

**GEERT SOMSEN\***

## **The Philosopher and the Rooster: Henri Bergson's French Diplomatic Missions, 1914–1925**

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Unlike what is often presumed, scientific internationalism persisted through the First World War and its aftermath. Although many scientists aligned themselves with their belligerent nations after 1914, and although Germany and Austria were excluded from international meetings after 1919, the rhetoric celebrating the universally fraternizing nature of science continued as if no such ruptures existed. In this article I argue that this persistence was rooted in the war itself, and particularly in the massive mobilization of academics in wartime propaganda and diplomacy. In these activities they used internationalist arguments and their own supranational status as scientists to defend their countries' war causes and defame those of the enemy. I illustrate this by following the diplomatic work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. From the start of the war Bergson presented himself as a neutral scientific arbiter, developing a philosophy of the war (based on his work on life and evolution) as a battle of German barbarity versus universal (not just French) civilization. His government took note and sent Bergson on several diplomatic tasks, most notably a secret mission to the United States, early 1917, where he was to speak to President Wilson to persuade him to enter the war on the French side. Bergson's universalism and his stature as a philosopher should appeal to Wilson's dislike of partisanship and craving for the moral high ground. After the war, Bergson-style universalism continued and was institutionalized in the League of Nations and its International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation—with Bergson as its president.

This essay is part of a special issue entitled *Science Diplomacy*, edited by Giulia Rispoli and Simone Turchetti.

\*History Department, FASoS, Maastricht University; P.O. Box 616, 6200MD Maastricht, The Netherlands; g.somsen@maastrichtuniversity.nl

The following abbreviation is used: ICIC, International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation.

---

*Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, Vol. 50, Number 4, pps. 364–383. ISSN 1939-1811, electronic ISSN 1939-182X. © 2020 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/hsns.2020.50.4.364>.

KEY WORDS: science diplomacy, Henri Bergson, scientific internationalism, First World War, Woodrow Wilson, scientists and war propaganda

“nous sommes tous plus ou moins diplomates”—Henri Bergson<sup>1</sup>

The split in international scientific relations that started during the First World War has been the subject of innumerable studies in the history and sociology of science. Scholars from Robert K. Merton to Daniel Kevles and from Brigitte Schröder-Gudehus to Michael Gordin have analyzed the institutional, personal, and even linguistic rifts that were produced by the war and that ripped the scientific community apart for years to come.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of the Great War, antagonism was the norm, and science diplomacy revolved around exclusion, not reconciliation.

But while the *Krieg der Gelehrten* and its aftermath are increasingly well understood, they still hold a paradox that remains unresolved. For at the same moment that international cooperation declined and was even officially suspended, the rhetoric *celebrating* the universal and fraternizing nature of science continued as if no such thing had happened. George Sarton, for example, declared that “science is the privileged domain of internationalism” and that the “unity of knowledge” ensures “the unity of mankind” precisely when German and Austrian scientists were being boycotted from international meetings.<sup>3</sup> And one of the boycott’s very embodiments, the League of Nations’ International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), stated that its “moral aim” was “the realization of a great ideal of fraternity, of solidarity and

1. “We are all more or less diplomats.” Henri Bergson (undated, but attributed to “Le jeune Bergson”), quoted in Philippe Soulez, “Les Missions de Bergson ou les Paradoxes du Philosophe Véristique et Trompeur,” in *Les Philosophes et la Guerre de 14, Est-Ouest: Vieux Voyants, Nouveaux Aveugles*, ed. Philippe Soulez (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes-Saint-Denis, 1988), 65–81, on 69.

2. Robert K. Merton, “The Normative Structure of Science,” in Robert K. Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. Norman W. Storer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 267–78, on 270–73; Brigitte Schröder-Gudehus, *Les Scientifiques et la Paix: La Communauté Scientifique Internationale au Cours des Années 20* (Montréal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1978); Daniel Kevles, “Into Hostile Political Camps: The Reorganization of International Science in World War I,” *Isis* 62, no. 1 (1971): 47–60; Michael Gordin, *Scientific Babel: How Science was Done Before and After Global English* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), ch. 6.

3. George Sarton, “The New Humanism,” *Isis* 6, no. 1 (1924): 9–42, on 24. This article was based on an earlier version in French, published during the war: “Le Nouvel Humanisme,” *Scientia* 33, no. 3 (1918), 161–75.

of accord among men.”<sup>4</sup> The ICIC combined a practice of division with a discourse of inclusivity and even went so far as to declare the broken-up scholarly community to be an exemplar of world peace—a peace that was “most easily attained in high intellectual spheres” from where it would “descend upon the nations.”<sup>5</sup>

Statements like these repeated the old ideal of the Republic of Letters—the community of the learned transcending and uniting all nationalities—at the same time that they ignored the blatant fact that no such community had existed since 1914, or was expected to exist any time soon.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps for this reason most historians have more or less ignored these expressions, unreflective as they seem to be of the reality of exclusion and division. One exception is Brigitte Schröder, who *has* paid attention to the statements, but mostly to dismiss their internationalist rhetoric as disingenuous if not reprehensible.<sup>7</sup>

I propose a different way of understanding the postwar internationalist discourse, by tracing its roots back to the war itself. For even though many scientists of the belligerent countries turned to heavily chauvinistic rhetoric when hostilities started, *internationalist* declarations by no means vanished with the guns of August. They persisted, acquired new significance, and were in fact *wedded* to the nationalistic discourses of self-defense and war justification. This alliance was forged in a context of propaganda and diplomacy in which academics were heavily engaged. Scientists and scholars mobilized *en masse*—sometimes spontaneously, at other times recruited by their governments—and started to produce statements about the war and their nation’s role in it. These statements often wielded notions of internationalism and civilized international cultural relations that scientists were deemed to represent.<sup>8</sup> After the armistice this discourse continued, and through the Paris peace negotiations the internationalist rhetoric ended up accompanying the new, exclusionary postwar institutions established by the victorious powers.

4. Henri Bergson, *Mélanges*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 1351. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Arguably, of course, the Republic of Letters had never existed, except as an ideal.

7. Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus, “Probing the Master Narrative of Scientific Internationalism: Nationals and Neutrals in the 1920s,” in *Neutrality in Twentieth-Century Europe: Intersections of Science, Culture, and Politics after the First World War*, ed. Rebecka Lettevall, Geert Somsen, and Sven Widmalm (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 19–42.

8. See several chapters in Christophe Prochasson and Anne Rasmussen, eds., *Vrai et Faux dans la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2004).



**FIG. 1.** Henri Bergson dressed for his reception into the Académie Française in 1914. Source: *L'Illustration* (2 Feb 1918). Retrieved from Wikimedia commons.

In this article, I want to demonstrate this trajectory, and the crucial impact of war diplomacy on scientific internationalism, by following the public statements of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (Fig. 1). Bergson was one of Europe's most prominent intellectuals of the time—not a working scientist, but scientifically very well-informed, and basing his views, particularly the ones relevant here, on biological understandings of life and evolution.<sup>9</sup> What is

9. Bergson later acquired a reputation as an anti-rationalist and a mystic, but as Jimena Canales has shown, this was largely unfounded and certainly did not reflect how he was seen at the time. Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate That Changed Our Understanding of Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

more, Bergson was a typical member of that class of public intellectuals—scientists and humanities scholars—that lent its authority to internationalist and war-related statements. He would do so as a wartime president of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, and after the armistice until 1925, as the first chairman of the ICIC cited above. Here he was surrounded by high-profile scientists—such as Marie Curie, Albert Einstein (rapidly rising as *the* international public spokesperson for science), and Hendrik Lorentz, who succeeded him in the chair—and he shared in their image of representatives of internationalism. In this position, and from the start of the war, Bergson developed his own vision of the global conflict, one that was internationalist and anti-German at the same time. Through the war he voiced these views in various venues, and in 1917, the French government even sent him on a mission to the United States with the aim to convey them to the American leadership and to persuade the president to join France on the battlefield. Hence the development of Bergson’s vision and the contexts in which it was uttered can help shed light on the relations of scientific internationalism to wartime science diplomacy and on its persistence through the First World War. This philosopher worked for the Gallic rooster.

### **LIFE AND MATTER IN CONFLICT**

Just four days after Germany’s invasion of Belgium and its declaration of war to France, the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques met at the Institut de France. The war was the dominant topic on the agenda, and in his opening of the meeting president Henri Bergson declared the academy’s gratitude for the Belgian defensive struggle (it had corresponding members in Belgium, who were directly affected) as well as its unrestrained dedication to the French war cause. “The war against Germany,” he stated, “is the war of civilization against barbarism.”<sup>10</sup> This was not a patriotic statement but a scientific observation:

Everybody senses this [that the war is a war of civilization against barbarism], but our Academy has perhaps a special authority in saying so. . . . [I]t is simply doing its scientific duty when observing a regression to a savage state in Germany’s brutality and cynicism, in its contempt of all justice and all truth.<sup>11</sup>

10. “Séance du 8. [Août],” *Séances et Travaux de l’Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* 92 (Sep/Oct 1914), 325.

11. *Ibid.*

This kind of message would continue to be Bergson's general response. Throughout the war years he would repeatedly speak to newspapers, give lectures, and write articles restating this fairly typical—and on the face of it, fairly unremarkable—perspective: Germany had fallen into barbarity, France and its Allies were defending civilization.

Seemingly unspecial, Bergson's views were in fact the particular product of his earlier work on life and evolution, especially his 1907 study *Creative Evolution*.<sup>12</sup> In the Fall of 1914, he elaborated these ideas into a more comprehensive philosophical analysis of the war (an analysis that he claimed was simple to accomplish: "A little history, and a little philosophy, will suffice.").<sup>13</sup> His interpretation started from a historical account of the development of Germany, which had begun like any other nation, but had increasingly come under the sway of Prussia. Prussia, to Bergson, was a different and altogether unnatural kind of state. It had not evolved like a normal society but was an artificial patchwork of regions that had only been united by conquest and negotiation. Its operations were mechanical: Prussia's administration ran like clockwork, its army was a machine, and its citizens were "drilled . . . to mechanical obedience."<sup>14</sup> In the nineteenth century, Prussian militarism had been accompanied by an equally mechanical industrialism, and the values of this mechanical way of being had come to dominate the national mentality and morality. Prussians only appreciated the power of force, and their leading ethical principle was "Might is Right."<sup>15</sup> These conditions, Bergson asserted, explained the ruthlessness and the yearning for conquest for its own sake that was so characteristic of Prussia and now of the German empire as a whole. Germany's relentless and brutal warfare was the expression of an unnatural, mechanical essence.

Throughout his essay, Bergson juxtaposed the mechanical to the organic, materialism to idealism, the determined to the spontaneous, to creativity, growth, and freedom—that is, to precisely those principles that underlay his conception of life and the "élan vital" (its subtle driving force) that he had elaborated in *Creative Evolution*. His essay's subtitle, *Life and Matter in Conflict*, captured exactly what he thought the entire war was about. Strangely enough, at first sight the juxtaposition looks like a reversal of the traditional

12. Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution Créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907).

13. Henri Bergson, *The Meaning of the War: Life and matter in conflict* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 17.

14. *Ibid.*, 19.

15. *Ibid.*, 45.

German distinction between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*, where France used to stand for the mechanical and Germany for the organic. But on closer inspection the mirror image blurs. Not only were its details informed by Bergson's theories of life and evolution rather than by nineteenth-century Romanticism, the national roles were not really reversed either. For while "matter" and the mechanical were represented by Germany, "life" and the organic did *not* actually stand for France. They were part of the natural state of any nation—at least at a sufficiently advanced stage. Hence Bergson's book *was* a straightforward rejection of German culture, but it was by no means a defense of French civilization *per se*. It applied to a general, potentially universal condition. As the British philosopher H. Wildon Carr wrote in the preface,

Were the discourse by M. Bergson no more than the utterance of a philosopher stirred by deep patriotic feeling to uphold his country's cause and denounce his country's foes, then . . . it would have no significance or value. . . . [But it] has a much deeper meaning. It is no mere indictment of Germany's rulers or people. It goes to the very heart of the problem of the future of humanity.<sup>16</sup>

A number of Bergson scholars have recently drawn attention to these and other writings, claiming convincingly that Bergson was much more of a political thinker than has been acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> The key text is his 1932 book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, in which he analyzed, among other things, the causes of war in general.<sup>18</sup> War itself was not an aberration, Bergson argued there, but followed natural impulses of group solidarity and their concomitant mistrust of outsiders. Such impulses had an evolutionary function and were part of every naturally evolving society. By 1914, Bergson had not yet worked out all of these ideas, but some elements can already be recognized. It is clear, for example, that in *The Meaning of the War* he did not so much blame the war on Germany or claim that France was peaceful by nature. His point was rather that German society was not natural, and had not developed

16. H. Wildon Carr, Introduction to Bergson, *The Meaning of the War* (ref. 13), 9–13, on 12.

17. See Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, ed., *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2012), especially the essays by Frédéric Worms, Suzanne Guerlac, John Mullarkey, and Philippe Soulez; Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human Rights and the Care of the Self* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2012); Nadia Yala Kisukidi, "Construire la Paix: Humanisme, Langues et Littérature chez Bergson," *Annales Bergsoniennes* 7 (2014), 213–33; Mark Antliff, "From Class War to Creative Revolution: Bergson's Communist Legacy in Britain," *Annales Bergsoniennes* 7 (2014), 235–58.

18. Henri Bergson, *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1932).

normally. It was a mechanical monster, and hence different, not only from Bergson's own country, but from all naturally evolved nations—different, in fact, from life itself. *This* is the sense in which the war was a stand-off between the German machine and universal civilization.

## BERGSON AND WILSON

In the following two years Bergson would continue to propagate his interpretation of the war, sometimes as a whole, sometimes in parts forming elements of a discourse on other topics, such as “French philosophy” or “the human soul.”<sup>19</sup> Some of these pronouncements were for home consumption, addressed at fellow scholars and/or fellow countrymen (the former often implying the latter, as scholarly papers were also published in magazines like *La Revue de Paris*). But the French government increasingly saw a wider use for Bergson's war views and, in the winter of 1917, decided to send him on a diplomatic mission to the United States.

The US did not (yet) participate in the war in Europe, but its *potential* participation was very much on the minds of the belligerents. The country was *the* economic powerhouse of the world, its Gross Domestic Product surpassing that of the entire British Empire by 1916.<sup>20</sup> If it would turn its economic into military power and would enter the war, this would certainly be decisive. From the start, therefore, Germany, Britain, and France had conducted massive campaigns to win the support, and possibly the alliance, of the Americans. The Entente had the advantage in this effort, in that they could check the information coming out of Germany (the British cut all German transatlantic telegraph cables, and tapped the remaining indirect connections) and make sure that their own reporting dominated the US news.<sup>21</sup> But this was not enough. American public opinion was on average not pro-German (although

19. Henri Bergson, “La Philosophie Française,” *La Revue de Paris* 22 (May/Jun 1915): 236–56; Henri Bergson, “L’Ame Humaine,” in Bergson, *Mélanges* (ref. 4), 1200–15. These two texts also had a foreign reach. The first was to be distributed as a brochure at the 1915 World’s Fair in San Francisco. The latter was a talk before a Spanish audience at a public conference in Madrid, in 1916; this talk was part of a goodwill campaign organized by the French government, and in fact was Bergson’s first diplomatic mission.

20. Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America, and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (London: Alan Lane, 2014), on 12–13.

21. G. J. Meyer, *The World Remade: America in World War I* (New York: Bantam Books, 2016), 27.



parts of the population were), and varied between Allied sympathy and steadfast neutrality. Until 1917, however, the latter position was largely favored and shared by Congress and the Wilson administration.

Trying to shift this balance, the French campaign long stuck to soft diplomacy. Having seen that blunt German efforts to win American support at the start of the war had produced the opposite effect, the French ambassador in Washington DC, Jean-Jules Jusserand, advised against overt propaganda and for playing the culture card. Americans (especially on the East Coast) generally liked and admired French artistic and intellectual life, and showing this side could help in “marketing Marianne.”<sup>22</sup> Heeding Jusserand’s advice, the French foreign ministry brought over theater companies, organized decorative art exhibitions, set up professorial exchanges, and, for example, sent the actress Sarah Bernard on a six-month US tour in 1916.<sup>23</sup>

By early 1917, however, the effectiveness of this cautious, indirect campaigning started to be questioned. If American public opinion by now was moving toward intervention (and there were indications that it was), the president himself looked persistently reluctant. He seemed immune to the constant aggressive clamoring of belligerent Republicans like Theodore Roosevelt, and preferred to be seen as a peace-maker, not a warmonger. Even Germany’s announcement that it would resume unrestricted submarine attacks against all transatlantic shipping, on January 31, did not change this situation. The declaration led to massive American indignation, and all parties involved, including the Germans themselves, expected that US entry was now inevitable. But although Wilson did cut diplomatic ties to Berlin, he faltered in declaring war.<sup>24</sup>

To the French administration, it seemed that the president needed personal prodding, and Premier Aristide Briand and his cabinet wondered what they could do. Wilson was at this point extremely private and weary of calls for action from the Quai d’Orsay and the Foreign Office, so direct governmental interference might still be counterproductive.<sup>25</sup> Hence an idea of *targeted* soft diplomacy came up: sending the intellectual Bergson on what looked like a professional visit to see if his philosophizing about the war could appeal to

22. Robert J. Young, *Marketing Marianne: French Propaganda in America, 1900–1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

23. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “The Viviani-Joffre Mission to the United States, April–May 1917: A Reassessment,” *French Historical Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012), 628–59, on 631–39.

24. Meyer, *World Remade* (ref. 21), ch. 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 156–58.

the president's idealism—directly or via his entourage of advisors. This had the advantage that it did not look like politicking, which Wilson was known to resent, but instead appealed to his sense for reason and righteousness, which he was known to crave. Bergson could embody these values and make moral appeals to the president. In this task he would be aided by his fame (also in America) and his fluency in English (he had a British mother).<sup>26</sup> Briand asked to see Bergson, and by early February the philosopher found himself on an ocean liner.

After his arrival, Bergson partly assumed a public role.<sup>27</sup> During his entire mission (he ended up staying until May) he regularly gave interviews to newspapers and addressed all kinds of clubs, societies, and academic audiences. At these occasions he spread his vision of the war as a defense of universal (not just French) civilization against German barbarism. It was, he told listeners in New York, a “holy war”—not for king and country, nor for blood and soil, but for natural civilization as a whole.<sup>28</sup> When General Joseph Joffre (joining Bergson's tour in April) had stopped the German troops at the Marne, he had not just saved his nation but human society at large.

Still Bergson's real target was the president himself, and he sought access to him via his advisors, whose own opinions he tried to massage in turn. This plan worked out remarkably well. Bergson managed to speak to various government officials, often and at length, and got on close terms, for example, with Wilson's Minister of the Interior, Franklin Lane, who was himself a philosophy student and knew Bergson's work.<sup>29</sup> Bergson also befriended Edward House, Wilson's personal advisor (Fig. 2).<sup>30</sup> In their conversations Bergson related the same reading of the global conflict that he ventured elsewhere, and we know

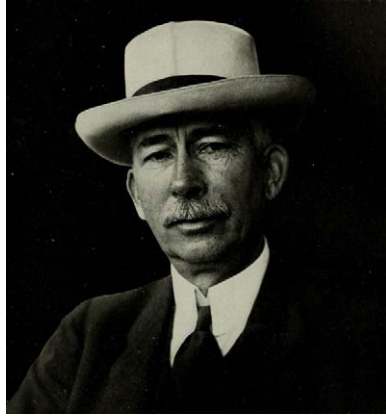
26. Bergson, “Mes Missions,” in Bergson, *Mélanges* (ref. 4), 1554–70, on 1555. Greenhalgh, “Viviani-Joffre Mission” (ref. 23), 635.

27. This was in fact unintentional. Bergson was supposed to arrive incognito, but was soon recognized, and New York reporters started to swarm his hotel. After this he began to give lectures and interviews on a public basis. Henri Bergson, *Correspondances*, ed. André Robinet et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 694–95.

28. Bergson, *Mélanges* (ref. 4), 1247.

29. Bergson, “Mes Missions” (ref. 26), 1557.

30. Bergson got in touch with House immediately after his arrival and was on a good footing with him from the start. Their friendship has been noted from both sides. Bergson himself reported how they kept in touch, and “the Colonel” (as he was known) visited him in Paris after the war. Reversely, House made frequent mention of his French friend in his notes. See Bergson, “Mes Missions” (ref. 26), 1556; and *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, ed. Charles Seymour (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 14, 75, 408.



**FIG. 2.** Edward “Colonel” M. House, President Wilson’s confidant and advisor and Bergson’s chief contact in the United States. Source: *The World’s Work* 35, no. 3 (1918): 253. Retrieved from Wikimedia commons.

from House’s own diary that he wholeheartedly agreed with his French interlocutor.<sup>31</sup> This was not so much because House shared Bergson’s philosophy of life, but first and foremost because the image of the war as a defense of universal civilization presented a very useful kind of justification for American entry into the conflict—an entry that, House himself thought, had become a necessity. Such a justification was not only ethically required but also politically imperative as, still, broad swaths of the American population needed to be convinced of the sanctity of the sacrifice.<sup>32</sup> Bergson and House agreed that a legitimization merely in terms of retaliating German submarine attacks might “not gain the same moral advantage.” Instead, “America would have a more beautiful role in the eyes of the world if she would declare war proclaiming that she is fighting for the same principles [as France].”<sup>33</sup>

31. On the day of their first meeting, House wrote in his diary: “I found we have much in common. Bergson remarked that the reason German militarism must be broken was because the German held it in worship; that it came even before the Kaiser, and that if the Kaiser intervened, he would be brushed aside. I mention this as it bears out Alan J. Baker’s view as well as my own.” E. M. House diary, quoted in Bergson, *Correspondances* (ref. 27), 694–95.

32. Meyer, *World Remade* (ref. 21), 207.

33. Quotation from Bergson’s account of the conversation, with Bergson speaking and House answering that he had just advised the president along those lines. Henri Bergson to Prime Minister A. Ribot, 22 Mar 1917, in Bergson, *Correspondances* (ref. 27), 703.

House also assisted on getting the ear of the president and helped Bergson prepare for that meeting.<sup>34</sup> Again, it was Bergson's war philosophy that provided the background. He made sure not to talk politics or any practicalities, but to focus instead on general principles and higher moral goals: to save universal civilization from barbarity, to (effectively) take over its torch from Europe, and to herald a new era of world peace under American leadership.<sup>35</sup> The latter point referred to the League of Nations, which Wilson had formulated as his main goal in his last great speech.<sup>36</sup> Bergson asserted that he shared this ideal ("as you know") and that if the president was serious about it, he needed to go all the way—that is, he had no choice but to enter the war.<sup>37</sup> This sounds like political advice, but as Bergson biographer Philippe Soulez has emphasized, it mattered tremendously that in giving it, Bergson presented himself as a philosopher. It was not just that this made him appear disinterested while speaking truth to power. Bergson also conferred some of his status onto the president himself, making him an equal interlocutor, a philosopher in his own right—a philosopher-king, in Soulez's words. If this sounds far-fetched, we need to remind ourselves how much Wilson aspired to this role, not just as an academic and a former political science professor, but in his desire to be more than a mere politician, to be "a great statesman," as he had declared since age sixteen.<sup>38</sup> House knew his master's craving for greatness—he himself played it routinely. And he knew that this same character trait—one that made Wilson look down upon, say, Roosevelt's blustering battle machismo—would render him receptive to Bergson's universalist idealism. He would see it as his own—the surest way to convince the president.

Wilson would indeed come around, and on April 2, he announced his decision to enter the war before a loudly applauding Congress (Fig. 3). Of course it would be presumptuous to suppose that this change of heart was Bergson's doing—many weeks had passed since their meeting, during which there had been no sign of the president coming to any conclusion at all, and moreover, *most* of Wilson's advisors also favored intervention at this point and were doing all they could to move their president in that direction. Still there are signs that Bergson's advice at least contributed to Wilson's conversion;

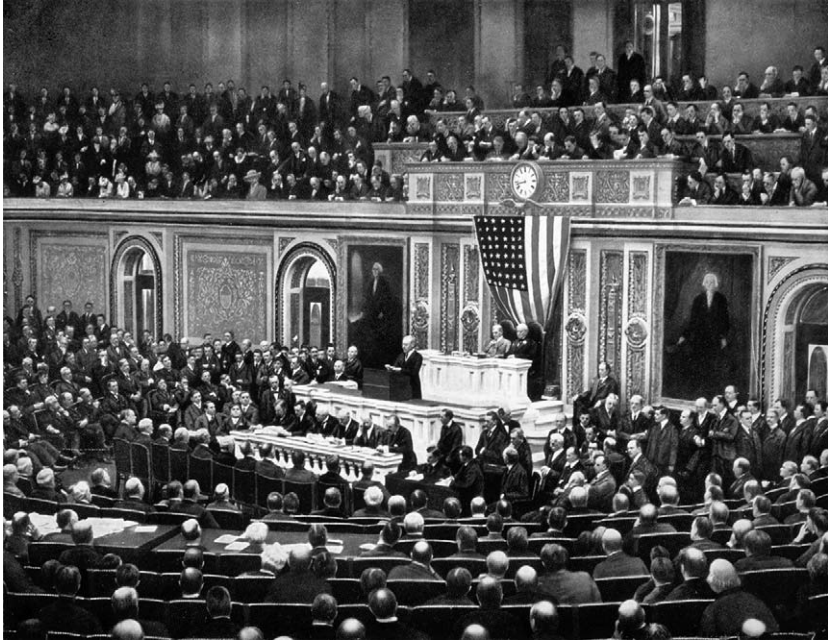
34. Bergson and Wilson met on 19 Feb, for half an hour. Bergson, "Mes Missions" (ref. 26), 1556.

35. Greenhalgh, "Viviani-Joffre Mission" (ref. 23), 635.

36. The famous "Peace without Victory" speech of 22 Jan 1917.

37. Bergson's diary, quoted in Soulez, "Les Missions" (ref. 1), on 68.

38. Meyer, *World Remade* (ref. 21), 51.



**FIG. 3.** Woodrow Wilson's war declaration before Congress, April 2, 1917. *Source:* Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-USZ62-17146; <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a19343> (accessed 21 Jul 2020).

Lane, for example, later told the philosopher that he had “played a greater role than [he] realized in the president’s decision.”<sup>39</sup> And while it may be impossible to determine how great that role was, what can be said is that Bergson’s philosophy had helped in preparing and presenting the decision. For not only did it resonate with House’s attempts to articulate a war justification as well as with Wilson’s desire to be seen as a great statesman, as we have just seen; it also provided a solution for a dilemma that the president was facing right at that time, a political problem that had come up precisely at the moment when Bergson was visiting.

From the start of the war, Wilson had aspired to a position above the parties, mediating between the belligerents, and bringing them back to a state of civility that they were evidently unable to hold on to themselves. For several years he had sought this role by offering peace negotiations, which he would

39. Lane, quoted in Bergson, “Mes Missions” (ref. 26), on 1557 (translation from Greenhalgh, “Viviani-Joffre Mission” [ref. 23], 636). Bergson himself (usually not someone to brag) saw his mission as “un succès—peut-être un *grand succès*” (ibid.).

lead as a neutral arbiter. His latest attempt of this kind, in December 1916, was a request that the battling states relate their respective war aims to him so that he could try and align them.<sup>40</sup> What he received back in January, however, was none of this—understandably, since, for example, the British could hardly reveal their secret aim to annex most of the Ottoman Empire. What France and Britain did make clear to the president, however, was that they were not going to accept his leading of any postwar peace negotiations. Why would they squander their immeasurable sacrifices at the hands of a country that had made none? If the United States wanted no business in the war, it would have no part in the peace either.<sup>41</sup>

The implications of this situation were all too clear. The only way to get a seat at the peace-making table was to become a war participant, and the only way to get the leader's seat was to become the decisive war participant. Here now was Wilson's dilemma. His desire was to stand above the parties, but he could only do that by becoming one of them. His ambition was to bring world peace, but for that he had to enter world war. How could he combine a lofty neutrality with on-the-ground partisanship? This is where Bergson's philosophy could help. It offered a vision of fighting the war, not for oneself, but for universal civilization. It made it possible to enter the conflict without tying one's nation to national motives. In the end, this was precisely how Wilson chose to frame US entry. He was going to fight the war, not for America, but in defense of universal civilization and against the barbarity of Germany (and indirectly against the selfishness of Britain and France). He would battle on the Entente side, but he was not going to be part of it.<sup>42</sup> This is how Wilson presented American war entry, and this is what characterized his attitude right through the Paris Peace negotiations. It was a vision of the war that squarely matched Bergson's philosophy and that may well have been stimulated by it.

## POSTWAR UNIVERSALISM

If Wilson adopted some of Bergson's universalism, however, that is not to say that it was in itself unique. The philosopher and the president were not the only ones to produce "the defense of civilization" as a leading definition of their war cause. Comparable versions were developed all over, most often by

40. Meyer, *World Remade* (ref. 21), 151.

41. *Ibid.*, 169.

42. *Ibid.*, 209–12.

other scientists and intellectuals. The Belgian George Sarton, for example, came up with an analogous account of the conflict. Already before the time of Bergson's lobbying, he had been contributing similar stories to the American public debate, with the one difference that in his version it was not France but Belgium that halted the German hordes and saved humanity from barbarism.<sup>43</sup> In a comparable manner, academics from neutral countries made claims of the kind. According to them, it was the Swedes, Dutch, or Danish who were preserving universal civilization as *all* of the belligerents, on *either* side, had lost their reason in the fog of war. Only neutrals could save European culture—from itself, as it were.<sup>44</sup> Finally, one could say that even German intellectuals described their war as defending not just their own country, but universal civilization, international law, and world peace against the assaults being made upon them by Britain and France. That, at least, is what the notorious manifesto “To the Civilized World” of October 1914 tried to argue.<sup>45</sup> All of these advocates were scholars and scientists. And all of them, in that capacity, claimed to represent a universal civilization that their particular country was trying to preserve.

And so in this sense Bergson's rendering of the war was hardly exceptional. What did make it special, apart from its origins in Bergson's philosophy of life, was that it would come to be the winner's version. After all, it was the victorious powers' views of higher civilization, and not those of the neutrals or the Germans, that won the day and that were adopted in the Paris peace treaties and institutionalized in the League of Nations and related organizations (Fig. 4). This is also how they ended up in the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation, which, from the start, would present itself as the embodiment of higher civilization and trumpet its universalism while excluding Germans and Austrians from membership—as we have seen in the opening of this article.

Nor is it a coincidence that this Bergson-style war philosophy ended up in the ICIC. In order to see this, we must realize that the ICIC was not a mere

43. E.g., George Sarton, “The Future of Belgium,” *The Open Court* 29, no. 5 (1915), 257–72. In this piece, Sarton also claimed that a World Capital of international institutions should be established in Brussels as a symbol of the world's indebtedness to Belgium.

44. Lettevall et al., *Neutrality* (ref. 7), chs. 3, 4, 6, 14, and 15.

45. The manifesto emphatically referred to “world peace” and “international law” as the guiding norms and values of their nation. Cf. Geert Somsen, “Chauvinism Revisited: Scientists' Responses to Total War,” paper at the symposium *Science en guerre & guerre des savants. Politique et réseaux scientifiques internationaux durant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Brussels, 14 Nov 2014.



**FIG. 4.** Woodrow Wilson reading out a draft of the League of Nations covenant in the presence of Edward House (second from left), Paris 1919. Drawing by Cyrus Leroy Baldridge. Source: C. LeRoy Baldridge, *"I was there" with the Yanks in France* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919), n.p. Retrieved from Wikimedia commons.

“technical” body of the League of Nations. It is sometimes described this way—as a task-driven subcommittee, charged with sorting out practical problems of learned communication, bibliographic systematics, scholarly exchange programs, and the like. But it was never just that, and in fact only



adopted these tasks after it got started.<sup>46</sup> When the Council of the League of Nations first established the ICIC, it had given it no specific job at all.<sup>47</sup> The eminent intellectuals that were appointed as its members were supposed to define their work as they pleased.<sup>48</sup> The only original purpose with the committee was that it should exist—that its scholars and scientists would sit together and display the kind of civil interaction and disregard for national strife that was deemed characteristic of their “high intellectual spheres”—from which peace would “descend upon the nations.” The ICIC, in other words, was to be the League’s showcase Republic of Letters. It was meant to be the embodiment of universal civilization.

For such an institution, Bergson would be a perfect president, and that is indeed what he was chosen to be.<sup>49</sup> Hence his rhetoric of universal civilization, developed in a context of war justification, could continue in the postwar situation without much change. In time, the ICIC itself would start to challenge it. Especially its non-Allied members grew uncomfortable with the paradoxical combination of universalism and anti-Germanism. Albert Einstein, himself no defender of the German war-cause, protested the all too French flavor of the ICIC’s internationalism, and objected to Bergson’s philosophies of nature and international relations at the same time, as Jimena Canales has beautifully shown.<sup>50</sup> Hendrik Lorentz, the Dutch physicist and Bergson’s successor as ICIC chair, even campaigned to roll back the exclusionary universalism, which to him looked like a blatant, if not hypocritical, oxymoron.

But Bergson himself never displayed any discomfort with the apparent contradiction. For one brief moment, in the ICIC’s opening meeting, it did

46. In the late 1920s, the ICIC even ended up becoming a main vehicle for defending intellectual property rights. See Evan Hemmings Wirtén, *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property & Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 110–44.

47. Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L’UNESCO Oubliée: La Société des Nations et la C Intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999), 18–19.

48. Bergson, *Mélanges* (ref. 4), 1350.

49. On the connection between Bergson’s presidency and his philosophy, see Soulez, “Bergson” (ref. 17), 113–16; and Jo-Anne Pemberton, “The Changing Shape of Intellectual Cooperation: From the League of Nations to UNESCO,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 1 (2012): 34–50. Soulez points out Bergson’s disagreement with the “diplomatico-juridical” version of the League and his hope that the ICIC could offer counterbalance.

50. Jimena Canales, “Einstein, Bergson, and the Experiment that Failed: Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations,” *MLN* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1168–91; Canales, “Of Twins and Time: Scientists, Intellectual Cooperation, and the League of Nations,” in Lettevall et al., *Neutrality* (ref. 7), 243–70.

seem as if he wondered whether the committee actually lived up to the ideals of openness and disregard for nationality that it was supposed to embody. Was such in fact demonstrated by its actions? But immediately after raising the question, Bergson reported his test result: “vérification.” The experience of the first meeting had proven that “it is indeed among intellectuals that accord is most easily established. . . . [I]t really feels to me that we are here between friends. Such could happen only among intellectuals.”<sup>51</sup> The fact that this unity was achieved while excluding whole nations and large segments of the scientific and scholarly community did not even occur to Bergson. The universalism that he saw verified had had the boycott of Germany and Austria built right into it, ever since its conception in the early days of the war.

## CONCLUSION

It is no news that scientists played a major role in World War I and in the international politics that followed it. But this role was not only material, restricted to the development of poison gas, synthetic rubber, *Ersatz* food, and the like. Scientists and their humanities colleagues also took a large part in framing the war—in defining its meaning, proclaiming its (higher) aims, and in defending these principles against enemy assaults. Part of this work was diplomatic. When the Oxford emeritus professor Viscount James Bryce edited a catalogue of German war atrocities, this was part of a British government campaign to press the necessity of fighting upon the minds, not just of young men at home (Britain still had a volunteer army), but of American readers—the US-directed propaganda efforts had already begun. Bryce had been selected precisely because his status as a venerable scholar would lend credibility to the (at times outrageous) claims that the report contained.<sup>52</sup>

Like Bryce, Bergson's story exemplifies how academics were mobilized: they were recruited to weigh in their cultural authority as truth-speakers and universalists; their work would raise them above partisanship and nationality. The Republic of Letters became a Republic in Arms. To us, distant observers, the paradoxical character of this mobilization is striking: internationalism was used for national purposes, universalism justified exclusion. But for those involved,

51. Bergson, *Mélanges* (ref. 4), 1351–52.

52. James Bryce et al., *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1915). Cf. John Horne, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). See also Meyer, *World Remade* (ref. 21), 177.

these combinations were not contradictory at all. The community of the learned had always had membership requirements, and uncivilized candidates simply did not fit the bill. Internationalism was never for everybody.

In the case of Bergson, this point is particularly pertinent. Most of the recent work on the political dimensions of his philosophy has focused on his distinction (in *Two Sources*, 1932) between “closed” and “open societies,” that is, communities based on in-group solidarity versus those based on universal love. As this scholarship points out, Bergson saw both types of society as products of natural tendencies, and war prevention and peace preservation hinged upon curbing the one while feeding the other. But what most of these studies have missed is that Bergson made a different distinction during World War I. Back then, his problem with Germany was not that it was a closed society, but that it was not a natural society altogether. It was absolutely beyond the fray.<sup>53</sup> Hence the ideas on peace and cooperation that he developed in subsequent years were limited in their application, and only held for natural, civilized nations, not for monstrosities like Prussia and its descendants. Bergson’s pacifism was circumscribed, his universalism exclusionary. This should be kept in mind if we want to fully understand, not only his practical work for the ICIC, until 1925, but also the philosophizing that led up to *Two Sources*.<sup>54</sup> Bergson’s war diplomacy cast a long shadow forward, and his “open society” may not have been as inclusive as it has seemed.

Someone once said, diplomacy is the art of viewing a national interest as a universal value. If this is true, Bergson and like-minded scientists were diplomats in the strongest sense.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was first presented at the symposium *The Science of Information, 1870–1945: The Universalization of Knowledge in a Utopian Age* at the University

53. See, e.g., Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White in their introduction to the volume *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (ref. 17), 1–10, and most of the essays in it. Philippe Soulez suggests that in his later work “Bergson continues his dialogue with Woodrow Wilson even beyond the latter’s death,” but leaves it unclear where his exclusion of Germany went; “Bergson” (ref. 17), 114. Mark Antliff does recognize and point out the difference between Bergson’s two distinctions of societies; see his “From Class War” (ref. 17), 253–56.

54. It may, for example, throw new light on Bergson’s belief in the pacifying power of knowing a foreign language and literature, which Nadia Kisukidi discusses in “Construire la Paix” (ref. 17). Bergson no doubt drew on his own fluency in French and English, which gave him this special experience. But would he have extended it to a knowledge of German?

of Pennsylvania, in 2017, and I would like to thank its organizers, Evan Hepler-Smith, Robert Fox, and Lynn Ransom, for setting me on this path. I am deeply grateful to Lily Xiaolei Huang for sharing her knowledge and sources of Bergson with me. Thanks also to Giulia Rispoli, Simone Turchetti, Sam Robinson, Matthew Adamson, Frans van Lunteren, Margaret Meredith, two anonymous reviewers, and my Maastricht colleagues for helping me to improve the paper—and to Steven Shapin for advice on its title. I am grateful to Nadia Kisukidi and Mark Antliff for generously sharing their work.