the eyes of all. Our mission is one of peace.¹⁷

The secretary of the *Sociedad de Amigos de la Educación Popular* [Society of friends of universal education], a journalist and a formidable polemicist, was 23 years old. As well as fighting for mass education, he defended liberty and democracy and raised 'the great issue of modern times', women's rights. Society in general, and the cultural élite in particular, never ceased to be surprised by this young agitator.

Towards the end of 1869, there were fresh disturbances in the country. A few months later, Varela was detained and sent into exile.

In 1871 he founded the review *La paz* [Peace] and, later, *El hijo de la paz* [The child of peace]. The names chosen were symbolic. *La paz* reached the country in late 1872. Varela did not see himself as a partisan political activist. He did not see politics as a consciously chosen career. Rather, political circumstances caught him up and carried him along. In 1875 he was a candidate for the Ordinary Tribunal, but he had already obtained other credentials: in 1874 he published his first work of educational theory, *La educación del pueblo* [The education of the people], and his main preoccupation was thus clearly defined. Meanwhile, the *Sociedad de Amigos de la Educación Popular* was working tirelessly throughout those years.

Varela's plan: education for equality

In his short but fruitful life Varela wrote two books of educational theory. The first, written in 1874, was *La educación del pueblo* and the second, in 1876, *La legislación escolar* [School legislation]. But his total output was much greater and included articles, lectures and, above all, his *Annual Reports* as Director-General and National Inspector of Education.

Like every sound educational scheme, it had political and social aspects: initially, democracy was Varela's main focus of concern.

He did not improvise, because he was convinced that education was 'a true science'. To legislate without knowledge of the facts is to legislate in a vacuum, and in order to legislate, one must determine the nature of the educational needs of one's time and one's country. It is obvious that, although he held no public office, he was seeking to influence the educational legislation of his day.

Laws on education, which are necessary to meet the requirements of our era, our institutions and our country, should fulfil the following conditions: (1) the provision of special subsidies for education in order to shield it from political disturbances and financial crises; (2) the decentralization of government in order to stimulate local interest and activity, and to make the educational authorities and administration more independent [. . .]; (3) the establishment of a graduated system encompassing nursery schools, primary and secondary schools, teacher-training colleges, and even colleges and universities.¹⁸

These primary conditions reveal the fundamental ideas underlying his conception of mass education. First of all, independent resources; political disturbances and financial crises were evils that hindered national development. Second, decentralization as a means of enlisting public participation. Thus formulated, both ideas constitute an important criterion of independent educational management. Lastly, the idea of the system, that we shall consider below.

He sets out basic principles governing this system, principles without which the task could not be accomplished. First, education should be compulsory.

The freedom of the individual, especially of the individual in society, is not unlimited [. . .] individual freedom has the freedom of other people as its irreducible limit. [. . .] If the State establishes certain conditions for the exercise of citizenship which can be satisfied only through education, the parents who deprive their child of that education are guilty of an abuse to which the authorities must put a stop [. . .] in order to defend the rights of the minor which are being ignored [. . .] and thereby to ensure the protection of society, whose very foundations are being undermined.¹⁹

Further on, he reiterates: 'The State requires all its citizens to possess certain types of knowledge which are necessary for the exercise of citizenship and, in order to satisfy that requirement, it provides free access for all to educational facilities.'²⁰

Varela's preoccupation with democracy deserves emphasis. Under the 1830 Constitution that was then in force, illiterate people had no voting rights. As a result, education was a prerequisite for civic participation.

Moreover, he saw education as one way of ensuring social levelling: free of charge for all children, of all classes and faiths. 'Those who once frequented the same classrooms in which they were equal, and in which they competed according to the same rules, easily become accustomed to seeing one another as equals . . . Free education is thus the most powerful tool with which to shape democratic equality.'²¹

This theory of educational equality did not, however, see the free state schools as schools for the poor. They were schools for each and every child, and both wealthy and poor parents were called upon to send their children to the same common schools. 'Rich or poor, children who are educated together in the same classrooms will feel neither contempt nor dislike for one another.'²²

In conformity with the prevailing Constitution, the Catholic religion was the official state religion. However, the idea of freedom of worship already existed. Varela, ahead of many thinkers,

maintained that the lay school 'should faithfully observe the principle of the separation of church and state.'²³

What the state school, open to children of all faiths, was to pursue was not a religious goal, but a social one. Secular schooling 'did not belong exclusively to any sect and was, therefore, not atheistic, for atheism was also a religious doctrine.'²⁴

Dogmatic education has no place in this egalitarian school. First, because the State, which is not a religious institution, should ensure that justice reigns and not favour any religious community in particular. Second, free state schooling will be upheld by the joint contribution of society, which will comprise believers from all religious communities. 'The education that the state provides and requires is not aimed at integrating the child into this or that religious denomination, but at giving him or her the appropriate training to lead the life of a citizen.'²⁵

Varela's popular conceptions have their roots deep in rationalism, especially in the thought of Bilbao. At the time it was reinforced by an incipient positivism, of which Varela himself was a pioneer.

Towards a national education system

Although a national education system seems to be outlined in *La educación del pueblo*, it is developed from the point of view of its management, administration and organization in *La legislación escolar*. The latter work gives us a clear appreciation of the positivist strain in Varela's thought: observe in order to plan ahead, and plan ahead in order to make provision.

The work was sent with a note to the government minister. Unfortunately, the government in question was the military dictatorship of Colonel Lorenzo Latorre. For a thoroughgoing democrat, this was no minor contradiction and had to be justified:

The fundamental reason that has induced me to address myself to Your Excellency is recognition of the need to enact laws in order to ensure the proper organization of education in our country. I think that we cannot sensibly expect those laws to be promulgated by future parliaments, whatever their membership, at least if we are to judge the immediate future by our experience of the Republic so far.²⁶

The book which contained the Universal Education Bill was not commissioned by any authority, but was produced spontaneously and voluntarily in order to serve the country. It was divided into three parts. The first concerned 'our present situation and its causes'; the second dealt with 'general principles'; and the third with 'applying the principles'. This third part contained Varela's proposed law.

On the subject of the present situation and its causes, he posited a threefold crisis—economic, political and financial—with the last element stemming naturally from the other two. This study implies an assessment of the situation, without which no valid solutions can be put forward. As concerns remedies, he stated clearly:

Everything is interrelated in the development of social existence, and accordingly it is an illusion to suppose that, in order to bring about radical change, it is enough to strive in a particular direction while other social forces remain inactive or work in a contrary direction. Having recognized this, we shall not make the mistake of attributing to mass education, still less to an education bill, the mysterious power that religious belief attributes to the absolution granted by priests.²⁸

With regard to general principles, he turned his attention to State action and local action. He thought that administrative centralization and the imposition of uniform solutions to deal with concrete situations were serious mistakes. 'The democratic element, the people, . . . plays no part in the administration of education . . . consequently, the people do not regard state education as their own work.'²⁶ A good system of education should combine action by the state with the active and

resolute participation of the people. However, state action should not be confused with linking public action to a particular party. On the contrary, the independence of the state authority for education from the rest of the civil service is a *sine qua non* 'without which the education of the people will be subjected to the vicissitudes of political upheavals and will have a fitful, weak and unhealthy existence.'²⁹

Varela proposes a state policy transcending party lines. The history of Uruguay is evidence of the abuses of partisan power. 'The result is always that public administration only partially reflects the aspirations of the people, and is based exclusively on factions . . . that never actually represent the whole community.'³⁰

The national education system was planned in stages.

Nursery schools. These were for children between the ages of 3 and 6, with play and work activities suited to their age-group and interests. Such schools should satisfy children's need for movement, 'places in which to run, move around, play and, above all, breathe clean air'.

Primary education. This would be compulsory, for children aged 5 to 15. It should be rationally organized and take account of the learning ability of each child. Its aim should be the acquisition of knowledge and use of language, the exercise and nourishment of various skills and abilities, and the acquisition of those ideas and forms of knowledge which will give the child 'food for thought. To learn how to use all the intellectual faculties, in the best possible way, is the primary purpose of cultivating the mind.'³¹ Teaching diplomas, graded according to level, were required in order to be employed in these schools.

Secondary education. This level should be concerned with the forms of knowledge that 'are the most necessary in order to meet the demands of adult life'. This means taking into account 'not only the intellectual, moral and physical aspects of individuals but also the society in which they live'.

Teacher training. Varela explains the necessity of this as follows: 'it is impossible to establish good schools without good teachers or to have good teachers without teacher-training colleges. The teacher must have a grounding in the science of education: education presents us with its facts, and they are as numerous and profoundly interesting as the facts of any other science; its facts can be classified and ordered, just like those of chemistry and astronomy.'³² Varela is forcefully positivist when defining the scientific requirements of the teacher's task. Besides scientific training, the teacher should learn the art of teaching, and for this purpose model colleges, now called training colleges, are required.

Reform or revolution? The problem of method

From his earliest writings, Varela raised the question of method as a very important aspect of any educational activity, and it may even be said that he saw it as a defining characteristic of his overall view of education.

Nevertheless, there is a noticeable difference in emphasis on the subject between his initial, more general, ideas and the assessments of his final years, when he was engaged in the practical and concrete task of creating a new style of primary education for the emergent country.

He states in *La Educación del Pueblo* that: 'method means the particular way in that which is to be taught is developed and presented to the intellect. It is merely the external form, whereas the teaching is the substance—but the latter determines the former: hence, the method must adapt itself to what we consider to constitute education.'³³

The prevailing idea of the aims and objectives of education is probably what determines the choice of methods and, at the same time, their importance in relation to the teaching/learning process. In his connection, he adds:

If we believe that education consists in communicating a number of facts, and overloading the memory with them, without cultivating the other faculties, then we need pay little attention to method, since we can easily obtain the desired result. But if we consider education to be a powerful aid in developing the life of the mind and an appeal for the active and harmonious exercise of the various faculties and powers that Nature has given us, and if we believe that this progressive development follows a well-defined order and is consistent with certain general and unchanging rules, then the method which we adopt to encourage this process is of the utmost importance.³²

The question of method will be closely related to the characteristics of the pupils. There is no fixed order of priority valid for all ages if the aim is to cater for the ‘development of their threefold nature in mind, body and spirit’.

In line with the trends of his time, he recognized two methods: the analytical and the synthetic. Given that ‘in infancy and well into childhood, only the perceptive faculties are used’ and that ‘logic does not appear until a much later date . . . the analytical method must be used with children, which means pointing at objects and giving definitions as one proceeds; after some time, when analysis has blazed the trail, a synthetic approach may be adopted, bringing together in a harmonious whole the scattered elements that have been floating about on the surface of the mind.’³⁵

But alongside the determining factors associated with the characteristics of the learner, those arising from the subject-matter must also be taken into account.

Taking ideas of this kind as his point of departure, Varela refers to the so-called ‘object lessons’ that had been espoused by some circles in theory, but had not yet been introduced into the classroom on a regular basis. This type of activity basically implied greater emphasis on the tangible world as opposed to abstract speculation unrelated in any immediate or obvious contact with reality. Intellectualized education based essentially on the use and abuse of memory invariably tended to underemphasize the practical side of life. In contrast, Varela recommended object lessons based on methods that catered for that dimension. His idea of active education and of showing respect for the interests and aptitudes of children emerges clearly in this context. ‘If possible, let them grasp [the object], turn it around and look at it from all angles’.

But it was not simply a matter of the physical activity involved in handling an object: ‘it should rely first and foremost on the pupils’ exercising their own ability to discover new facts. As a rule, pupils should not be told anything that they can find out for themselves . . . children only learn well what they have learnt through their own efforts.’³⁷

At the same time, however, this activity should be conducive to the free exercise of the mental faculties, ‘encouraging habits of free speech, ensuring that all possible explanations of relevance to an object are exhausted without teacher guidance through questions, so that they become accustomed to thinking for themselves without having someone to lead them along the path that their ideas should follow.’³⁷

But these ideas were not developed solely in the light of the limitations and potential of primary education. Analysing the situation of university education in his day, he severely criticized the approach adopted in teaching physics, chemistry and zoology ‘without a single *piece of equipment* or a single *zoological specimen*’.³⁸ He found that the experimental sciences were being taught in the same way as speculative philosophy, on the basis of a textbook and theoretical dissertations: ‘It is easy to imagine the kind of results such a method will produce.’

To make matters worse, Universidad Mayor took no interest in the actual circumstances of its students and recognized no order or hierarchy in the knowledge imparted. Here was further evidence of disdain for method. As a result, young people were leaving the university with qualifications but without knowledge. Varela stressed the need for knowledge and method to gain access to the field of science.

As young people study mathematics, physics, chemistry, the natural sciences, they experience an awakening of the urge to satisfy curiosity through inquiry; they acquire the habit of seeing, forming their own ideas, registering the facts

they observe, verifying them against their experience and seeking the links connecting them and the laws that they obey.³⁹

Taking these ideas as a theoretical framework, Varela worked for practical educational reform. From the earliest years he felt the need to present the country with a progress report, however rudimentary the results.

In the report corresponding to the period from 1 April 1876 to 1 August 1877, he noted that some minor improvements had been made in the public (state) schools, leaving ‘the soul, so to speak, of the teaching system in its original state. The old routine continues, the only concern being to convey information, relying on memory alone to the detriment of all the other physical and mental faculties of the child as the means to achieve that end.’⁴⁰ Thus far we can say that reform is no more than a lucid plan taking shape. ‘Every teacher, especially every old teacher, had a group of well-disposed parents and a staff of supportive students and assistants. Every school was therefore a kind of fortress in which the teacher was entrenched; new methods, new ideas, any attempted change or reform were doomed, drowning in the moats of tradition surrounding the school.’ The new school called for the demise of the old, using method as its weapon. ‘So the old school had to be liquidated, the old building demolished, the old organization wiped out . . . in a phrase, temporary chaos had to be produced in order to annihilate tradition and make the proposed reform feasible and attainable.’⁴¹

By 1878, in the space of barely two years, the situation had changed. In early January 1879, the students met with their teachers for fourteen days to assess their relative progress. In his inaugural speech, Varela said that at the theoretical level there was also room for doubt and discussion

depending on the angle from which the proceedings are viewed. [. . .] On coming down to earth, things look different: the facts speak with unquestionable eloquence: like it or not, they are there to be seen and recorded, although they may clash with our opinions or seem absurd. At all events, we are convinced that the facts and practical experience have spoken and decided eloquently in favour of educational reform.⁴²

After the public evaluation session, Varela compared the performance of the schools where the new methods had carried the day with those where they had not yet found favour: ‘the radical differences between the old and new systems are becoming clear; the new school is a place of life, action, movement, joy, enthusiasm and emulation, while the typical features of the old school are passivity, boredom, aversion from study and from the teacher, intellectual and moral paralysis, a total lack of stimulus, ambition and pleasure.’⁴³

The question of method, a recurrent theme in Varela’s work, now emerges with greater clarity and emphasis. Reform had taken root and become a reality; the condition of State schools, the methods used, curriculum development and the quality of the instruction imparted to individual children furnished solid proof of the fact that the new systems and methods had ousted the old. Varela prepared a paper for a prize-giving ceremony in which he set forth his idea of method as a more important instrument of educational revolution than reform, however important the latter might be:

Changing general education systems, promulgating new curricula in keeping with the demands of our time and the society in which we live, adopting textbooks in which the new way of life is depicted instead of keeping the fossilized textbooks of the old school, and changing the procedures for putting knowledge across, are certainly reforms of great importance, but they relate only to instruction, a secondary matter in relative terms since it changes only the outward appearance of schools and communities. If reform stops here, it will turn an ignorant community into an educated one, familiar with what other societies and individuals have done or are doing; but it will have only slightly enhanced people’s ability to produce, create and invent. But replacing the old mechanical method by the rational method implies penetrating to the very soul of the school and the people, seeking to change the habits, customs, ideas and aspirations of society as a whole. *Reform* may be and is the process of introducing new systems, new curricula and

new textbooks, but *revolution* lies in method. The former changes teaching, the latter education: education — the mould in which the minds and hearts of future generations are cast!⁴² (Our emphasis.)

From Varela to the future

Varela's strictly educational ideas may be—and in some respects certainly have been—superseded by theoretical advances in response to new circumstances. But what remains unalterable is the political and social context in which he places mass education.

The concepts of free and egalitarian state education, secularism, the rational method and the independence of education form part of the country's cultural heritage.⁴³

Another bequest of the Varela period is the idea of education as a national issue of relevance to all.⁴⁴ Since that time, upheavals in the education system have been able to whip up social storms in our country. Although the fact is not always recognized or sufficiently stressed, the progress of national education is inextricably bound up with the fight for democracy.

Notes

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2. Hugo Rodríguez Aldabalde (Uruguay) Lecturer in teaching methods and educational theory at the Teacher-Training College in Montevideo.
3. J. P. Varela, *La educación del pueblo* [The education of the people], Chapter 8, p. 70–73, Montevideo, 1964. (Colección Clásicos Uruguayos, vol. 49.)
4. J. P. Varela, 'Los gauchos', *La revista literaria*, no. 13, July 1865, p. 207.
5. J. P. Varela, 'Las revoluciones' [Revolutions], *La revista literaria*, no. 14, August 1865, p. 223.
6. J. P. Varela, 'Francisco Bilbao y el catolicismo' [Francisco Bilbao and Catholicism], *El siglo*, 24 November 1866.
7. J. P. Varela, 'La Iglesia católica y la sociedad moderna' [The Catholic Church and modern society], *El siglo*, 15 December 1866.
8. J. P. Varela, *Impresiones de viaje* [Impressions of a Journey], tenth letter, pp. 89-90, Montevideo, Ed. Liceo, 1945.
9. *Ibid.*, thirteenth letter, p. 90.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112–13.
11. J. P. Varela, 'Don Domingo Sarmiento y la verdadera demagogia' [Domingo Sarmiento and True Demagoguery], *El siglo*, 2 September 1868.
12. Speech delivered on 18 September 1868.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *El siglo*, 8 October 1868.
17. Address to the Sociedad de Amigos de la Educación Popular, 10 October 1868.
18. *La educación del pueblo*, op. cit., p. 14.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
22. Speech delivered on 18 September 1868.
23. *La educación del pueblo*, op. cit., p. 97.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
26. J. P. Varela, *La legislación escolar* [School Legislation], p. 10, Montevideo, 1964. (Colección Clásicos Uruguayos, vol. 51, Tome 1.)
27. *Ibid.*, p. .
28. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
29. *Ibid.*, vol. 52, Tome 2.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

31. *La educación del pueblo*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 137.
32. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 130.
33. J. P. Varela, *La educación del pueblo*, Chapter XVI, p. 122, Montevideo, El Siglo Ilustrado, 1910.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
39. *Ibid.*, Chapter XII, p. 89.
40. J. P. Varela, *Memoria, 1' de abril de 1876-1' de agosto de 1877* [Report from 1 April 1876 to 1 August 1877], Chapter XII, p. 86, Montevideo, 1877.
41. *Ibid.*, Chapter XV.
42. Speech delivered on 2 January 1879.
43. Speech delivered on 12 January 1879.
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