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Einstein, Bergson, and the experiment that failed: Intellectual cooperation at the League of Nations¹

ON APRIL 6, 1922 HENRI BERGSON and Albert Einstein confronted each other at a meeting of the Société française de philosophie.² It is commonly asserted that during the meeting Bergson lost to the young physicist. Bergson, subsequent commentators have insisted, made an essential mistake by not understanding the *physics* of relativity.³ Their confrontation exemplified the victory of “rationality” against “intuition.” It was a key moment demonstrating that intellectuals (like Bergson) were unable to keep up with revolutions in science (like Einstein’s). For the physicists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, the “historical origins” of the Science Wars lay in Einstein’s and Bergson’s fateful meeting. Since then, they have seen the malaise of *le bergsonisme* continuing to spread — recently reaching “Deleuze, after passing through Jankélévitch and Merleau-Ponty.”⁴

Bergson, however, never acknowledged defeat. According to him, it was Einstein and his interlocutors who did not understand *him*.⁵ He attempted to clarify his views in no less than three appendices to his famous book *Durée et Simultanéité*, in a separate article “Les temps fictifs et les temps réel” (May 1924), and in a long footnote to *La Pensée et le mouvant*. Despite these attempts many of his previous followers abandoned him. Gaston Bachelard, for example, referred to him as the philosopher who had lost against Einstein. But others, like Merleau-Ponty, persisted in defending him. This small group resigned themselves to being categorized by Einstein’s defenders as retrogrades, irrationals and ignorant. Among the most important thinkers who have since followed the debate we can list: Gaston Bachelard, Léon Brunschvicg, Gilles Deleuze, Emile Meyerson, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Maritain, Karl Popper, Bertrand Russell, Paul Valéry, and Alfred North Whitehead.

In what follows I will give an account of the Einstein – Bergson debate in science by paying particular attention to how it affected a political debate occurring at the same time. The context involves an institution founded on the hope that if intellectuals could learn to cooperate then nations might follow: the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (CIC) of the League of Nations, a forerunner of UNESCO. Disagreements between Bergson and Einstein plagued the Commission until it was informally dissolved 1939, in the face of a second world war.

The political views of Bergson and Einstein and the history of scientific internationalism have been amply studied before.⁶ Yet the *scientific* Bergson – Einstein debate taking place simultaneously with the

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² The meeting was recounted in the *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, vol. 22, no. 3, July 1922, pp. 102–113. It was reprinted in Bergson, *Ecrits et Paroles*, vol. 3, pp. 497, and in Henri Bergson, “Discussion avec Einstein,” in *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

³ The main proponent of the view that Bergson did not sufficiently understand the physics of relativity is Thomas Hanna (ed.), *The Bergsonian Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 23. Other notable examples include A. d’Abro, Olivier Costa de Beauregard, and Ilya Prigogine.

⁴ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, “Un regard sur l’histoire des rapports entre science et philosophie: Bergson et ses successeurs,” in *Impostures Intellectuelles* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997), 166.

⁵ Bergson explained how “the book has been frequently misunderstood” in Henri Bergson, “La Pensée et le mouvant,” in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991 (1934)), 1280–83 n. 1 on p. 81.

⁶ For Einstein’s early political views see Thomas Levenson, *Einstein in Berlin* (New York: Bantam 2003), p. 303 and Hubert Goenner, *Einstein in Berlin, 1914–1933* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), 291–95.

political Bergson – Einstein debate within the CIC have been considered as independent from each other.⁷ It is evident, however, that both Bergson and Einstein (as well as those around them) often drew connections between the two. This article explores these connections *symmetrically* to expose the ways in which boundaries between nature, science and politics shifted during this period.⁸ It is pertinent to study these shifts *first* to understand the ancillary debates in science and politics that have thus far dominated historiography.⁹

This episode marks an essential change in the place of science and philosophy in history. Einstein and Bergson debated about much more than the nature of time and simultaneity. At stake in their debate was the status of philosophy *vis à vis* physics. It was about who could speak for nature and about which of these two disciplines was going to have the “final” word.¹⁰

For Bergson’s politics in relation to his philosophy the classic account is: Philippe Soulez, *Bergson politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989).

⁷ This is the position taken in Rose-Marie Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson éducateur* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 122.

⁸ For a critique of the asymmetry present in the literature of science written from the perspective of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, see Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 39–46.

⁹ I am therefore primarily interested in tracking a shift between human and non-human time that took place during the debate between Bergson and Einstein, and seeing how this shift subsequently affected both science and politics. This change is an important subset of the broad divisions between man and animal and human and non-human studied by Giorgio Agamben: “It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man — has man been separated from non-man, and the animal and the human, that it is to take positions on great issues, on so-called human rights and values.” Giorgio Agamben, “*Mysterium disjunctionis*,” in *The Open: Man and Animal*, ed. Werner Hamacher (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16.

¹⁰ Instead of considering their debate as a delimited case of “endogenous critical inquiry,” I focus on the productive excesses of “shop-talk” that overflow into the broader cultural sphere. On “endogenous critical inquiry” see Michael Lynch, “Technical Work and Critical Inquiry: Investigations in a Scientific Laboratory,” *Social Studies of Science* 12 (1982).