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BERGSON, SERVANT OF COLONIALISM: EDUCATION AND EMPIRE IN NORTH AFRICA UNDER THE FRENCH THIRD REPUBLIC

Larry S. MCGRATH

In a 1923 review of the book, *Le Maroc, école d'énergie*, Henri Bergson praised a new “philosophy of colonisation.” Here are Bergson’s words at length:

L'indolence musulmane [...] n'est nullement un refus de travailler. Elle consiste, au fond, dans une indifférence radicale au changement. L'indigène ne croit pas que la vie puisse changer. Il ne juge donc pas nécessaire un effort soutenu : son énergie est brève, uniquement destiné à répondre aux nécessités du moment. La civilisation européenne, au contraire, implique une croyance à l'efficacité de l'effort. Ce contraste nous donne la clef du problème de la colonisation. Il faut partir de là pour comprendre ce que nous sommes venus faire au Maroc [...] Ce qu'on voit moins, c'est la force secrète qui, depuis la guerre de 1870, nous a poussés à coloniser : une révolte des énergies étouffées de notre race, un besoin d'agir et d'enseigner l'action. Les colonies en général, le Maroc en particulier, 'nous renvoient, vivifiée, la sève que nous leur prêtons.' Cette formule de M. de Tarde donne l'idée dominante de son livre [...] C'est, pourrait-on-dire, le premier chapitre d'une philosophie de la colonisation (Bergson 1972, 1395-6).

It's quite a passage! What's striking (at least to audiences in the twenty-first century) is not only Bergson's embrace of the French Empire in North Africa. Noteworthy as well, is his characterization of France's civilizing mission in the terms of energy, effort, and action — terms that suggest Bergson digested and justified colonialism through his own conceptual repertoire.

Bergson's 1923 review was not the lone blemish on his corpus. His politics has drawn criticism since World War I. Famously, Georges Politzer (1929) and Paul Nizan (1932) mounted accusations of nationalistic chauvinism. During the War, Bergson served as a French emissary and campaigned on behalf of the Allied cause. His diplomatic voyage to America in 1917 aimed to convince President Woodrow Wilson that French and American interests were aligned against Germany. In a meeting with the American Senator Albert Beveridge, Bergson inveighed against the Germans:

[T]hey do not recognize the great truth that other nations, with their different cultures, have a right to exist. We French, on the contrary, believe that when any people have developed into a nation they have proved their right to a separate existence, and that the thought, the ideal, the culture of that nation as thus developed is a contribution to the sum of human welfare (Bergson 2002, 623-4).

Beveridge responded, "Have you not done the same in the case of your possessions and colonies, Algiers, Morocco and the rest?" To which Bergson qualified, "It cannot be said that these were nations. They were warring tribes. They had no solidarity, no national consciousness" (Beveridge 1915, 292). Bergson's views on colonialism were not, therefore, limited to his account of "Muslim indolence" in his 1923 review article.

Bergson's relationship to racism and colonialism has been the subject of a growing body of scholarship. Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2011, 2022) has traced Bergson's influence on the *négritude* movement, an artistic expression of black identity in French colonies beginning in the 1930s. Diagne draws attention to the anti-colonial leaders, Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, who pressed Bergson's oeuvre into the service of independence movements both outside France (in the case of Senegalese national independence in 1960) and within (as Martinique achieved the status of *département* in 1946 and *région* in 1974) (Wilder 2015). Donna Jones (2010) elaborates that Bergson's influence was dual edged. In addition to providing the conceptual fodder for racial forms of self-understanding, his life philosophy also fueled European racism. Because the animate is distinct from the inanimate on account of the memory inhering in the former, Jones argues that the present's reproductive connection to the past in Bergson's thought lent traction to nostalgia for a pure racial origin in eugenics and social Darwinism. Alia Al-Saji (2019) and Mark William Westmoreland (2019) also acknowledge Bergson's complicity in colonialist discourse yet suggest that he offered the philosophical tools — particularly in his final book, *Les deux sources de la*

morale et de la religion (1932) — to critique that very discourse. Across this growing body of scholarship, Bergson's relationship to colonialism has been sought, whether as a philosopher or a political diplomat, in the words that he wrote and spoke.

My goal is to locate Bergson's involvement in the French colonial project elsewhere: namely, in his job as a civil servant teaching philosophy. Bergson spent the bulk of his career working for a French education system under the Third Republic that actively propagated empire. In an age before radio and television — let alone the Internet — education functioned as the state's primary ideological mouthpiece. The Republic expanded schools. Professors trained in Paris, after which they were sent to teach in provincial schools at home or in indigenous schools abroad. Bergson belonged to a class of civil servants who, upon completion of the *agrégation*, inculcated the values of science and secularism in the provinces while many of his colleagues taught a separate curriculum in North Africa. Bergson began his teaching career in 1881 as a philosophy professor of boys at the Lycée d'Angers (he also taught literature in the same town to girls at the École supérieure des jeunes filles d'Angers). He went on to spend the next two decades teaching the state philosophy curriculum before transitioning to a university professorship at the École normale supérieure in 1898 and then at the Collège de France in 1900, where he remained until 1921.

Across this period, education ministers used schools as a key tool to shape public life in the hexagon and in the colonies. In the ensuing pages, I show how the young human sciences — psychology, neurology, sociology — informed education policy and, furthermore, how these sciences were mobilized toward opposing ends: for French (primarily male and bourgeoisie) lycée students, to cultivate citizens; for Muslim youths in indigenous schools, to mold subjects. My evidence goes beyond the published record. I draw on letters from colonial education officials in the Sorbonne archive. What they illuminate is a discourse of energy within the human sciences that proved easily pliable in the hands of state functionaries. The discourse rationalized an education policy that could flexibly accommodate both Republican and imperial state formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As a philosophy professor, Bergson was employed by the state to disseminate the standardized curriculum. It was in this context, I argue, that we can understand the views on colonialism espoused in his 1923 review. To be clear, I am not claiming that Bergson explicitly supported the

Education Ministry's policies. Evidence for or against the claim has yet to surface. Instead, my suggestion is that Bergson's review was an expression of the institutional context in which he worked. Therein, the human sciences' accounts of French and Muslim energy provided an ideological rationalization for Republican nation building and imperial expansion respectively. Hence, we can appreciate the subtitle of the book that Bergson reviewed about France's occupation of North Africa: *the school of energy*.

Le Maroc, Ecole d'Énergie

Originally published in 1915, the book's author was the young sociologist and journalist, Alfred de Tarde. He opened with the questions: "*Qu'est-ce que la France est venue apporter au Maghreb de neuf et de fécond? Qu'est-ce que l'âme indigène, qu'est-ce que l'âme française elle-même gagnent à ce contact ?*" (Tarde 1915, 7) Pointing to the energy motivating, on the one hand, the Maghreb peoples, and on the other, the aims of colonial management, Tarde sought to justify France's colonial conquests in North Africa within the nascent human sciences that he practiced. Tarde argued, "*un abîme véritable qui sépare ces deux races sont là, dans une notion différente de la valeur du travail, du but de la vie*" (Tarde 1915, 4). Whereas French civilization was animated by a creative, dynamic, even life-affirming energy, the Muslim population was marked by immobility and laziness. For Tarde, it followed that the French mission ought to galvanize static Muslims, to transform the Arab and Kabyle people of North Africa into industrious subjects whose interests aligned with *la patrie*.

Tarde's account was prototypically Orientalist. Claims of a civilizational abyss separating the indolent Arab from the diligent European were commonplace tokens of a racial anthropology that inflected the French civilizing mission in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such aesthetic depictions of North African lethargy in the arid desert terrain were mobilized to justify Islamic "barbarity," and in turn, its violent amelioration by colonial conquest (Conklin 2013).

France rapidly expanded its North African empire during the turn of the century. New colonial possessions were seized during the scramble for Africa in the decades following the 1884-5 Berlin conference, at which European powers partitioned territories on the continent among themselves. Algeria had long been France's strategic foothold since its capture in 1830. Tunisia followed in 1881. The military occupation of Morocco in 1907 completed France's claim to the Southern Mediterranean coast. The Treaty of Fes

(1812) established the country as a protectorate of France, which meant that Morocco nominally retained its statehood despite remaining beholden to French management.

Tarde wrote *Maroc, l'école d'énergie* not only to celebrate his country's recent imperial conquest. The book was also part of a wide-ranging discourse in the human sciences at a time when concepts of embodied energy came to animate psychology, neurology, and sociology. Alfred's father, the pioneering sociologist Gabriel Tarde, emphasized the energetic dimension of social relations in his magnum opus, *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890). For the elder Tarde, social relations emerge out of mimetic practices among humans whose mutual influence repeat over time to solidify as corporeal and mental norms. When he took over the chair of modern philosophy at the Collège de France in 1900, Gabriel Tarde espoused a genetic sociology, according to which humans' volitional energy co-mingled with the vibratory energies analyzed in physics as well as the sensory-motor energies peculiar to physiology and neurology. Bergson succeeded Tarde at the Collège, where he researched and wrote his 1907 book, *L'Évolution créatrice*. Its central concept, *l'élan vital*, can be understood as another energetic power traversing nature and society, articulated within the same turn-of-the-century intellectual milieu.

The discourse of energy in the human sciences also rationalized imperial administration. French ministries responsible for managing the Muslim population of North Africa posed questions of population management in the terms of regulating effort and activity flows. Indeed, when Alfred de Tarde described “*un passé séculaire qui s'est perpétué là, dans le Moghreb oublié, hors des convulsions européennes*” (Tarde 1915, 4), his words conveyed not only a figurative language, but also a technical lexicon. The discourse of energy is especially interesting because it lays bare an imperial rationale rooted less in liberal ideas of universal rights, as many have framed the civilizing mission (Conklin 1997; Cooper 2006; Pitts 2009). I am suggesting that rationale was more so rooted in sociobiological accounts of Muslim vitality, effort, and exertion. Hence Bergson, in his review of Alfred de Tarde's report, emphatically praised what he took to be a “*philosophie de la colonisation*” (Bergson 1972, 1396). It was a philosophy that elevated action above knowledge, and in turn, circumscribed North African Muslims' will (*volonté*) as a scientific object of inquiry.

The Colonial Curriculum

Islamic volition was a focus of indigenous schools in Algeria. A typical teaching manual disseminated among French instructors made it clear: “*L’Arabe qui a fréquenté l’école se reconnaîtra non à ce qu’il sait, mais à ce qu’il fait*” (Jeanmaire 1890a, 113). The cultivation of Muslims’ energy became a goal of indigenous education after numerous failed attempts to institute a colonial school system. Bicultural schools called *écoles arabes-françaises* were established in 1833 and exclusively indigenous schools followed in 1850. But the latter remained in a derelict state under the Second Empire, which relied predominantly on private initiatives to develop the colony (Ruedy 1992, 83). Seizing on the Empire’s collapse during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, Algerians staged an insurrection. In 1871, the Kabyle revolt, led by Mohamed El-Mokrani, razed indigenous schools, which were seen as pillars of the colonial edifice (Oussedik 2005). By the 1880s, indigenous schools were reconstructed. Assimilation was a new goal, which meant language instruction: gallicization. Many French *colons* living in North Africa were resistant to the assimilationist goals of the Third Republic; most were hesitant to finance the education of a future Algerian elite — *évolués*, as they came to be known. By 1889 there were 122 indigenous schools in the colony (Ageron 1968, 358). The entire curriculum was in French.

The emphasis on students’ energy took shape in this assimilationist context. Educational administrators responded to a particular problem in the wake of the Kabyle revolt: how to make Muslims not just learn, but *aspire to become* French? By 1891, the Ministry of Education adapted its primary school morals curriculum to a course in morals, history, and geography for indigenous schools. Both served to energize students’ fidelity to the *patrie*. Stark differences, however, distinguished the courses’ teaching in metropolitan and North African schools. In France, the course in morals was released in 1882. It applied to the first and second years of primary school. Moral education fulfilled Republicans’ secular imperative to extirpate religious tutelage. The lessons promoted citizenship; but in Algeria, morals imposed submission. In the words of Charles Jonnart, the Governor General of Algeria, “*L’école primaire qui est en France la pierre angulaire de la République, est en Algérie le fondement de notre domination*” (Ageron 1968, 343).

Now, when we look at the curricula side by side, there appears to be little difference:

FRANCE	ALGERIA
<i>Première année</i>	<i>Première année</i>
L'enfant dans la famille Devoirs de frères et de ses sœurs Devoirs envers les serviteurs L'enfant dans l'école La patrie	Par des historiettes prises autant que possible dans la vie scolaire, on corrigera les défauts des élèves. On s'efforcera de toucher leur cœur par des récits, des allégories, des paraboles et des proverbes
<i>Deuxième année – la morale sociale</i>	<i>Deuxième année</i>
Devoirs envers soi-même Les biens extérieurs L'âme (sa nature et ses facultés) Devoirs envers les autres hommes Devoirs envers Dieu La famille La société La patrie (Allou 1883, 1570-9)	Devoirs envers soi-même Devoirs dans la famille Devoirs dans l'école Devoirs envers les autres hommes Perfectionnement moral Devoirs envers la France (Jeanmaire 1890a, 152)

Table 1. Comparison of the curricula

Both curricula presented duties expanding outwards, as if by concentric circles, from the self to the family, and ultimately to the nation. The metropolitan version was more extensive. It included lessons on the soul and its faculties; but the Algerian version incorporated “*perfectionnement moral*,” which addressed the nature of the mind and the future life in God. The Algerian curriculum was introduced in 1892. It hewed to Jules Ferry’s *rattachement* policy, which subsumed the colony under the management of Paris ministries. Bergson was familiar with the metropolitan version of the morals curriculum. The *Bulletin administratif du ministère de l’instruction publique* was regularly distributed to professors at all levels of education. Moreover, Bergson taught the advanced version of the morals syllabus in the lycée philosophy course, which promoted the same liberal distribution of duties expanding outward from self to society (McGrath 2020, 88-100). I have no proof, however, whether he was familiar with that curriculum’s deployment in indigenous schools.

The two courses pose for us a historical riddle. Given the apparent similarities of the curricula, how do we account for the different functions

of the moral course: one to form citizens, the other to forge subjects? What explains the divergent models of education between metropole and colony? Consider an intriguing anecdote. Eugène Scheer was an inspector general of indigenous schools in Algeria. And he was keen to attract to attract Arab and Kabyle students into classrooms. Enrollment lagged since the French education minister, Jules Ferry, applied his educational reforms to the colony. In a letter to the ministry, Scheer urged to have magic lanterns (primitive overhead projectors) installed in classrooms:

Ce procédé scientifique me serait un excellent auxiliaire pour faire des conférences [...] dans les tribus. Vous dire [sic] si non seulement les yeux mais surtout les esprits des enfants et des adultes seraient frappés! Mes soirées se passeraient agréablement, et avec des sujets appropriés j'enseignerai la morale aux petits musulmans: il en ont tant besoin (Scheer 1891)!

Dazzling illuminations helped to inculcate the morals course, a cornerstone of the colonial enterprise. But the technology was not mere spectacle. Scheer invoked a distinction critical to the human sciences when he wrote that the magic lanterns struck “*pas seulement les yeux mais surtout les esprits*” (Scheer 1891). Unlike traditional teaching materials, light was believed to activate students’ sensory-motor capacities and thereby inscribe the morals lessons into the physiology of Muslim students.

Returning to the metropolitan and colonial curricula: interpreting them through the lens of the human sciences casts their divergence into stark relief. Psychology buttressed Republicans’ civilizing mission. In the official handbook released for indigenous schools, instructors were urged to follow a psychological pedagogy:

A l'école, l'instruction n'est donc qu'un moyen, l'éducation seule marque le but. L'une a pour objet l'intelligence qu'elle éclaire, l'autre s'adresse au cœur et à la volonté : au cœur pour l'éveiller aux sentiments affectueux, désintéressés ; à la volonté pour la fortifier, la diriger vers le devoir (Jeanmaire 1890a, 113).

The appeal to the heart and *volonté* was not a rhetorical flourish. It reflected the corporeal solidarity between students’ mental and motor capacities. The architect of the curriculum and head of the Université d’Alger, Charles Jeanmaire, was *agrégé* in philosophy in 1875. He was attuned to research on the cerebral underpinnings of selfhood, having submitted a doctoral thesis in 1882 entitled, *L'idée de la personnalité dans la psychologie moderne*. In it, Jeanmaire argued that the self is riven between two dimensions: for itself (*pour-soi*) and by itself (*par-soi*). The dimensions followed two philosophical traditions: on the one hand, the idealism inherited from

Kantian philosophy, for which the self furnishes the conditions that make judgments possible; and on the other hand, the spiritualist tradition extending from Maine de Biran through Victor Cousin, for which the self is a creative power inhering in the muscular activity of effort.

This bicameral understanding of selfhood turned on the relations between the intellect and the will. The faculties forged an intimate bond, which, for Jeanmaire, also connected psychology and pedagogy. He believed that the acquisition of knowledge required an activation of the student's volitional energy. Jeanmaire promoted the model once he arrived at the *Université d'Algers* in 1883. The same year, Ernst Renan claimed in his infamous lecture, *L'Islam et la science* that since the thirteenth century, "à quelques rares exceptions près, comme Ibn-Khaldoun, l'islam ne compta plus aucun esprit large ; il a tué la science et la philosophie dans son sein" (Renan 1883, 14). Jeanmaire harbored comparable hostilities to the Arab and Kabyle communities. But he believed that science and philosophy were integral to guiding Muslim energy.

Under Ferry's leadership, Jeanmaire overhauled the indigenous education system. Filling seats was a persistent challenge. Parents resisted what they saw as alien schools vitiating Islamic traditions. Colonial educators confronted a problem: how to attract students? Few families were willing to release children from household and agricultural work. Those parents who did generally preferred Qur'anic instruction in the *Kuttabs* (elementary schools), which co-existed alongside indigenous schools. The children who attended indigenous schools typically began after religious study at the age of 10-11 when learning a new language was more difficult (Bisquerra 2001). It was against this backdrop that colonial administrators invoked the human sciences to craft a pedagogy that would make students not only *learn* the French language, but also *aspire* to become French. At stake was a pedagogical method that would galvanize students' sensory-motor attachment to the nation.

Jeanmaire tackled this challenge when he arrived in Algeria. But he quickly found himself butting heads with officials who thought it was pointless to teach secular morals to an "indolent" Muslim population. Jeanmaire insisted that indigenous education not be modeled on *laïcité*: first, he reasoned, because Islamic practices were already integrated in the schools existing on the ground, as the majority of education took place in *Kuttabs* and was carried out by *talebs* (Qur'anic instructors) (Ageron 1968, 317); and second, by self-consciously incorporating Islamic tenets into the

curriculum, indigenous schools would better energize Arab and Kabyle students' volition. In other words, Jeanmaire sought to *redirect* students' habitual activities from religious spaces to the francophone ecosystem of the imperial classroom. It was thus critical, he advised, to incorporate Islamic practices into the morals course:

[La France] demande donc à ses instituteurs, français ou indigènes, de montrer le plus grand respect pour les croyances des élèves et de leurs parents, de s'abstenir scrupuleusement de la moindre critique à l'égard des doctrines du Coran. Les moniteurs se tromperaient s'ils se figuraient qu'en affichant l'irréligion ils répondent aux intentions de l'administration ou lui seulement agréables. Un tel zèle, inspiré peut-être de louables sentiments, serait toujours maladroit, parfois même coupable [...] Pour exercer une action bienfaisante et efficace, les moniteurs doivent jouir de la confiance de leurs coreligionnaires : ils la perdront s'ils ne 'disent la formule,' s'ils ne se privent de boissons alcooliques, s'ils ne s'astreignent aux pratiques du ramadan. Respectent-ils, au contraire, les prescriptions du Coran, ils auront une incontestable autorité pour parler au nom de la France, pour enseigner la morale (Jeanmaire 1890a, 119).

Jeanmaire's advice highlighted the mimetic facets of teaching morals. Instructors were expected to integrate Muslim practices and even recite the *Shahada* ("la formule"), while instructors in the metropole dispensed with Christian teachings. The indigenous classroom was transformed into an affective milieu that harmonized with Islamic habits. In fact, Jeanmaire's instructions prefigured an 1892 decree, initiated by the future prime minister, Émile Combes, which guaranteed students' freedom of conscience in indigenous primary education.

There were limitations. Jeanmaire believed it would be impossible to leave education entirely in the hands of Islamic instructors, let alone imams. As he recounted in a letter, "*les musulmans recevaient notre argent, et ne continueraient pas moins à ne pas enseigner le français et à se moquer de nous. Il faudrait qu'un régiment d'inspecteurs fissent constamment sur le dos de chaque Taleb*" (Jeanmaire 1890b, 150-153). Ultimately, French inspectors were needed to mold religious practice, but not to conform with Republican values. *Laïcité* was not an official policy of colonial rule. In fact, the 1905 law that enshrined the separation of church and state by bringing an end to the Napoleonic Concordat was never extended to Algeria. Rather, education policy sought to integrate religious and even ethnic identities into the curriculum — a fact that unsettles the longstanding assumption that modern France is wholly European. French colonists were quite willing to rely on the Islamic psyche (in its dual dimensions as both an

idealized object of investigation and an embodied reality in the classroom) in order to make Algeria French.

Bergson's career as a civil servant of the Ministry of Education was pivotal to his success. He stands out among French philosophers of the fin de siècle for his meteoric ascent up the academic hierarchy. Following a decade and a half teaching the lycée philosophy course in Clermont Ferrand, Bergson was selected to teach at the prestigious Lycée Henri IV in Paris. By the age of forty, he held a chair at the Collège de France. These institutions provide the context, I've argued, in which we can make sense of the views on colonialism that Bergson wrote in his 1923 book review.

Reciprocally, Bergson's views open a window onto the scientific rationalization of colonial policy. The idea that Muslim culture was marked by a radical indifference to change; that North Africans' energy was static; that European civilization, by contrast, had cultivated the need for action and the need to teach action: these dualities characterized education policy under the Third Republic. The human sciences furnished the flexible discourse of energy used, at once, to engender citizenship in Bergson's courses and assimilation in the indigenous schools taught by his colleagues. Looking back on his civil service career, we can appreciate how Bergson wrote and worked in a *school of energy*.

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Abstract: How should we make sense of Henri Bergson's praise of French colonialism? In this chapter, I examine his 1923 book review in which he claimed that the remedy to Muslim "indolence" was found in European civilization's energy, effort, and action. Bergson drew not only on his own philosophy to justify the French imperial mission in North Africa. What he described as a "philosophy of colonialism" also took shape in the wider educational context of the French Third Republic. Using school manuals and unpublished letters, I show how Bergson's early career as a civil servant was spent teaching a curriculum that mobilized the human sciences to rationalize French colonialism.

Keywords: Bergson, French third republic, colonialism, Algeria, education.

Résumé: Comment comprendre l'éloge du colonialisme français par Henri Bergson ? Dans ce chapitre, j'examine sa critique de livre de 1923 dans laquelle il affirme que le remède à l'« indolence » des musulmans se trouve dans l'énergie, l'effort et l'action de la civilisation européenne. Bergson n'a pas seulement puisé dans sa propre philosophie pour justifier la mission impériale française en Afrique du Nord. Ce qu'il a décrit comme une « philosophie du colonialisme » a également pris forme dans le contexte éducatif plus large de la Troisième République française. À l'aide de manuels scolaires et de lettres inédites, je montre comment Bergson, au début de sa carrière de fonctionnaire, a enseigné un programme qui mobilisait les sciences humaines pour rationaliser le colonialisme français.

Mots-clés: Bergson, troisième république, colonialisme, Algérie, éducation.

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