

Introduction

Creative Extensions

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Henri Bergson (1859–1941) did not write a book of political philosophy or one that dealt specifically with race or colonialism. “What interest[ed] him,” Philippe Soulez writes, “[were] problems, rather than a subject matter or discipline.”¹ After a cursory read through Bergson’s works, one might conclude the problems that concerned Bergson most were consciousness, memory, temporality, and freedom. To consider Bergson a philosopher of race and/or colonialism might seem to be a stretch for many. Nevertheless, Bergson’s work did carry tremendous influence for many thinkers grappling with these sociopolitical phenomena. As we highlight throughout this volume, while Bergson’s writings were not themselves directly attuned to the themes of race and colonialism, prominent philosophical traditions within Latin America, Africa, and Black Europe were analyzing and extending his work within distinct geopolitical contexts.² It is thus our hope that this volume will demonstrate and justify why thinking with and beyond Bergson is useful for diagnosing and challenging our thinking about race and colonialism.

Regarding the status of *Beyond* in our title, we mean that this book is not an apology for a distinguished philosopher, nor is it a return to philosophy bound up within a sociohistorical context different from our own without adapting that philosophy to meet the changes that have occurred over the last century. Rather, we have something in mind akin to Gilles Deleuze’s concluding words in *Bergsonism*: “A ‘return to Bergson’ does not

only mean a renewed admiration for a great philosopher but a renewal of his project today, in relation to the transformations of life and society.”³ In this vein, we want to reconsider some old problems, a few with which Bergson was familiar, by extending his thought in new and creative ways. Likewise, we want to apply Bergson’s thought to questions unknown or not discussed by the philosopher. And, we hope, like Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, “To show that Bergson does not just offer a new solution to already established problems, but, in keeping with the methodological privilege he gives to them, he dissolves or reconfigures the formation of the problem itself.”⁴ Thus, our aim in this volume is to shed light on systems of oppression such as racism and colonialism, and on the creative possibilities for resistance to these forms of oppression from the theoretical influences of Bergsonism. In what follows, we highlight some relevant biographical details of Bergson’s political career, and then connect his work to the topics of race and colonialism. Finally, we close with an outline of the chapters in this volume and some suggested pathways to move through the text.

Bergson’s Political Career

Bergson left his mark on early twentieth century internationalism. For instance, John Humphrey, one of the main authors of the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), was significantly influenced by Bergson. According to Clinton Curle, “Humphrey kept a journal of his private thoughts during his early tenure at the United Nations. From these journals, it is apparent that he came to view the *Universal Declaration* in terms of Bergson’s book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.”⁵ Years earlier, during World War I, particularly in 1916, Bergson became a French emissary to Spain and delivered lectures at the Ateneo de Madrid. In February 1917, Bergson (unofficially) visited the United States, and through this visit, French Premier Aristide Briand had hoped that Bergson would passionately encourage Woodrow Wilson to enter the war.

After war ceased toward the end of 1918, the Paris Peace Conference provided the blueprint for peace between the Allied victors and the Central Powers. During the conference, which lasted from January 18, 1919 to June 28, 1919 (the fifth anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand), Bergson took on the role of liaison between France and the United States. The Conference resulted in five peace treaties, including the Treaty of Versailles, and the creation of the League of Nations, which was

officially founded on January 10, 1920, with the purpose of maintaining international peace. Bergson served as chair of the League's International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) from the summer of 1922 until 1925, when he resigned due to illness. The ICIC had a joint goal, namely, to cultivate both scientific cooperation and moral fraternity and solidarity.⁶ Bergson later wrote in *The Two Sources* that "anyone who is thoroughly familiar with the language and literature of a people cannot be wholly its enemy. This should be borne in mind when we ask education to pave the way for international understanding."⁷ Looking back, it is clear that Bergson had thought for many years about how to establish and maintain a peaceful internationalism. The League and its aim of peace were not solely political in origin but, at least for Bergson, were mystical and religious. The League of Nations was rooted in and buttressed by mystical intuition—something very distant from the mechanical rationalization of the factory (and of the gas chamber). The ICIC more specifically sought to increase communication between nations by creating a network of shared projects through which scholarship could be translated from one language to another, students and researchers could participate in the scientific and artistic life of different countries via exchange programs, and knowledge could be more readily and accessibly disseminated. These new networks, it was thought, held the potential for fostering a strong sense of community and belonging among the member states of the League.⁸ Sadly, by 1939, Hitler's invasion of Poland inaugurated the second Great War, bringing with it another holocaust.⁹

Race and Colonialism

In *Humanism and Terror*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty highlights the extent to which our species is capable of both profound beauty and sublime violence: "The human world is an open or unfinished system and the same radical contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the inevitability of disorder and prevents us from despairing of it, providing only that one remembers its various machineries are actually men and tries to maintain and expand man's relations to man."¹⁰ In one line of thought, we might consider how modernity began with the hunting of Black peoples and continued with the atomic bomb.¹¹ It wears the mask of progress while hiding its thanatocratic nature, that is, its capacity for killing all human lives—both friend and foe. The modern era is one of contradiction. On

the one hand, it lifts up the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. On the other hand, it requires of itself unjust habits of, including but not limited to, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, gender discrimination, and colonial violence. Racism, for example, is, as Soulez claims, “the flipside of the refusal to ‘know’ the other, namely to acknowledge or ‘recognize’ him [*sic*]. Naturalizing the difference (by biologizing it) opens the way to extermination.”¹² As Bergson notes, a “veil of ignorance, preconceptions and prejudices” exists between one and the other, and this veil leads to all manner of injustice.¹³

The notion of justice brings to the fore other related ideas such as equality and, more recently, rights.¹⁴ Justice, as it relates to equality, involves determining the proper relation of one thing to another by appealing to a third thing. Take, for instance, the rights of citizens within a so-called free society such as the United States. In a formal sense, affluent white men and poor Women of Color are equal with regard to a third, namely, the neutral deraced and desexed citizen of the U.S. Constitution. Much work has already been done to show how this “anonymous citizen” figure reinforces white supremacist and sexist values in so far as white men with material resources are implicitly (and often explicitly) the paradigmatic citizen. It is worth noting for our present purpose how this third category is predicated on the social norms of (closed) society. In short, the closed society can only support a relative justice. Bergson writes,

Justice has always evoked ideas of equality, or proportion, of compensation [. . .] The idea [of justice] must have already taken shape as far back as the days of exchange and barter; however rudimentary a community may be, it barter, and it cannot barter without first finding out if the objects exchanged are really equal in value, that is to say, both exchangeable for a definite third object.¹⁵

Such an economy of exchange will have all things reduced to their value in the market. At some point, and we have already been at this point for some time, human life will be valued with regard to one’s economic value, which will be based on one’s productivity while also leaving room for any one particular person to be expendable. This is the fate of neocolonial finance capitalism of the twenty-first century.

Absolute justice, however, exceeds the social determination of the third thing—a constitution or money. Rather than affirming a person’s value (citizen or not) by tying this value to an equality of rights, absolute justice

affirms the incommensurate value of every person.¹⁶ Absolute justice is none other than the love for all persons. This is not the same as, for example, the color-blindness approach to racism defended by some liberals. Color-blindness obfuscates the failures of systemic racism and addresses (perhaps) the intentions of whites while ignoring the consequences of whites' actions. Absolute justice bypasses the problems of identity politics. One can respect persons in their particularity without having this particularity be a condition for equal rights. Bergson appears to have in mind here that one ought to be affirmatively indifferent to difference. This suggests that one acknowledges differences among persons and, at the same time, defends the equality of all persons regardless of these differences. In practice, this means to begin with the social conditions in which people find themselves—such conditions are in no way equitable—and strive for what Aimé Césaire describes as “a humanism made for the measure of the world.”¹⁷ Put differently, absolute justice must be “[drawn] out to infinity.”¹⁸ There will always be more injustice to alleviate. Every society is a mixture of tendencies toward closure and openness. Put differently, there are no purely closed or purely open societies. Nevertheless, our world would be better off if the tendency toward openness were actualized much more often.

This volume seeks to unsettle the sedimentation of unjust binaries—white/black, male/female, colonizer/colonized, friend/enemy, primitive/civilized, self/other—and cast doubt on the oft held belief that Western rationalization and industrialization will bring about human flourishing on a global scale.¹⁹ The key to human flourishing, however, lies not in walled sovereignties and nation-states, not in sexist patriarchy or racist white supremacy, but rather in the tendency toward the open—that is, the indeterminate, inclusive, and welcoming—society. Bergson writes, “Between the nation, however great it might be, and humanity there exists the distance that separates the finite from the indefinite, the closed and the open.”²⁰ Nations are grounded in a logic of exclusion, which in turn keeps us from embarking on the fecund adventure of our proper humanity, that is, of actualizing the tendency toward an open society.

Structure of the Volume

Part I, “Bergson on Colonialism, Social Groups, and the State,” begins the volume with an analysis of Bergson's treatment of conceptions of social group cohesion, history, and the formation of modern nation-states. The authors collected here demonstrate that Bergson's writings help to provide clarity

for long-standing debates within political philosophy that pertain specifically to race and colonial violence. Chapter 1 by Alia Al-Saji, “Decolonizing Bergson,” brings readers to the theme of temporality in Bergson’s work in an attempt, in her words, to *decolonize* his writings. Taking *The Two Sources on Morality and Religion* as a primary text, Al-Saji proposes that the concept of the “half-open,” rather than an open/closed dichotomy, bypasses liberalist conceptions of temporality that frame the history of colonial oppression. Chapter 2, “The Language of Closure,” by Martin Shuster, analyses the political foundations of state formation, and offers Bergson’s conception of language as a means to interpret the relationship between homogeneity and difference among state populations. Chapter 3, “The Politics of Sympathy in Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*,” by Melanie White, further interrogates threads of group cohesion through an analysis of sympathy in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. In this vein, White argues that Bergson’s conception of sympathy may offer a fruitful theoretical site from which to explore systemic forms of racism and exclusion.

Part II, “Bergsonian Themes in the Négritude Movement,” examines the influence of Bergsonism on that movement. In chapter 4, titled “Bergson, Senghor, and the Philosophical Foundations of Négritude,” Clevis Headley maps out several aspects of Bergson’s thought, particularly the notions of intellect, intuition, and duration and the role of science with regard to knowledge production. After providing the reader with the necessary scaffolding for understanding Bergsonism, Headley explores the status of Négritude as presented by poet, politician, and culture critic Léopold Sédar Senghor. Many critics of Négritude have prematurely denounced Négritude as being guilty of endorsing various unsavory notions: racism, essentialism, nativism, and naive ideological mystification. Headley pushes against such critics by claiming that it is only in the context of acknowledging Senghor’s debt to Bergson and his involvement with African art forms that his positive assessment of emotion and his limiting of the scope of reason make philosophical sense. In chapter 5, “The Spectacle of Belonging,” Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel considers how Bergson’s *Laughter*—with its unique discussion of how the sight of the Black body provokes laughter from whites—was reconsidered by the editors of the renowned Négritude movement journal *La revue du monde noir*. For Haitian doctor Leo Sajous and Martinican journalist Paulette Nardal, *Laughter* became a tool used for scrutinizing the connection between nationalism and racial performativity. In short, Joseph-Gabriel argues that Négritude writers rethought Bergson’s comical Negro trope—foregrounding the adverse effects of colonialism on the Black psyche—by highlighting the link between colonial ideology and comedy.

Finally, part III, “Race, Revolution, and Bergsonism in Latin America,” highlights the tremendous influence that Bergson had in the context of nationalist, socialist, and antipositivist movements throughout the Americas. Chapter 6, Adriana Novo’s “Racial Becomings,” demonstrates how uses of Bergsonism within recent developments by feminists within the Anglophone discourse of “New Materialisms” has rich historical precursors in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Latin American thought. Novo provides a substantial overview of the scientific and philosophical debates during these periods in Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, and the means by which authors in these geopolitical contexts utilized, extended, and critiqued Bergson’s views on vitalism, evolution, and temporality. Chapter 7, “Bergsonism in Postrevolutionary Mexico,” by Andrea J. Pitts, focuses more specifically on the writings of Mexican philosopher and educator Antonio Caso. Pitts analyzes the influence of Bergson’s conception of intuition on early-twentieth-century postrevolutionary Mexican philosophy, and more specifically, the significance of his thought on Caso’s articulation of aesthetic intuition. The book concludes with chapter 8, “Antagonism and Myth,” by Jaime Hanneken, who analyzes the influence of Bergsonism on Peruvian socialist theorist José Carlos Mariátegui. Mariátegui, Hanneken argues, drew from a Bergsonian thread of thought found within George Sorel’s writings to develop a political role for mythmaking within revolutionary struggle. “The myth of the general strike,” according to Hanneken, creates the conditions of collective memory and struggle necessary to mobilize indigenous peasant workers in Peru. The conclusion of Hanneken’s chapter also brings the volume back to themes from the foreword of this volume—namely, the optimism in a creative capacity within philosophical thinking that we find in Lawlor’s remarks on Bergson surfaces again in Hanneken’s articulation of community transformation and political mythmaking. From these distinct discursive contexts we glean hope for future extensions, critiques, and elaborations of the many philosophical questions regarding race and colonialism that can be framed through the writings of Bergson.

Creative Pathways through the Volume

We close our introduction here by offering some suggested pathways by which readers of this volume can navigate the many themes, contexts, and sources discussed in this collection. For readers who are interested in Bergson’s writings on humor and the social imagination, the chapters by Shuster, White, Joseph-Gabriel, Pitts, and Hanneken offer extensive analyses of these themes.

With respect to theme of Bergsonian temporality, the chapters offered by Headley, Al-Saji, and Novoa focus specifically on the relationship between history, time, and duration. Regarding philosophical questions about the formation of racial group identities and collective resistance, the works by White, Headley, Joseph-Gabriel, Novoa, and Hanneken each provide distinct perspectives that highlight how Bergsonism may be used to address such questions. A number of works in the volume also bring to light themes within the recent philosophical discourse of New Materialisms, including the chapters by Al-Saji, Novoa, and Pitts. Additionally, for readers interested in Bergson's conceptualization of sympathy, Lawlor, White, and Headley all address this concept at varying lengths. Last, with respect to attention to Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, we offer here a number of chapters exploring the dynamics of that text, such as those by Al-Saji, Shuster, White, and Pitts. From these many perspectives we hope that our readers are able to creatively explore the many options available through Bergsonism, and that our readers find new and dynamic ways of approaching questions of race and colonialism through and beyond his work.

Notes

1. Philippe Soulez, "Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political," trans. Melissa McMahon, in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 109.

2. Although we do not offer analyses of these genealogical threads in the volume, Bergson's work has also had a significant impact on writings within Muslim and Asian philosophical thought, including in the work of authors such as Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899–1968), Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), and Liang Shuming (1893–1988). Japan, in particular, has a long history of Bergson scholarship including Kiyoshi Miki (1897–1945), Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), and Hajime Tanabe (1885–1962), as well as more recent scholars such as the founders of Project Bergson in Japan: Hisashi Fujita (1973–), Tatsuya Higaki (1964–), and Naoki Sugiyama (1964–). See, for example, Yanming An, "Liang Shuming and Henri Bergson on Intuition: Cultural Context and the Evolution of Terms," *Philosophy of East and West* 47, no. 3 (1997): 337–62; Hisashi Fujita, "Bergson's Hand: Toward a History of (Non)-Organic Vitalism," *Substance* 114, 36, no. 3 (2007): 115–30; Saleh Omar, "Philosophical Origins of the Arab Ba'ath Party: The Work of Zaki Al-Arsuzi," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1996): 23–37; Susan Townsend, *Miki Kiyoshi 1897–1945: Japan's Itinerant Philosopher* (Boston: Leiden, 2009).

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 115.

4. Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White (eds.). *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 5. This is an excellent resource for considering Bergson's views on politics and religion.

5. Clinton Curle, *Humanité: John Humphrey's Alternative Account of Human Rights* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6.

6. See Henri Bergson, *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 1351.

7. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 286. Hereafter referred to as "TSMR."

8. See Philippe Soulez, *Bergson politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989).

9. Following decolonial theorists such as Aimé Césaire, we refer to "another holocaust" because European colonial powers, for several centuries, had already committed acts of mass genocide and mechanized extermination outside of Europe.

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 188.

11. According to Marx, capitalism began with the "hunting of black skins," that is, with the dehumanization and commodification of Black peoples. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I. Introduced by Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 915.

12. Soulez, "Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political," 110.

13. *TSMR*, 285.

14. For Bergson's discussion of rights in *TSMR*, see pp. 74–81 and 281–83.

15. *TSMR*, 69.

16. *Ibid.*, 74.

17. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 73.

18. *TSMR*, 74.

19. For a criticism of how the market serves as a rubric for flourishing, see *TSMR*, 306.

20. *TSMR*, 32.