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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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Introduction: spaces of alternative education

This paper 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,¹ North America,² and Latin America.³ If the most famous example of this movement was the Barcelona Modern School (1901-1906), run by 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,⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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’.⁷ The importance of socio-spatial contexts and childhood practices in which the ‘social geographical importance of schools extends well beyond their physical boundaries’⁸ 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’.⁹ The case study that I have chosen for this paper contains an early affirmation of these principles in terms of a child-oriented pedagogy.¹⁰ 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’.¹¹ 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’.¹² 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.¹³

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

On a methodological standpoint, I mobilize 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’.¹⁶ 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’,¹⁷ 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 recognize,

following an established literature, that archives are not only bulks of sources, but research objects in themselves.¹⁸

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,¹⁹ 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 paper 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.²⁰

In the first part of my paper, 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 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.²¹ 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

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the label of 'integral education'.²² 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.²³ Perron and Robin were the first, within the First International (the IWA – International Workingmen Association), to emphasise education as a priority field in the struggle for social emancipation.²⁴

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,²⁵ 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*,²⁶ considered the symbol of the secularisation and democratisation of the French school system, which was realised in the follow decades by left-republican governments.²⁷

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 political background.²⁸ One of the conceptual frameworks of Guillaume's commitment was provided by his ideas about the French Revolution of 1789, which he envisaged as the origin of the debates for public and secular education: Guillaume was involved in drafting the materials of the Public Education Committee of the Revolutionary Convention of 1792.²⁹ Some historians have observed that Guillaume, in dealing with the revolution of the previous century, acted in a classic way historians tend to act by 'building a history which was inseparable from his present concerns'.³⁰ Guillaume's trajectory is a typical example of the dialectical and occasionally contradictory relationship between anarchism and republicanism; among French anarchists, the idea of the Republic was either rejected or proclaimed as a fundamental principle which had been betrayed by official Republicans.³¹ An interest in the French Revolution was also shared by the anarchist geographer Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921), who worked closely with both Guillaume and

Reclus,³² and who carried on a scientific correspondence with Guillaume on these topics.³³ We find this contrast, recalling anarchism's connection with the original Republican idea of 'freedom as non-domination',³⁴ in the conflictual relationship the Cempuis educators had with the symbols of the French Republic they were officially asked to represent.

Guillaume's work was also important in the spread to France of ideas emanating from educators like the Swiss Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and the German Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852). These ideas were universally endorsed during the 'Buisson moment'³⁵ as the inspiration of a pedagogical method based on children's direct experience, known in the French-speaking world as the *leçon de choses*, or 'intuitive method'. This kind of approach shows several unmistakable links with the idea of 'integral' or 'polytechnic' education clearly grounded in experience. Proudhon, for example, was endorsed in the *Dictionary of Primary Education* as a point of reference for 'professional teaching... allowing all citizens to have equal access to knowledge'.³⁶

Pestalozzi's approach was strongly spatial and directly addressed the teaching of geography. In his writings on Pestalozzi, Guillaume stressed his 'natural' method as well as his links with important geographers of the day like Carl Ritter (1779-1859), who defined himself as 'Pestalozzi's disciple'. According to Guillaume, 'Pestalozzi came twice to Yverdon in September 1807 and January 1809, and then, during his stay in Geneva between 1811 and 1812, he visited the orphanage managed by Pestalozzi several times. Forty years after his stays in Yverdon, Ritter said to the historian Louis Vuillemin: 'Pestalozzi didn't know what a child in primary school knows about geography; yet it was no less in talking with him that I felt awakening in me the instinct of natural methods; it was he who led the way for me, and what I managed to do, I must ruefully assign to him as his'.³⁷ Guillaume also stressed Vuillemin's own eye-witness accounts of the natural methods employed by Pestalozzi in teaching geography to primary school pupils: 'The first elements of geography were taught to us in the field. They began by pointing our walk towards a narrow valley near Yverdon where the Buron stream flows. They made us observe it as a whole and in its details until we had a complete and accurate sense of it. Then they invited each of us to collect his own supply of a clay found there in layers in one of the small valley's sides, and we filled large baskets we had brought along for that purpose. Once back at the château, they

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distributed long tables to us and left us to reproduce in relief the valley we had just studied, each of us for the part he was assigned. The following days, new walks, new explorations, carried out from an every-higher point of view, and each time a new extension given to our work. We continued in this way until we had completed the study of the Yverdon basin; until from atop the mountain that utterly dominates it, we had taken it in wholly, we had completed our relief model. Then and only then did we go from the relief model to the geographic map, which we arrived at only after having acquired an understanding of it'.³⁸

Ritter's frequent references to the Earth as 'home for the education of humankind', his antipathy for the uncritical use of maps, for lists and pedagogical dogmatism, as well as his commitment to building the German system of instruction, owed a great deal to Pestalozzi. Ritter's importance to the formation of European geography in the 19th century is universally acknowledged, and the influence of his ideas on several geographers who worked for public education is well known in both the French-speaking world³⁹ and Great Britain.⁴⁰ It is clear that the so-called natural methods were immediately endorsed by anarchist geographers like Kropotkin and Reclus (this latter attended Ritter's courses in the University of Berlin) and some of their collaborators like Patrick Geddes,⁴¹ as an alternative to an ideological state education.⁴²

Guillaume also dedicated to Pestalozzi a chapter of his book *Études Révolutionnaires* (Revolutionary Studies) dealing with topical figures in the construction of the idea of secular education during the French Revolution. In that chapter Guillaume offers a rather original interpretation of Pestalozzi, investigating his (then) little-known participation in the revolutionary movement at the end of the 18th century, as well as his contribution to the spread of Enlightenment ideas in Switzerland. Pestalozzi was acknowledged, in 1792, as a French citizen (*Citoyen français*) by the Paris National Assembly, which endorsed him as 'one of the men who contributed the most, by both their writings and their bravery, to the cause of freedom and the liberation of peoples'.⁴³ According to Guillaume, Pestalozzi 'was the most original and the bravest among all the thinkers and writers (as well as among the men of action) in German-speaking Switzerland in the 18th century'.⁴⁴

It is worth stressing that in the same years, according to Teresa Ploszajska, the introduction of fieldwork practices in British schools ‘is often assumed either to have seeped down from educational practices in university practices or to be the result of Pestalozzian theories’.⁴⁵ The posterity of these practices in the following decades is clearly stated by this author, as well as the Geddes’s influence on the idea that doing fieldwork in the countryside ‘involved defining citizenship in strict counter-opposition to anticitizenship’.⁴⁶ Geddes is equally evoked by Pys Gruffudd as one of the inspirers of fieldwork practices in the Welsh schools in order to build a national identity. Thus, ‘initiatives in Wales followed on from the resurrection of nature study in Scotland and England at the turn of the century inspired and led by the Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes.’⁴⁷ As Geddes’s influence on all British geography and planning in the 20th century is undeniable⁴⁸ and his closeness to anarchist geographers like Kropotkin and Reclus is clear,⁴⁹ it is possible to hypothesise that the posterity of the pedagogical movement which I am addressing, in the Anglophone world, transited indirectly through Geddes’ works, which played a not negligible role in the shaping of later fieldwork and teaching practices.

Open-air spaces and natural methods at Cempuis

Bulletins, which the Cempuis School produced from 1882 and 1894, form an exceptional source documenting almost day by day the school’s activities. Reading them today we can appreciate the heavy use of tutelary figures like Pestalozzi, Fröbel, and Elisée Reclus by the Cempuis educators. Founded thanks to the legacy of the philanthropist Jean Prévost to shelter orphans from four to sixteen years of age (with an average presence of around one hundred pupils), the school was run from 1880 to 1894 by Robin, who had been invited there by Buisson. Buisson was the executor of Prévost’s will, for example, and his wife had ‘managed the school over the last two years’.⁵⁰ The school belonged officially to the local administration, called the *Conseil général de la Seine* (General Council of the Seine), where the councillor responsible for the Cempuis School was Aristide Rey (1834-1901), a former member of the Paris International Workingmen’s Association and friend of Reclus and Benoît Malon.⁵¹ It was Rey who ‘laid the foundation for a wide programme of integral education’.⁵² There was also a constant exchange taking place between the orphanage and Buisson’s *Dictionnary*, as can be seen by its inclusion of several of Robin’s essays that had originally been published in the *Bulletin*.

In Cempuis, it was first established that as many activities as possible were to be done in the open air, for reasons of hygiene and to put the *leçon de choses* into practice,⁵³ which included both unhampered gymnastics and exercises ‘inspired by the Fröbel method’ (ibid., p. 6) and manual work ‘in the garden or the workshop’.⁵⁴ In this first issue of their *Bulletin*, the Cempuis educators explained their programme of school walks and excursions, ‘Frequently (more than ten times this year) the whole community leaves in the early morning for long excursions. A wagon follows behind us to carry our food for the outward leg of the trip, and to carry those who are too tired, or the littlest ones, on the way back’.⁵⁵

Shorter walks were made generally twice a week, on Thursdays and Sundays, following Pestalozzi’s principle of starting by exploring one’s surroundings. ‘Walks set off from the school’s surroundings: plains, hills, uplands, valleys. Pupils learn to model reliefs with clay, indicating streams’ springs, tributaries, and branches, after which they understand streams, rivers, and estuaries. Walk after walk, they indicate the districts, the cantons, the departments. The rest comes by intuition’.⁵⁶

According to Gabriel Giroud (1870-1945), a former pupil and later Robin’s son-in-law and the first historian of Cempuis, these walks were never organised randomly, but with a precise aim, which had both a naturalist and a social interest, ‘Walks always had an aim, visiting the factory of a workshop, seeing a natural spectacle like a spring or a valley, or looking at a historical or pre-historical monument: here was a living lesson of geography, history and ethics’.⁵⁷ As Giroud recalls, three kinds of excursion were systematically practised at Cempuis, ‘The first, trips in a deserted or unknown field’;⁵⁸ the second, ‘trips accompanied by a wagon’;⁵⁹ and the third, ‘trips with stays in cities or little towns’.⁶⁰ In this sense, the approach of Cempuis’s educators finds a clear echo in the Geddes’ idea of ‘nature’ not as evasion, but as a good training for both urban and rural citizenship, as I argued above.



Fig. 1 Rest during a Cempuis excursion (Giroud, p. 75)

These walks, especially the longer ones (Fig. 1), involving overnighting outside the school walls, also had a strong social dimension, targeting the contact between the orphanage members (pupils and teachers) and the inhabitants of the surrounding *communes*, because the educational debates in those years were ‘the central issue of a political and cultural conflict’⁶¹ and secular education needed to gain supporters, especially among the lowest classes of the countryside, traditionally the portion of the population most exposed to clerical propaganda.

In those pioneering years, the secular teachers who worked in the most peripheral villages were often isolated and subject to the diffidence of Catholic peasants. Thus, local teachers and progressive mayors were both the first targets of the Cempuis visits, and often those who allowed the Cempuis pupils and teachers to be sheltered in their villages, where the latter offered in the evening ‘celebrations and entertainment for the inhabitants: vocal and instrumental music, gymnastics, diction, plays, etc’.⁶² Music had great importance in teaching at Cempuis: it was for all these reasons that his school formed a brass band (Fig. 2), which did its first public performance on 13 March 1884.⁶³ One of the aims expressed by Giroud was that ‘everywhere

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school pupils should be welcome, and all pupils should travel'.⁶⁴ In any case, 'sleeping on the straw'⁶⁵ was considered a formative experience. These, according to Nathalie Brémand,⁶⁶ anticipated some aspects of Baden Powell's scouts' movement, recently addressed by research in historical geographies of youth and citizenship.⁶⁷

Music also involved the dialectical relationship between anarchism and the republic: in many of the villages visited, people asked the Cempuis band to play the national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, originally the rallying song of the French revolutionaries of 1792, whose music was played with a last hurrah for the Republic. Nevertheless, according to Giroud, in more discreet occasions the patriotic song was not only played but also sung, and at such times in a different version called *La Marseillaise de la Paix* (Peace Marseillaise), whose words were completely changed with respect to the official text. If the original refrain was '*Aux armes citoyens/formez vos bataillons/marchons, marchons/qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons*' (To arms, citizens! Form your battalions! Let us march, let us march! May impure blood soak our fields' furrows!), the new version went, '*Pas d'armes citoyens/rompez vos bataillons/chantez, chantons/et que la paix féconde nos sillons*' (No arms, citizens! Break your battalions! Sing ye, let us sing! May peace fertilise our fields' furrows).⁶⁸



Fig. 2 – The Cempuis brass band (Giroud, 1900, p. 121)

It is clear that these performances offered to exterior people were also part of a diplomatic necessity for legitimating the Cempuis experiment as a ‘republican’ one, in order to safeguard the school’s public funding, which was often questioned by the conservative press. But as I have argued above, the links between anarchism and republicanism rendered Republican slogans acceptable to the left/libertarians of the first decades of the Third Republic, an historical experience welcomed by Reclus (then exiled in Switzerland following his participation in the 1871 Paris Commune), who said, ‘I set my hopes, not on the Republic, which does not exist, but for its name, because a name is always something’.⁶⁹

Thus, while waiting for the creation of the ‘true Republic’, anarchists like Robin strengthened their alliances with left/republicans and offered themselves as the Republican vanguard. In this sense then, the *Bulletin* evinces Cempuis’s concern with helping the secular teachers of the countryside, often isolated and faulted by local priests and conservative people. One of the

declared aims of these trips, as in the case of an 1888 excursion to the northern towns of Tréport and Dieppe, was to ‘show these peasants what the Republic can obtain through education, hoping that their children will later become loyal and intelligent Republicans’.⁷⁰

In this regard, it is important to stress that the Cempuis School’s visits were not necessarily well received everywhere; the welcome depended on the political tendencies of local governments. Conservative governments like Dieppe, for instance, often refused to shelter the group, and the adults and children were sometimes obliged to sleep in tents or in schoolrooms opened to them by sympathetic teachers. In other districts, the *Bulletin* recorded a ‘fine welcome by Republican councillors’,⁷¹ that is to say leftist or non-conservative ones. A feature of Cempuis’s organisation was thus a ‘discipline without obligation’,⁷² which is still a theme not only of anarchist literature, but also for the philosophers of republicanism,⁷³ and recalls the Alexander Neill’s definition of ‘freedom without licence’.

The politicisation of these expeditions is seen in a range of anecdotes from the different trips. The author of the account of the 1891 school summer trip relates with amusement that one night the Cempuis group discovered they had set up camp in the surroundings of a convent, and the appearance of a nun’s headgear sparked the laughter.⁷⁴ It is worth pointing out that later experiences of alternative and radical education will be characterized by a similar rebuttal of religious teaching, from the Summerhill School to the Cambridge Malting House Garden School (1924-1929) studied by Laura Cameron, where the school’s head Geoffrey Pyke, advertising an available teaching position, specified that interested people should ‘not hold any form or religious belief’.⁷⁵ In Cempuis, other occasions to socialise with neighbours, families and other educators were the *Fêtes pédagogiques*, school festivals of one or more days with demonstrations of music performances, theatre, gymnastics, and different sorts of manual labor, along with talks and lectures, which had an ever-greater presence in the life of the community. As stated in 1883, ‘like school walks and excursions, festivals occupy, and will continue to occupy, an increasingly important place in our family’s life’.⁷⁶

What characterised the Cempuis excursions was a rigorous preparation that included equipment for orienteering and for climatic and morphological studies. From the beginning of their experience, the Cempuis children were trained to make regular meteorological observations, which they did three times a day according to the standards of the Central Office of Meteorology, to which observations were periodically transmitted.⁷⁷ A deliberate awareness of geography and space affected both internal and external activities, including those that had the pupils working with their hands. For instance, the project and spatial arrangement of school typography was made over into a social activity. The printing laboratory was thought to be able to employ ‘up to twenty children’⁷⁸ and became the centre for printing the Cempuis *Bulletin* as well as propaganda pamphlets, which increasingly put to work older pupils besides the educators.

Other productive activities involved the school vegetable gardens and animal farm, which were regarded as resources for basic alimentation. The latter also represented a field for trying out a range of ideas: according to the *Bulletin* some pupils, encouraged by Robin, experimented with vegetarianism, whereas the majority consumed the meat of the school’s animals, including ‘pigs raised by the orphanage, one of which is killed every month’.⁷⁹ It is worth stressing that in their writings both Buisson and Guillaume viewed gardening and farming as a central learning activity. Guillaume stated that it was an essential task for ‘putting children in touch with nature’,⁸⁰ while Buisson admired, at the 1873 World Exposition in Vienna, the models representing primary schools where ‘the main garden contains at least one little garden for every child, who cultivates his plot in his/her own way’.⁸¹

The surroundings were firstly perceived in their morphological features. Cempuis is a toponym linked to the presence of numerous wells or pits (from the phrase *cent puits* – a hundred wells) due to the absence of surface water flows. The first itineraries were therefore directed to find the closest streams. As we know from the long quote above, water flow was a major pedagogical concern for Pestalozzi and Reclus. ‘Living on the watershed between the basins of the Somme and the Seine, we love going to visit the running waters which we are deprived of in the village of the hundred wells’.⁸²

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A consideration that we find in the same text recalls another feature of the then-current debates going on around the Buisson-Guillaume *Dictionary* and teaching through experience. When Cempuis pupils evoke ‘all the beauties by which our eyes were enchanted’⁸³ during their first long school trip, they use the same words and expressions that Reclus and his cousin Franz Schrader (1844-1924) employ, conjuring up the need to awaken the child’s wonderment for the imagination and ‘the gigantic. He wants absolutely that: he sees a stone, he imagines a boulder; he sees a molehill, he suddenly imagines a mountain’.⁸⁴ A complementary tool for excursions was the formation of a ‘velocipede squad, which boasted twelve bicycles and eight tricycles, one of which had been made in the orphanage’.⁸⁵

But as I have pointed out, social concerns, as well as naturalistic ones, were important, too. As the Cempuis children grew, they increasingly took part in writing articles for the *Bulletin*, showing an increasing class consciousness, which is on display in numerous remarks like those they made after the school holidays of 1884 (organised as a long collective excursion to the northern sea ports). They write that ‘these sea baths we have now were once a privilege for very few wealthy people’.⁸⁶ Direct participation of children to the bulletins and the propaganda activities was constantly increasing in the 14 years of the school’s history, as the first classes’ children grew. My sources do not detail individual contributions because in all the school’s publications children were anonymised, but I can argue that the difficulty in distinguishing their contributions from the adults’ ones was an effect to the application of a participative ‘school democracy’, which will characterize the later experiences of Summerhill and of radical education in general.⁸⁷ As I remarked, the first historian and defender of the Cempuis School was one of its first pupils, Gabriel Giroud.

I can conclude this section arguing that Cempuis and ‘integral education’ anticipated several features of the present-day alternative experiences studied by Kraftl who envisages, in their outdoor practices, the mobilisation of ‘more-than-social elements of life: the interaction and blurring of the “natural” and the “social” [which defines] learning (and life) as an ongoing series of collaboration between the “natural” and the “social”’.⁸⁸ According to Kraftl, practices of walking and tasks like farming, which characterise today several kinds of home schooling, are an

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instrument to (spatially) ‘break down a formal educational relationship between teacher and learner,’⁸⁹ who are no more face-to-face but side-by-side. One difference with the cases addressed by Kraftl, to my mind, is that in Cempuis walks, farming and gardening were not ‘distractions’ from more formal practices, but very structural and declared learning activities. In this vein, their ‘repetition’ seems to me not the institutionalisation of a routine, as in the theory of ‘habit’ discussed by Kraftl, but rather the opening of diverse possibilities to make a ‘school republic’ work, considering that the Cempuis’ documented walks were always different, planned with the participation of pupils and sometimes constituted by ‘explorations’ with a didactic explicit aim but without a definite destination.

3. The teaching of picturesque and intuitive geography

Beyond the material reality of excursions, the sector of knowledge which is now called geography was constantly practised at Cempuis; this started from the critical use of one of its more typical and more controversial tools, viz., the map. According to Giroud, the excursion groups were equipped with topographical military maps, whose deficiencies for educational use were regularly stressed by the author. ‘Even if the planimetry is correct, the terrain relief, both on the Military Staff maps and on the Local Service ones, is absurdly represented by an awful daubing which darkens the drawing and indicates nothing’.⁹⁰

This critique of the obscure cartographic symbols immediately brings to mind Reclus’s critique of flat maps, which he viewed as an ideological device and a false one which should be avoided in primary education. Thus, according to the anarchist geographer, maps ‘ought to be entirely tabooed. They must be tabooed, because maps are made on different scales, and that being so, it is quite impossible to compare them; and if you cannot compare them, it is only waste of time and trouble. In all well-conducted schools, globes should be used, and children ought to be entirely forbidden the use of maps’.⁹¹

Nevertheless, at Cempuis maps were not entirely outlawed, but they were critically analysed. In the school printing laboratory, advanced pupils produced in 1885 a world map based on a projection which differed from the ones then adopted in education, stating that ‘we need a better

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system than the Mercator cylindrical projection'.⁹² It is well known that the Mercator projection deformed the relative dimensions of countries and contributed to the construction of a Euro-Centrism,⁹³ but its questioning by a French orphanage in the 19th century is undoubtedly a very early instance of criticising imperial map projections. The Cempuis people preferred 'Lambert's conic projection, unfortunately unknown in primary education, which conserves relative surfaces everywhere'.⁹⁴ These activities for the production of geographical models and representations paralleled the introduction of the same practices in English schools analysed by Ploszajska, who argues that 'like fieldwork, with which it was closely associated both in principle and practice, modelling made children active participants in the acquisition of geographical knowledge'.⁹⁵ Once more, these practices echoed the debates on 'natural methods' promoted by Reclus and Kropotkin and assumed by Geddes.

Maps were also used for practical tasks linked to outdoor activities. One idea was the 'map under glass'. A military topographic representation of the region was covered with a glass panel on which children could draw and redraw itineraries and check them in the field. During an excursion to Beauvais, the 'map under glass' was 'attached to our wagon'⁹⁶ and regularly consulted. During 'the long 1888 trip through Bray, Neufchâtel, Dieppe, and Tréport, every excursionist had a map with an abstract, all chromatographed by one of them; they were generally *quarts* (quarter sections of maps) from the Military Staff'.⁹⁷

But among the characteristic features of the Cempuis excursions, the most significant was not the use of a map but of the most up-to-date equipment for orienteering and measuring. Robin had returned from his travels in Great Britain with several topographic devices like 'the prismatic compass' (Robin's term in English for what he calls a *boussole de réflexion*), 'a precious instrument still unknown in France, [which we used as well as] the aneroid barometer, the pedometer and sometimes the pocket sextant and the Abney level'.⁹⁸

Robin made an impressive list of the scientific instruments which the Cempuis students and teachers used during the sixteen-day trip they made on foot in the summer 1891 to their base for group holidays by the sea in the village of Mer-les-Bains. 'Notebook for drafts and notes; pencil;

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map of the region and itinerary; chronometer; compass; binoculars; magnifying glass; pedometer; aneroid barometer; box to collect plants; garden trowel; geologist's hammer; sewing kit; pharmacy kit'.⁹⁹

Alexis Sluys (1849-1939), a Belgian free-mason and freethinker, the director of Brussels' *École normale* and a great fan of Robin, was one of the teachers responsible for teaching geography at Cempuis. His interest in these topics started in the 1870s with the publication of an *Intuitive geography*.¹⁰⁰ In 1890, he was host to a Cempuis expedition in Brussels to promote an international conference against the exploitation of orphans' work, which was the usual practice in traditional orphanages, and to launch 'a new rationalist orphanage in Brussels'¹⁰¹ after the Cempuis model. Sluys wrote in the Cempuis journal *Fêtes pédagogiques*, on the teaching of geography in primary school, laying out arguments very close to those used by Kropotkin in his celebrated paper 'What Geography Ought to Be'¹⁰² on children's delight in nature and travel narratives, a sharp contrast with their deep boredom in geography classes based on memorised enumerations. Sluys quotes another Russian inspirer of libertarian pedagogy, Leo Tolstoy, endorsing his claims against 'arid nomenclatures... a jumble of names'.¹⁰³ But unlike Tolstoy, Sluys stressed the opportunity to teach geography from the earliest levels, if it was taught 'according to nature; otherwise, it is useless'.¹⁰⁴ In this sense, a true 'intuitive geography' should start with the schools surroundings, but without abstraction, and thus be grounded in the 'observation method',¹⁰⁵ which sprang from an example directly inspired by Reclus's *Histoire d'un ruisseau*,¹⁰⁶ namely 'the observation of the nearest stream'.¹⁰⁷ At this early stage, according to Sluys, teachers have to avoid erudite details like technical names and definitions, but try to stimulate pupils' curiosity to investigate and understand causal links between phenomena like rain and water runoff, or the source and the river. In this way, children were allowed to understand greater generalisation, until they realise the idea, clearly influenced by the 19th-century philosophy of nature, that 'the globe is no longer a set of disparate pieces, as it appears studying geography by fragments, but like a whole whose different parts are intrinsically linked among themselves'.¹⁰⁸ Among the recommended books of his ideal geography programme, Sluys names several of Reclus's works like *La Terre*, *Histoire d'un ruisseau* and *Histoire d'une montagne*,¹⁰⁹ while also endorsing popular writers on nature and adventure like Jules Verne and

Archibald Geikie. Sluys was the organiser of the sixteen-day school field trip of 1891, and relates in his diary several anecdotes, like the welcome the Cempuis group received in the village of Sainte-Marguerite by the secretary of the Paris Geographical Society, Charles Maunoir.¹¹⁰

And among the authors quoted by Sluys, we find Charles Delon (1839-1900), one of the other Cempuis ‘geographers’. This maverick figure, like other protagonists of secular education at the time, had renounced his public appointment as a schoolteacher under the Second Empire in 1859 by refusing to swear loyalty to Napoleon III.¹¹¹ Working as a people’s teacher and a writer, Delon was then one of the early cultural channels of the ideas of Pestalozzi and Fröbel in France. In this he collaborated with Marie Pape-Carpantier (1815-1878), one of the first women involved in the establishment of public nurseries, inspiring the work of Pauline Kergomard-Reclus (1838-1925) under the Third Republic. A cousin of Elisée Reclus, Kergomard-Reclus worked with Guillaume and Buisson.¹¹² In particular, Delon was interested in ‘clearing Fröbel’s system of all metaphysics, to reform and supplement it scientifically’.¹¹³ The task of secularising Protestant thinkers like Ritter, Pestalozzi and Fröbel, a clearly political undertaking, was often presented as a cultural transfer between the German and French linguistic areas. According to Delon, ‘to make [this method] a French one, it had to be freed, it had to be naturalised to be established among us’.¹¹⁴ Taking his cues from Fröbel’s *Kindergarten*, Delon was also interested in space, remarking that the interior layout of schoolrooms was different from the traditional system still used in France; for instance, ‘daises are suppressed’¹¹⁵ and the organisation of internal and external spaces thus had to be arranged to allow children freedom of movement in order to develop their ‘integral’ capacities. As at Cempuis, music and songs were very important in the Fröbel system. They accompanied every walk and set the pace. ‘They sing a great deal in the Fröbel school. They sing to mark the rhythm in play and walks, before and after study, during the distribution of work’.¹¹⁶

As for activities outside the school walls, the other of Delon’s points of reference was clearly Pestalozzi’s valley walks, which the French teacher described using the plan of Reclus’ *Histoire d’un ruisseau*. Delon’s richly illustrated *Géographie pittoresque* was plainly an attempt to adapt Reclus’s work to a very early level of learning, whose first step was the ‘topographic walk in the

valley’,¹¹⁷ from which the young pupils would get outdoor exercise and form an idea of their first geographic models, based on what Delon ironically called a *charmante école buissonnière*,¹¹⁸ or charming day skiing off school.

We can thus assume that the Cempuis orphanage was the most advanced attempt to put into practice the debates fuelled by Buisson’s *Dictionary*, which included arguments that were often too ‘revolutionary’ to be introduced by the French state. Moreover, the French government was not unanimous in its appreciation of works by Buisson and other *instituteurs laïques*, or lay teachers, and the changes of ministers and governments implied different practical choices. Cempuis and Robin were targeted for a long time by the French Catholic and conservative press, which was scandalised by mixed-sex education, calling such arrangements a ‘pigsty’ and eventually obtaining Robin’s dismissal in 1894, even though he was hotly defended by Buisson and Kergomard, and all the alleged episodes of ‘immorality’ were never proved.¹¹⁹ Benjamin Buisson compared Cempuis to the mythic orphanage managed by Pestalozzi in Switzerland, ‘We went to Cempuis the way people once went to Yverdon to see Pestalozzi’.¹²⁰ It is worth stressing the strong commitment of French anarchists and secular educators in what was later called ‘gender parity’ and in defending the works of female teachers like Pauline Kergomard-Reclus, often demonized by the conservative press. Mixed-sex education was in this sense a very pioneering effort, if we consider for instance that, according to Elizabeth Gagen, teaching to both girls and boys, in the USA, still posed problems in the middle of the 20th century.¹²¹

From that moment on, anarchist schools were generally created through self-financing and self-management in order to be independent of the state’s politics and policies. Such was the case of two direct heirs of the Cempuis School, the Barcelona Modern School (1901-1906), which was run by Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, and Lausanne’s ‘Ferrer School’ (1909-1919). Both these experiments were directly inspired by Robin and geographers like Reclus and Kropotkin. I should also stress the internationalism of both anarchism and these experiments, witness, for instance, Robin’s efforts to introduce at Cempuis the teaching of several foreign languages.¹²²

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In the case of Barcelona, Francisco Ferrer worked directly with Elisée Reclus, whom Ferrer had known during his exile in France (1886-1901); at the time Reclus was settled in Brussels as the director of the Cartographic Institute at the *Université Nouvelle*, where he experimented with the construction of three-dimensional devices like raised-reliefs and ‘globular maps’¹²³ to resolve the aforementioned problem of the inadequacy of flat maps. It should be emphasised that part of these devices were intended for use in anarchist schools like the one in Barcelona. There were, for example, ‘little cardboard globes [meant to be] indestructible: pupils can drop them’.¹²⁴ Cartography was thus adapted to the needs of an active education, one which involved not only visual abilities, but also the other senses. Ferrer participated directly in the design of Reclus’s ‘spherical maps’ by trying them out at the Modern School and going over the experience with the geographer. ‘Our teachers loved the spherical map very much, but one made an observation, wondering if it is not too small to be seen in the classroom’.¹²⁵

Even if based in an urban context, the Barcelona Modern School applied the idea of external fieldwork as an integral part of educational spaces, including in this case the industrial environs of Barcelona. A 1903 visit to the textile factories of Sabadell was for children the occasion to become aware of workers’ conditions.¹²⁶ A 1904 trip beyond the French border to visit the Banyuls-sur-Mer research station in maritime biology was also a chance for teachers and pupils to have material contact with the phenomenon of national boundaries, discussing the oddity of different flags waving over regions like Catalonia and Roussillon, where local dialects were not that different from each other.¹²⁷ The Modern School was closed in 1906 by the authorities and Ferrer began a new exile in France; returning to Spain in 1909, he was murdered by the Spanish state, as I have already explained. During the campaign of international solidarity to win his release, Ferdinand Buisson declared that Ferrer was ‘the representative of the French Revolution in Spain’.¹²⁸



Fig. 3. The Ferrer School at work (*Bulletin de l'École Ferrer*, 1, 1913, p. 3)

Another of Cempuis's heirs, Lausanne's Ferrer School, was devoted to the memory of Ferrer and his work. Its programme directly recalled Robin's integral education which is explicitly laid out there, 'To give [pupils] too early on manuals with definitive phrases that dispense them from turning to the work of their hands, eyes, and intelligence means, as Rousseau said, to accustom them to always believe and never know'.¹²⁹ Reclus was likewise one of the most quoted references, not the least because of his direct links with some of the founders and inspirers of the school.¹³⁰ Invoking Reclus and Geikie, the teachers of the Ferrer School argued that 'for children, books on natural sciences are useless; what is more needed is learning to observe on the spot, to do botany in fields and woods, to study atmosphere, stones, insects, birds, and animals along the way and in the midst of natural surroundings'.¹³¹ In one of the last issues of the school bulletin we find one of the most expressive definitions for the adoption of a learning space that includes open-air practices (Fig. 3), borrowed from the French historian Jules Michelet, 'The human flower, according to Michelet, is the one which needs the most sun'.¹³²

Conclusion

The present paper is but a first attempt to explore and analyse, through archive work, historical and current spaces of anarchist education, a rich field of research that deserves greater scholarly interest. Historical anarchist education was a pioneering approach in pedagogies that were secular, anti-patriarchal and based on children activism; this research has shown that geographers and geography, rather neglected by much of the existing historiography on these schools, in fact played a primary role in the foundation and functioning of anarchist schools like the ones in Cempuis, Barcelona, and Lausanne, and established a series of pedagogical practices relevant for the cultural historical geographies of education discussed in the quoted papers by Mills and Ploszajska.

Beyond geography in a disciplinary sense, however, my aim was to show that the discussion around and practice of the ‘right’ places and spaces for secular and liberated teaching and learning were of fundamental importance to anarchist educators; for now I can conclude that historical anarchist education possessed its own spatiality, which was firstly defined by the deliberate choice of open-air spaces and unconstrained open-air activities. It was not a rigid or unique space, but a broad definition of open spaces as a dimension that allows the expression of liberated teaching. It was mainly the result of an in-depth critique of closed spaces as mechanisms that form subjects, not citizens, and is best put in Reclus’s statement, anticipating some of Foucault’s own, that ‘it will not be in narrow rooms with barred windows that brave and honest people will grow’.¹³³

I also argue that the integration of manual, physical and intellectual practices, consistent with anarchist social theory,¹³⁴ further stimulated the development of free and open-air spatiality, providing an early critique of the alienation of work, while introducing in the early stages of education something like the concept of ‘attractive work’.¹³⁵ In fact, the ironic references to extramural activities as an *école buissonnière*, and the organisation of holidays as school excursions, were part of the questioning of the separation of school time and recreation time, which was in turn a questioning of the separation of school spaces and external spaces.

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In this sense, I can argue that what is important for anarchist education in these early experiences is the idea of a school which directly engages with society and which can be a tool for social emancipation, rather than a naturalistic ‘estrangement’. Current debates on childhood and policy have stressed the political nature of childhood and questioned the commonplace of children as passive ‘victims’ of great historical dramas, arguing that they could have an agency in political struggles.¹³⁶ Early anarchist education should be considered, then, as a specific childhood and youth policy aiming to help individuals grow and acquire their own critical instruments, which should allow them to deal with a future social transformation. The question of the influence of this movement, and of Buisson’s secular education, out of France and Southern Europe is still open and deserves further research, but I argue that an important deal of this posterity transited, generally in indirect ways, through the works of Patrick Geddes and Pyotr Kropotkin, who both exercised strong influence on English-speaking geographers and educators.¹³⁷

About Kraftl’s questioning of the spaces of alternative education, one answer that we can retrieve from the Cempuis’ experience is the idea that the best alternative educational space should be the real world. Kraftl argues that, in home schooling, ‘if learning flows from everyday life, children’s exposure to the greatest variety of everybody spaces is crucial’¹³⁸ and this leads to the ‘general idea among alternative (and radical) educators that learning should be imminent and immanent to everyday life’.¹³⁹ Thus, early anarchist experiments have something important to add to current debates on these topics, for instance by reinforcing the idea, equally expressed by Kraftl, that essays in diverse education are more than a mere alternative to the mainstream, because they ‘constitute and provoke reflection about alternative visions and versions of life-itself’¹⁴⁰ and should be, like in the case of Cempuis, a ‘public endeavour’¹⁴¹ towards the whole society. In this sense, they allow to ‘affirm practices that involve some kind of utopian impulse but which too are grounded in real-world practices’ affording ‘a sense that alternatives are possible, and not merely desirable’.¹⁴² In Cempuis, this alternative was anarchism.

¹ F.Codello, *La buona educazione: esperienze libertarie e teorie anarchiche in Europa da Godwin a Neill* (Milano: Angeli, 2005); C.Heimberg, *L’œuvre des travailleurs eux-mêmes? Valeurs et espoirs dans le mouvement ouvrier genevois au tournant du siècle (1885-1914)* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996) ; C.Heimberg ‘L’écho de l’éducation nouvelle au sein de l’École Ferrer lausannoise (1910-1921)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 42, 2006, pp. 49-61 ; C. Heimberg, J.

Wintsch, *L'École Ferrer de Lausanne* (Lausanne: Entremonde, 2009) ; M.Landolfi, 'L'utopia libertaria delle scuole moderne: da Ferrer alla scuola di Clivio', *Rivista storica dell'anarchismo*, 7, 2000, pp. 69-94; H.Lenoir, *Précis d'éducation libertaire ou Le livre du « ni maître »*; suivi de Victor Considérant, un utopiste et un éducationniste bien oublié (Paris: Éditions du Monde libertaire, 2011).

² P.Avrich, *The Modern School movement: anarchism and education in the United States* (Princeton: AK, 2006).

³ C.Romani, 'Da Biblioteca Popular à Escola Moderna. Breve história da ciência e educação libertária na América do Sul'. *Educacão Libertaria*, São Paulo, 1, 2006, pp. 87-100.

⁴ M.De Vroede 'Francisco Ferrer et la ligue internationale pour l'éducation rationnelle de l'enfance', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, 19, 1979, pp. 278-295; R.Rosa da Silva, *Anarquismo, ciência e educação: Francisco Ferrer y Guardia e a rede de militantes e cientistas em torno do ensino racionalista (1890-1920)*, São Paulo: Unpublished Dissertaton, 2013 ; S. Wagnon, *Francisco Ferrer: une éducation libertaire en héritage* (Lyon: Atelier de création libertaire, 2013).

⁵ N.Brémard, *Cempuis : une expérience d'éducation libertaire à l'époque de Jules Ferry, 1880-1894* (Paris: Éditions du Monde libertaire, 1992); M.Brunet, 'Ferdinand Buisson et James Guillaume, une histoire d'amitié'. *La Révolution prolétarienne*, 777, 2012 ; M.Brunet, *Ferdinand Buisson et les socialistes libertaires* (Lichères-sur-Yonne: M. Brunet-Giry, 2014) ; C.Demeulenaere-Douyere, *Paul Robin (1837-1912): un militant de la liberté et du bonheur* (Paris: Publisud, 1994).

⁶ S.Mills, 'Geographies of education, volunteering and the lifecourse: the Woodcraft Folk in Britain (1925-75)', *Cultural Geographies*, 1, 2014, pp. 1-17; K.Gulson, C.Symes (eds.), *Spatial theories of education: policy and geography matters* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); S.L.Holloway, G.Valentine, 'Spatiality and the new social studies of childhood', *Sociology*, 34, 2000, pp. 763-783.

⁷ S.L.Holloway, H.Jöns, 'Geographies of education and learning', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37, 2012, p. 482.

⁸ D.Collins, T.Coleman, 'Social Geographies of Education: looking within, and beyond, school boundaries', *Geography Compass*, 2/1, 2008, p. 291.

⁹ S.L. Holloway, P.Hubbard, H.Jöns, H.Pimlott-Wilson, 'Geographies of education and the significance of children, youth and families', *Progress in Human Geography*, 34, 2010, p. 594.

¹⁰ F.Codello, *Vaso, creta o fiore? Ne riempire, ne plasmare ma educare* (Lugano: La Baronata, 2005).

¹¹ P.Kraftl, *Geographies of alternative education, diverse learning spaces for children and young people* (Chicago: Policy Press, 2013), p. 256.

¹² Op. cit., p. 158.

¹³ P.Clerc, *La culture scolaire en géographie, le monde dans la classe* (Rennes: PUR, 2002) ; M.Monnard, 'L'école, lieu(x) de vie: une exploration cartographique du quotidien scolaire', *Visionscarto*, 2015, <http://visionscarto.net/ecole-lieux-de-vie>

¹⁴ A.S.Neill, *Summerhill: a radical approach to child-rearing* (London: Penguin Book, 1990).

¹⁵ F.Rouhani, 'Practice what you teach: facilitating anarchism in and out of the classroom', *Antipode*, 44, 2012, p. 1729.

¹⁶ S. Mills, 'Young ghosts: ethical and methodological issues of historical research in children's geographies', *Children's Geographies*, 10, 2012, p. 357.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 358.

¹⁸ C. Withers, 'Constructing the geographical archive', *Area* 34, 2004, p. 303-311.

¹⁹ F.Buisson (ed.) *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire* (Paris:Hachette, 1878-1887); F.Buisson (ed.) *Nouveau Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'Instruction primaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1911-1914); A.Fontaine, *Transferts culturels et déclinaisons de la pédagogie européenne: le cas franco-romand au travers de l'itinéraire d'Alexandre Daguét (1816-1894)*, Fribourg: Unpublished Dissertation, 2013.

²⁰ F.Ferretti, *Élisée Reclus : pour une géographie nouvelle* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2014); P.Pelletier, *Géographie et anarchie, Reclus, Kropotkine, Metchnikoff* (Paris: Éditions du Monde Libertaire, 2013); S.Springer, A.Ince, J.Pickerill, G.Brown, A.Barker, 'Reanimating anarchist geographies: a new burst of colour' *Antipode*, 44, 2012, pp. 1591-1604 ; S.Springer, 'Anarchism and geography: a brief genealogy of anarchist geographies,' *Geography Compass*, 7, 2013, pp. 46-60.

²¹ A.Pritchard, *Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²² Brémard, *Cempuis*; Lenoir, *Ni Maître*.

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- ²⁵ Brunet, *Ferdinand Buisson*.
- ²⁶ Buisson, *Dictionnaire*.
- ²⁷ D.Denis, P.Kahn, *L'école républicaine et la question des savoirs : enquête au cœur du Dictionnaire de pédagogie de Ferdinand Buisson* (Paris: CNRS, 2003); P.Dubois, *Le Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire de Ferdinand Buisson : répertoire biographique des auteurs* (Paris-Lyon-Rouen: INRP, 2002); V.Peillon, *Une religion pour la République: la foi laïque de Ferdinand Buisson* (Paris: Seuil, 2010) ; S.Tomei, *Ferdinand Buisson (1841-1932), protestantisme libéral, foi laïque et radical-socialisme* (Lille: ANRT, 2004).
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- ⁵³ *BOP* 1, November 1882, p. 6.
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- ⁵⁶ Brémand, *Cempuis*, p. 74.
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- ⁶¹ Dubois, *Le Dictionnaire de Pédagogie*, p. 18.
- ⁶² Giroud, *Cempuis*, p. 63.
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- ⁶⁴ Giroud, *Cempuis*, p. 64.
- ⁶⁵ Op. cit., p. 64.
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