

# THE ORIGINS OF VIOLENCE AND ITS CONTROL BY DEMOCRACY AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE WORK OF BERGSON

“How happy will the people be when kings are philosophers or  
philosophers are kings!” (Marcus Aurelius)

Professor Julia Urabayen.

Department of Philosophy. University of Navarra. Spain.

[jurabayen@unav.es](mailto:jurabayen@unav.es)

Keywords: Bergson, democracy, conflict, openness and closure.

The philosophy of Bergson has not been studied in depth from the socio-political point of view. Nevertheless I think that this aspect of his philosophy allows us to understand his significance and relevance. Bergson is a thinker who concentrates on current problems and his reflections on socio-political issues show him to be more a thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century than a 19<sup>th</sup> century one.

To understand the relevance and validity of his socio-political thought one has to carefully reread Bergson's last work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, and his works and his speeches during the War. It is necessary to see it in its intellectual context and also to recover its philosophical argument: the origin of violence and conflict and its control by means of democratic forms of coexistence, which promote relationships between different societies and the recognition of the necessity of international organisations as a form of mediation between different nations.

This means being aware of Bergson's political work and his approach to the relationship between philosophy and politics, his understanding of politics, his conditions and limits, and particularly his belief in an open society due to the intervention of charismatic figures and international organizations.

In this paper I intend to explain the historical political role played by Bergson during the First World War and I will later deal with his political ideas, focusing mainly on the relationship between the politician and the philosopher, the characteristics of politics taken as a charismatic guide and the necessity for openness in order to achieve proper coexistence between human beings: democracy and international organizations. The first point I would like to emphasise in this paper could be called Bergson's political role, which centres for the most part on his missions during the First World War and his role as President of the League of Nations International Commission for Intellectual Collaboration (later UNESCO) in the years following the Great War.

## 1. *Bergson as a politician*

Henri Bergson was a philosopher of international renown when the First World War broke out, and he also had many friends in the USA<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, as he states in “Mes missions”, the French government asked him to

---

<sup>1</sup> He was a friend of William James and in 1913 had travelled to the USA as a “delegate of the board of the University of Paris” (Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, PUF, Paris, 1989, p. 51) as a guest of the Columbia, Princeton and Harvard universities.

take on his first mission as a kind of ‘diplomat without portfolio’ in charge of presenting the affairs of France to President Wilson with the idea of persuading him to abandon his vacillation on the War, or rather his declaration of neutrality<sup>2</sup>.

In 1917 Bergson travelled to the US, where he had meetings with several members of the President’s entourage, particularly with Colonel House, and with Wilson himself. In these meetings, and in the various speeches he gave, Bergson focused on three key aspects: American idealism as a characteristic of this young nation which was to play a major role in history<sup>3</sup>; reinforcement of the idea of Bismarck as a defender of force over right, and of Germany as a country that, because it pursued unity in a mechanical and highly militarized way, was a staunch enemy of democracy and right<sup>4</sup>; and finally, the need for understanding among nations through right: the creation of a League of Nations.

On the first issue, Bergson always held that the US was born of a mighty freedom ideal, and that its participation in the War was because of this ideal

---

<sup>2</sup> There are at least two works by historians on the role played by Bergson in the Entry of America into the First World War: Kaspi, A., *Le temps des Américains. Le concours américain à la France en 1916-1918*, Publications de La Sorbonne, Paris I-Panthéon, Série internationale 6, Université de la Sorbonne, Institut des relations internationales contemporaines (IHEIC), Paris, 1976. Nouailhat, Y.-H., *France et les États-Unis, août 1914-avril 1917*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Série internationale 10, Université de la Sorbonne, Institut des relations internationales contemporaines (IHEIC), Paris, 1979. However, both works are partial and do not deal with Bergson’s second mission.

<sup>3</sup> “La note dominante de l’âme américaine est un certain *idéalisme*. [...] Un idéalisme qui côtoie parfois le mysticisme, et qui est toujours fortement imprégné de sentiment”; Bergson, H., “Discours au Comité France-Amérique”, June 1913, in *Mélanges*, PUF, Paris, 1972, p. 994. He defines idealism using several features: curiosity about spiritual things, the habit of placing such things above all else, and particularly the habit of considering life as having been created for the fulfilment of something which does not yet exist, but which will give a new meaning to life on being fulfilled. Cfr. pp. 994-995.

<sup>4</sup> This is clearly seen in the “Discours en séance publique de l’Académie des sciences morales et politique”, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1914. Bergson begins by underlining his horror and indignation at the crimes of Germany: “la civilisation avait déjà connu, sur tel ou tel de ses points, des retours offensifs de la barbarie; mais c’est la première fois que toutes les puissances du mal se dressent ensemble, coalisées, pour lui donner assaut”; in *Mélanges*, p. 1107-1108.

In his opinion, the internal disorder of Germany could have been solved in time, as an organic force. But in Germany there was a force, compelled by Prussia, which wanted this union by mechanical means, which wanted to unite everything like “une machine bien montée”, p. 1108. Unfortunately the unification was carried out in the latter way. Germany left aside its own philosophers and in order to be convinced that there were pre-destined races, looked abroad, to Gobineau, who was not read in France. Cfr. p. 1113.

Thus war is totally destructive: “il n’en est pas moins vrai qu’une ambition perverse, lorsqu’elle s’est élevée en théorie, se sent plus à son aise pour aller jusqu’au bout d’elle-même: elle rejettera ainsi sur la logique une part de la responsabilité. Si la race germanique est la race élue, elle sera la seule qui ait le droit absolu de vivre; les autres seront des races qu’elle tolère, et cette tolérance sera précisément ce qu’on appelle l’état de paix. Vienne la guerre: c’est l’anéantissement de l’ennemi que l’Allemagne devra poursuivre. Elle ne s’en prendra pas seulement aux combattants; elle massacrera les femmes, les enfants, les vieillards; elle pillera, elle incendiera: l’idéal serait de détruire les villes, les villages, toute la population”; p. 1113. Moreover, in this situation, barbarianism uses the forces of civilization: science and industry. Cfr. pp. 1114-1115.

and not because of economic or defensive interests (in such a case, it could simply have waged a partial war centred on the problem of submarine attack)<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, this fits in with his vision of President Wilson as a man of letters, whose main occupation would be human happiness. Due to his strong Platonism, Bergson always believed in a philosopher as a servant of the city, which idea was fulfilled by the American president, as it was by King Albert of Belgium<sup>6</sup>, but not by the German intellectuals who were in no way interested in politics.

On the second point, Bergson presented Bismarck as a pre-Hitler who was incapable of understanding the proper relationship between force and right<sup>7</sup> and insisted on the need to teach Germany that it was not invincible, because, as it was fascinated by force, it would not stop and would destroy the democratic ideals of the countries it was subduing by force<sup>8</sup>. This leads to the third concern. Bergson attempted to convince President Wilson that he, like France, believed that what was important was to keep the future peace in mind, a peace created by the Americans following the fundamentals of the French Revolution: individual rights and an international regime of rights, which are also the ideals of the League of Nations. But for these ideals to be achieved, America had to enter the war.

On his second mission, in 1918, Bergson was to convince Wilson that the US should enter with Japan on the Eastern front, in Russia, using the Trans-Siberian route in order to force the Germans to divide their forces, and thus take pressure off the Western front. The French philosopher began by suggesting economic aid for Russia and a later military intervention. However, this time not only did he fail to convince Wilson, but also showed the shortcomings of his political grasp, in spite of the assistance of expert political

---

<sup>5</sup> “Mais, avec de la discrétion toute seule, on ne pouvait rien obtenir. Il était essentiel de faire connaître à Wilson et à son entourage la vraie nature de la guerre que nos faisait l’Allemagne. Il était essentiel aussi de rechercher et d’amener à la pleine lumière, pour en combattre l’effet, les deux ou trois causes profondes de l’indécision de Wilson. Surtout, il fallait montrer à un président naturellement idéaliste, l’occasion unique qui s’offrait à lui de restaurer la paix dans le monde et, comme je le disais plus haut, d’ouvrir une ère nouvelle dans l’histoire de l’humanité”; Bergson, H., in *Mélanges*, p. 1559. Bergson emphasises the idealistic character of the USA in its wars in the “Discours au banquet de la société France-Amérique à New York”, in *Mélanges*, pp. 1243-1248.

<sup>6</sup> In “Hommage au roi Albert et au peuple belge”, Bergson states as follows: “il a fait par avance le sacrifice de tout ce qu’il avait et de tout ce qu’il était: ses villes et ses villages, sa fortune et sa vie, il a tout donné à une idée, à la conception héroïque qu’il s’était faite de l’honneur. Gloire à lui! Gloire à son roi! J’ai dit, j’ai enseigné pendant longtemps que l’histoire était une école d’immoralité. Je ne le dirai plus, après l’exemple que la Belgique vient de donner au monde. Un acte comme celui-là rachète les plus grandes vilenies de l’humanité. Il fait qu’on se sent plus fier d’être homme”; Bergson, H., in *Mélanges*, p. 1130.

<sup>7</sup> For Bergson right as a power is force, but not physical force. So he recognises that right means recognising the legitimacy of other forces, together with the need to regulate them using reason. Reflections on the idea of right and force, influenced by Bergson, appear in Patocka’s book: *Essais hérétiques sur la philosophie de l’histoire*, where he states that in the Great War it was force and not right that was used to evaluate others.

<sup>8</sup> According to Soulez, the 1914 war can be interpreted, to a great extent, as a controversy between French philosophers and German historians on the meaning of the unification of Germany. Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, p. 143.

assessors on Russia, Romania and the Eastern front: he did not understand Russia or his mission<sup>9</sup>. After this fiasco, Bergson refused a third mission, which in fact was merely honorary. When weighing up his “diplomatic” role in the Great War, he concluded that his fame has “allowed him to be truly useful to France during the war”<sup>10</sup>, which was of great importance for him.

On the subject of his work for the League of Nations International Cooperation Commission, Bergson was its first chairman and assisted in setting down the bases for international intellectual cooperation, the sub-commissions and their roles. He also headed the 1923 commission, which, among other issues, dealt with the subject of Esperanto. On this point, he stated that the aim of the League of Nations was to bring countries closer together, and that this was mainly achieved by understanding each other’s languages, which would disappear with the establishment of an artificial language<sup>11</sup>.

After the war<sup>12</sup>, Bergson needed more than ever to properly understand the relations between nations and to establish international organizations to achieve such understanding. For some, nations cannot interrelate through rights: “Justice exists, but only in the relations between individuals and the state, not in relations between states. One state has no duties towards another; it only has duties towards itself, and these duties can all be summarized in just one: being strong, becoming stronger and stronger”<sup>13</sup>.

That is to say, international relations are based on strength, not on rights. This means that a small, weak nation exists only because the strong nations tolerate its existence. And particularly that nations do not interrelate through agreements nor because of their given word: “Agreements exist, but there is a certain level of equilibrium between the forces present only at a given moment; when the balance changes, the agreement, which was but the verification of this agreement, is virtually broken, and will in fact be broken if one of the parties is interested in so doing”<sup>14</sup>.

These views imply that the strong nations would have the right and duty to impose their organization and dominance on the rest of the world, thus creating a mechanical unity: “The unification resulting from this would be very different from the first, a unification which would not proceed from the consent of nations, where each could develop its personality and individuality, rather, on the contrary, it would proceed from a kind of coercion which would impose a certain mechanical uniformity on humankind. This would also be unity, but,

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> Bergson, H., “Mes missions”, in *Mélanges*, p. 1555.

<sup>11</sup> “Dès lors, le rôle de la Société des Nations et de sa Commission est de pousser à l’étude des langues vivantes, et non pas à celle de la langue artificielle. Ce n’est pas à dire, encore une fois, que la langue artificielle ne finisse pas par s’imposer. Mais il appartient à d’autres, il n’appartient pas à la Société des Nations, de prendre sa cause en mains”; Bergson, H., in *Mélanges*, p. 1416.

<sup>12</sup> However, in 1917, during the war, Bergson states that the League of Nations will have to wait to be established, as it is very unlikely that Germany will renounce its present mentality and because, under the circumstances, it is more suitable to consider a federation of allies than a league of nations. Nevertheless, he believes these opinions should not be published at the time. Cfr. Bergson, H., “Letter to Ç (16 August 1917)”, in *Mélanges*, pp. 1271-1272.

<sup>13</sup> Bergson, H., “La personnalité”, in *Mélanges*, p. 1232.

<sup>14</sup> Bergson, H., “La personnalité”, p. 1232.

it has to be said, an abstract, poor, empty unity; the unity of a machine and not the harmonious fruitful unity of life”<sup>15</sup>.

In contrast with this view of relations between nations, Bergson considers that the League of Nations, politicians and philosophers, must establish a proper relationship based on rights, which in fact is simply the correct definition of democracy: “The term ‘Democracy’, in America, is of extremely deep and philosophical significance. The regime of Democracy is Reason, pure Reason that replaces Force, Instinct and even Tradition. If it has to do with the relations between citizens in a State, these relations, in the way they have been regulated little by little by historical incidents and accidents, by traditions, are not relations of strict justice, of equality in Law. But what Reason demands is this equality in Law. A democratic regime is one that, taking Force, Tradition and all historical eventualities as an abstraction, considers one man as equal to another, because all men are part of some infinite superior nature, and therefore the dignity of every man is eminent and the value of every man is absolute. This refers to the relations of citizens with the state itself.

This concept of Democracy is also a concept of the relations between States. Here again, what have Tradition, Force and Instinct done? They have led to oppression of the weak by the strong. If we ignore all this, and accept the perspective of pure reason, the fact that a state is large or small does not matter: only moral persons exist, in equality, equal in Law.

If we accept these concepts of the state and the relations between states, then [...] the regime of Force is abolished. The regime of force is followed by the regime of Law. This is why Americans believe and say that Democracy is in its essence peaceful and also that any lasting, definitive peace is in its essence democratic”<sup>16</sup>.

Keeping this ‘political’ activity of Bergson’s in mind, Soulez concludes that “few philosophers have been so active in politics in their times, [...] Bergson never followed a *party political line*. He was more interested in the *institutions* than in the *area* of political debate surrounding them”<sup>17</sup>. However, he always abstained from getting involved in specific political matters and did not take part in the major issues that affected his country and Europe in the pre- and post-war years.

This partially explain why Bergson has been forgotten and his socio-political thinking has been rejected. Bergson was seen as an “organic intellectual” of the Third Republic, a defender of patriotic liberal order. This is linked to the fact that the First World War and the Russian Revolution brought about radical change in the situation and in the most pressing concerns, which distanced the new generations from the Bergson’s work. The era of the thinker of *élan vital* seemed to be over, and his place appeared to have been occupied by others who were not allies of the “State and class whose tool it is”<sup>18</sup>, who

---

<sup>15</sup> Bergson, H., “La personnalité”, p. 1234.

<sup>16</sup> Bergson, H., “L’amitié franco-américaine (June 1917)”, in *Mélanges*, pp. 1263-1264.

<sup>17</sup> Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Politzer, G., *La fin d’une parade philosophique: le bergsonisme*, Les rues, Paris, 1929, pp. 10-11. Politzer focused his criticism on the disciples’ deviations (which would not affect Bergson’s philosophy); on his psychology, which Politzer contrasted with the psychoanalytical

would represent a more specific philosophy: Marx-Lenin, Freud and Husserl. Indeed, Bergson lost contact with the concerns of the young people of the times, and resigned from his post at the *Collège de France* in 1920; in France his philosophy was replaced by that of Husserl<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. Bergson's political philosophy: the origins of violence and its control

Now that we have established the political activity of Bergson, it is time to deal with his vision of politics and of politicians as men of action or charismatic leaders. In the first place, Bergson considered that the difference between a philosopher and a politician must be clear, as the latter can resort to lies, even in order to tell the truth<sup>20</sup>; But the philosopher is searching for the truth and formulates problems. Moreover, the philosopher is the equivalent of *homo sapiens*, whereas the politician is *homo loquax*<sup>21</sup>, which means that he is a person who appeals to language with an aim: "his function is to set up communication in view of cooperation"<sup>22</sup>. For Bergson the philosopher is one who can wait for the effect, while the politician can produce it. Their fields are different, but the main difference between a politician and a philosopher has to do with their areas of responsibility: the philosopher develops his intuition in a theoretical line, as contemplation; however, the politician moves in a practical area. This is why the features of a good politician have to do with skills related to sociability and direction of people.

---

perspective and urged a comparison between Bergson and Freud on the idea of the concrete and the method of analysis; and particularly on the fact that he was bourgeois. Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>19</sup> The first philosopher who, having been greatly influenced by Bergson, introduced the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger to France was Levinas, whose thesis became a classic at the time and drove Sartre to become interested in this new movement.

<sup>20</sup> "Un diplomate, homme d'esprit, se plaisait à répéter que le meilleur moyen de tromper les cours, c'est de leur dire la vérité. Il connaissait ses adversaires et ne les estimait pas assez naïfs pour croire à la parole d'un homme d'Etat, fût-il honnête. En ce sens nous sommes tous plus ou moins diplomates: nous regardons trop loin ou trop haut, et lorsque la vérité est sous nos yeux, nous passons sans l'apercevoir", Guitton, J., *La vocation de Bergson*, Gallimard, Paris, 1960. Quoted in Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, p. 217. Thus Bergson distrusts this kind of people: "We consider intelligence very highly, but we do not appreciate the 'intelligent man', who is skilled in speaking on all subjects. Skill to speak, ready to criticise"; Bergson, H., *El pensamiento y lo moviente*, La Pleyade, Paris, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> "*Homo faber* is the definition we suggest. *Homo sapiens*, born of the reflection of *Homo faber* on his making, seems to us to be worthy of esteem in that he uses pure intelligence to solve the problems which depend entirely on him: in the choice of these problems a philosopher may err, another philosopher will correct him; both will have done what they can; both deserve our recognition and admiration. *Homo faber*, *Homo sapiens*, although there is confusion about which is which, we bow to you both. The only one we do not like is *Homo loquax*, whose thinking, when he thinks, is merely a reflection of his words"; Bergson, H., *El pensamiento*, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Bergson, H., *Oeuvres*, PUF, Paris, 1970, p. 1321. Conversely, the philosopher has no recourse to this mode of language, as he would miss the true significance of reality: intuition of length. Cfr. *El pensamiento y lo moviente; Introducción a la metafísica*.

The first feature of the charismatic guide must be courtesy: “It seems, thus, that the power to contract long-lasting habits, appropriate to the circumstances and place in which one finds oneself and the place which one wants to occupy in the world, then demand another faculty which corrects or attenuates their effects, the faculty of relinquishing, if necessary, the habits one had acquired or even those natural aptitudes that one has managed to develop, the faculty of putting oneself in the other’s position, of being interested in their occupations, of thinking their thoughts, of re-living their lives, in short, of forgetting oneself. This is what courtesy of spirit signifies, I believe it is no more than a kind of intellectual agility. The real man of the world can talk to everyone on what interests them, can penetrate into the views of others without always adopting them, he understands everything, without excusing it all”<sup>23</sup>.

For Bergson the most outstanding trait in a politician is his good sense: “Therefore I see in good sense the inner energy of an intelligence that is always re-conquering itself, eliminating prior ideas to make space for ideas that are formed and modelled on what is real through the constant effort of persevering action. And I also see in him the splendour of a morally intense heart, precision of ideas modelled on the sentiment of justice, in any case, spirit strengthened by character. Our philosophy, based on the distinctions mentioned, draws a very clear divisory line between intelligence and will, between morality and knowledge, between thought and action. And these are, in fact, the two different directions where human nature is committed to develop. But it seems to me that action and thought have a common source, which is neither pure will nor pure intelligence, and this source is good sense”<sup>24</sup>.

That is, this capacity is at the same time theoretical and practical, or, to be more exact, it is prior to such a difference<sup>25</sup>. Thus neither education nor

---

<sup>23</sup> Bergson, H., “La politesse”, in *Mélanges*, pp. 321-322. These ideas are very similar to Arendt’s approach to the lengthened mentality, which is not only the capacity to see the other’s point of view, but also to adopt the most varied perspectives. For this reason it appeals to the imagination. Understanding the other’s point of view is training ‘to go visiting’, which presupposes a commitment to think for oneself, and not be seduced by others. The lengthened mentality does not mean taking on the other’s position (this would mean being the other and not judging), but judging one’s own judgement from the public perspective. Moreover, Arendt identifies Kant’s lengthened mentality with the Aristotelian *phronesis* and *sensus comunis*. To understand reality, we must leave aside all of one’s own interests, and take the diverse perspectives provided by others into account. Arendt also adds that the truth implies an element of coercion, as it implies validity that is beyond argument. Thus from the perspective of politics, the truth is despotic. For politics a broad mentality is necessary, because the quality of an opinion depends on its degree of impartiality. Opinions are never evident and imply discursive thinking. There are areas of truth in all societies and politics cannot influence them. The sphere of politics is limited by “the things that man cannot change” according to his will. Only if it respects its own borders, that field where we are free to act and change will remain intact, and will keep and uphold its promises”; Arendt, H., *Entre el pasado y el futuro Ocho ejercicios sobre la reflexión política*, Península, Barcelona, 1996. p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> Bergson, H., “Le bon sens et les études classiques”, in *Mélanges*, p. 365.

<sup>25</sup> This is one of the points on which Bergson is most insistent: good sense is the point of union of reason and will, and therefore offers “la solution socialement utile, celle qui facilite le langage et favorise l’action [...] Il semble donc que le bon sens procède en matière spéculative par un appel au vouloir, et en matière pratique par un recours à la raison. De sorte qu’on pourrait être tenté de voir en lui, l’effet d’un mélange, d’un accord intime entre les exigences de la

instruction<sup>26</sup> nor even experience is enough to attain it. As it is the most useful sense for social life it is a characteristic of everyone, but at the same time it can grow and must be properly cared for.

In any case, what the French philosopher is most interested in is to emphasise its functions: “On the subject of behaviour, to differentiate what is essential from what is accessory or indifferent; to chose from among the diverse possibilities the one which will give the greatest possible returns of good, not imaginable but rather feasible: this is, I believe, the role of good sense [...] good sense is charged with our relations with people”<sup>27</sup>.

Thus it is the capacity to choose correctly from among the options presented in our daily lives. This capacity, good sense, must be an active attention; must always fit in with situations which are always new. For his reason, Bergson moves between the spirit of routine, which rejects any change, and the spirit of fantasy, which hopes for miraculous transformations. It is the capacity to find the fulcrum between change and immobility, which would give the necessary stability to social life<sup>28</sup> and the indispensable openness for coexistence and growth, by emphasising the power for transformation which is proper to human freedom<sup>29</sup>. As this is its function, Bergson considers it a means of doing things and not a method, and situates it close to the role played by genius in art and science<sup>30</sup>. However, this is not the fundamental core of good sense: “Clarity of ideas, firmness of attention, freedom and moderation of judgement, all this is what shapes the material wrappings of good sense; but its soul is passion for justice”<sup>31</sup>.

pensée et celles de l'action. [...] Mais j'inclinerais, pour le fond, à envisager les choses tout autrement, à voir dans le bon sens la disposition originelle, et au contraire dans les habitudes de la pensée et les lois de la volonté, deux émanations, deux développements divergents de cette faculté primitive d'orientation”; Bergson, H., “Le bon sens”, pp. 365-366.

<sup>26</sup> “Je voudrais montrer que le bon sens consiste en partie dans une disposition active de l'intelligence, mais en partie aussi dans une certaine défiance toute particulière de l'intelligence vis-à-vis d'elle-même; que l'instruction lui fournit un soutien, mais qu'il pousse ses racines à des profondeurs où l'instruction ne pénètre guère”; Bergson, H., “Le bon sens”, p. 360.

<sup>27</sup> Bergson, H., “Le bons sens”, p. 361.

<sup>28</sup> “The essential aim of society is to insert a certain firmness into universal mobility”. Bergson, H., *El pensamiento*, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> “Il y a une erreur grave, qui consiste à raisonner dans la société comme sur la nature, à y découvrir je ne sais quel mécanisme des liens inéluctables, à méconnaître enfin l'efficacité du vouloir et la force créatrice de la liberté. Il en est une autre, celle des esprits chimériques, qui posent la formule d'un idéal simple, et en déduisent géométriquement les conséquences pour l'organisation de la société, comme si les définitions dépendent ici de nous, comme si notre liberté ne rencontrait pas une limite, dans les conditions mêmes de la nature humaine et de la vie sociale. Le bon sens tient le milieu entre ces deux imitations maladroités de la physique et de la géométrie. Peut-être n'a-t-il pas de méthode à proprement parler, mais plutôt une certaine manière de faire”; Bergson, H., “Le bon sens”, p. 369.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. Bergson, H., “Le bon sens”, p. 362. But in a way that is also a method: “tension, concentration, such are the words we use to characterize a method that demands of talent an entirely new effort for each new problem”; Bergson, H. *El pensamiento*, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Bergson, H., “Le bon sens”, p. 372. Bergson calls it the tact of practical truth: “le bon sens raisonne, je le veux bien, et sur des principes généraux parfois; mais il commence par les infléchir dans la direction de la réalité présente; et ce travail d'adaptation, qui ne relève plus du raisonnement pur, n'est-il pas justement l'office propre du bon sens? Non, le bon sens ne réside ni dans une expérience plus vaste, ni dans les souvenirs mieux classés, ni dans une déduction



Taking these characteristics belonging to politics in mind, Bergson concludes that, when faced with political issues, a philosopher is like anyone else and must exercise judgement with the aid of good sense. But at the same time, he accepts that he may have a certain advantage, as he better understands the role of the institutions as factors for stability<sup>32</sup>.

Taking these statements of Bergson's into account, it is necessary to explain his theory on the philosopher-king. The Frenchman shows his agreement with the platonic theory when he speaks of the growth of Columbia University during the presidency of Nicholas Murray Butler<sup>33</sup> and of King Albert of Belgium<sup>34</sup>. This means that there are lines of convergence between the philosopher and the politician, at least in some cases.

In Bergson's work, these examples emphasize the exceptionality of the charismatic guide: "Let us realize that the art of governing a great people is the only one for which there is no preparatory technique or effective education, particularly when dealing with the highest positions. The extreme scarcity of politicians of certain importance is due to the fact that they, constantly and in great detail, have to solve problems which have been made unsolvable by the extension of societies. Study the history of the great modern nations: you will find great sages, great artists, great soldiers, great specialists on every subject, but, how many great statesmen?"<sup>35</sup>.

plus exacte, ni même, plus généralement, dans une logique plus rigoureuse. Instrument, avant tout, de progrès social, il ne peut tirer sa force que du principe même de la vie sociale, l'esprit de justice [...] Je parle de la justice, incarnée dans l'homme juste, de la justice vivante et agissante, attentive à s'insérer dans les événements, mais pesant dans sa balance l'acte et la conséquence, et ne craignant rien tant que d'acheter le bien au prix d'un plus grand mal. La justice, quand elle se réalise dans un homme de bien, devient un sens délicat, une vision ou plutôt un tact de la vérité pratique"; Bergson, H., "Le bon sens", p. 364.

<sup>32</sup> "Son analyse du changement laisse cette question intacte. Pour peu qu'il ait du bon sens, il jugera nécessaire, comme tout le monde, une certaine permanence de ce qui est. Il dira que les institutions doivent fournir un cadre relativement invariable à la diversité et à la mobilité des desseins individuels. Et il comprendra peut-être mieux que d'autres le rôle de ces institutions. Ne contribuent-elles pas dans le domaine de l'action, en posant les impératifs, à l'oeuvre de stabilisation que les sens et l'entendement accomplissent dans le domaine de la connaissance quand ils condensent en perception les oscillations de la matière, et en concepts l'écoulement des choses? Sans doute, dans le cadre rigide des institutions, soutenues par cette rigidité, la société évolue. Même, le devoir de l'homme d'Etat est de suivre ces variations et de modifier l'institution quand il en est encore temps: sur dix erreurs politiques, il y en a neuf qui consistent simplement à croire encore vrai ce qui a cessé de l'être. Mais la dixième, qui pourra être la plus grave, sera de ne plus croire vrai ce qui l'est pourtant encore"; Bergson, H., *Oeuvres*, pp. 1329-1330.

<sup>33</sup> "Et, vraiment, quand on les a vus à l'oeuvre l'un et l'autre, on comprend mieux et l'on se sent tout prêt à accepter –pour ma part, je l'acceptais depuis longtemps, mais je n'osais pas le dire, par modestie– oui, l'on se sent prêt à accepter le mot de Platon, que 'tout irait bien dans le monde si les philosophes étaient rois, ou si les rois faisaient de la philosophie'; Bergson, H., in *Mélanges*, p. 998.

<sup>34</sup> "Je le voudrais, car la philosophie recueillerait alors quelque chose de sa gloire. Deux fois, au cours des siècles, elle a brillé autour d'un trône, et, les deux fois, elle aura été associée à la plus haute vertu. Elle inspira jadis le stoïcisme de Marc-Aurèle. Elle sortit aujourd'hui avec amour à l'héroïsme simple et sublime du roi Albert"; Bergson, H., in *Mélanges*, p. 1130.

<sup>35</sup> Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes de la moral y de la religión*, Tecnos, Madrid, 1996, p. 351.

The philosopher is political when he appeals to good sense, but he is more prepared than others to achieve it because it has to do with what is changing and intuition, which is that form of knowledge used by a philosopher, it is the ability to understand reality as duration<sup>36</sup>. The sensible man, on understanding the change, can alter his discourse and moreover, find “the most useful social solution, that which facilitates language and favours action”<sup>37</sup>. That is, what the philosopher-king truly contributes to modern plural democracies is his capacity to understand what is mobile and changing by dealing with it as it should be done, which fosters the habit of discussion and conversation on that decision-making that affects what is common.

On this point the philosopher-king is as extraordinary as the great mystics, with whom he shares the power to get to the bottom of reality and is “the intermediary between the ideal and the group and the mediator on the relations the group has with itself”<sup>38</sup>. That is, the philosopher-king is an exceptional human being who possesses within himself the functions of leader, philosopher and prophet<sup>39</sup>. The paradigmatic examples for Bergson are the Greek sages<sup>40</sup>. This means that really he is not a leader, nor a governor, but rather a legislator<sup>41</sup>. Thus his role is persuasive and he must not resort to coercion, but to words.

The role of the politician as a legislator is precisely to break with the closed character of human societies, to end the human tendency to close the group around himself. This means asking the politician to put an end to a typical characteristic of the politics, which by excluding the other “bears the seed of extermination”<sup>42</sup>. In his final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson searches for the root of society and politics, more specifically, of violence and war, in order to attempt to propose an alternative. Therefore, having developed the analysis of society, morality and open religion, he concludes with his famous “final observations” where he shows the limits of politics taken in a ‘natural’ sense and attempts to reach a type of politics which is open to justice<sup>43</sup>.

---

<sup>36</sup> Thus in *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson states that attention (another term he uses to refer to intuition) selects memories and has a social meaning.

<sup>37</sup> Bergson, H., *Mélanges*, p. 365.

<sup>38</sup> Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 162. This similarity can be seen clearly in the comparison that Bergson establishes with W. (Washington-Wilson) and Joan of Arc and Moses. Cfr. MAE, *Papiers d'agent Bergson* 207, chem. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Soulez underlines the similarity of these ideas with those of Freud in *Moïse et le monothéisme*, which shows a difference between open morality (the moral idea which is defended) and closed morality (the personality of the great man), a subject which Lacan also returns to. Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, pp. 162-163, p. 276.

<sup>40</sup> Bergson, H., *Oeuvres*, p. 1040.

<sup>41</sup> These Bergsonian ideas are in the same line as those of Rousseau. Cfr. Polin, R., *La politique de la solitude. Essai sur J.-J. Rousseau*, Sirey, Paris, 1971, pp. 221-236.

<sup>42</sup> Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, p. 283. “Nevertheless murder is still too often the *ratio ultima*, when it is not the *prima*, of politics”; Bergson, H., *Oeuvres*, p. 356.

<sup>43</sup> This capacity to go beyond politics and address justice is one of the qualities that Bergson admires in Wilson: “j’ai voué à Wilson, en 1917, l’admiration et la reconnaissance les plus profondes. Je conserve ces sentiments intacts, et je les conserverai jusqu’à mon dernier jour, plutôt renforcés par l’universelle ingratitude avec laquelle on traite ce vrai homme, qui voulut ouvrir une ère nouvelle dans l’histoire du monde en suspendant la politique au *righteousness*, à

Firstly, Bergson states that humankind is social by nature, as society responds to a natural instinct, which can later be increased artificially<sup>44</sup>. Thus the natural tendency to live in society created a type of grouping based on the obligation where the individual must harmonize his superfluous self with his profound, intimate self. But even this type of society is not nor must be taken as an organism, as freedom and rationality intervene in it<sup>45</sup>.

The analysis of the sources of morality and religion have their starting-point in the difference between natural order and social order, but then he states that this social order obeys a natural tendency (political animal)<sup>46</sup> that develops while attempting the survival of the group, which is achieved by means of a strong internal cohesion and thus leads to war-making with others (*homo homini lupus*). In this type of society, war is therefore natural.

This kind of societies are a great danger for others, because “where the forces developed by civilization are not subject to a moral idea, they are of need at the service of the instinct; and the force at the service of the instinct is

la justice, à la vertu, et qu’il y aurait peut-être réussi sans la fatalité qui s’abattit sur lui à son retour en Amérique”; Bergson, H., in *Mélange*, p. 1556.

<sup>44</sup> “Ne craignons pas d’ajouter que la crainte de l’opinion, du blâme, des châtements, contribue sinon à fortifier, du moins à préciser le sentiment de l’obligation, et nous ne faisons pas reposer ainsi le sentiment de l’obligation sur une convention humaine, car la société n’a pas d’autre origine que l’instinct moral, le désir de chaque homme de réaliser en lui l’humanité.

C’est dans la vie sociale seulement que les puissances de l’homme se développent. L’instinct moral est donc à l’origine de la société, il en est la cause, mais, comme il arrive souvent, l’effet réagit sur sa cause et la société en se développant trouve sur sa route les moyens de fortifier artificiellement, chez certains de ses membres au moins, l’instinct moral là où il risque d’être en défaut”; Bergson, H., Cours de philosophie morale et politique, in *Cours II*, PUF, Paris, 1992, pp. 125-126.

<sup>45</sup> Thus Bergson simultaneously accepts and rejects the two modern doctrines on the relations between human beings and society: “les rationalistes se placent au point de vue du droit et de l’idéal, les naturalistes au point de vue du fait et de l’histoire. Le développement des sociétés ressemble assez au développement de l’organisme, mais il faut bien tenir compte des crises intelligentes, contingentes de la société, de l’influence des grands hommes. Au point de vue du droit tout doit se passer comme si Rousseau avait absolument raison. L’homme est porté par sa nature sensible à vivre en société et par là la société est un organisme. Mais ces unités sensibles réagissent sur la société parce qu’elles sont intelligentes et libres”; Bergson, H., *Cours II*, p. 167.

“La conception naturaliste de la société est vraie en fait. Elle ne tient guère compte que de la sensibilité humaine, de ces instincts et inclinations qui font de l’homme un animal sociale, mais de ce point de vue on aperçoit clairement le caractère naturel des sociétés. Elle sont dans la nature puisqu’elles répondent à des inclinations profondes, à un instinct primitif. En d’autres termes l’homme vit en société, y a toujours vécu et la sociabilité fait partie de l’humanité.

La thèse rationaliste est vraie en droit. Tandis que les sociétés animales ne sont que naturelles, la société humaine est en outre rationnelle. L’homme connaît la loi morale, le devoir. De là la notion de droit, de là l’idée de la valeur absolue de la personne humaine et comme conséquence nécessaire l’affirmation de l’égalité des personnes. C’est pourquoi si la société résulte nécessairement de la nature même de l’homme, si elle est un effet physique des instincts sociaux, néanmoins tout doit s’y passer comme si elle résultait d’un contrat par lequel tous s’engagent vis-à-vis de tous. A cette condition seulement les obligations seront réciproques et les droit égaux. La première thèse est donc vraie en fait, la deuxième en droit”; p. 169.

<sup>46</sup> “We say there is a natural human society, vaguely prefigured in us, for which nature has been careful enough to give us the schema in advance, allowing total breadth to our intelligence and will to follow its indications. This vague and incomplete schema would correspond, in the realm of reasonable, free activity, to the now precise schema of an anthill or a bee-hive in the case of instinct, at the other extreme of evolution”; Bergson, H, *Las dos fuentes*, p. 349.

called barbarianism. Therefore I have said that development of material power by civilization, when it considers it enough in itself, may lead mankind to barbarianism”<sup>47</sup>.

When dealing with these societies, Bergson considers that others marked by openness must be reached. This is one of the best-known distinctions of this political philosopher. Then the key question on this point is how to avoid the closure of societies. Philosophy has a role to play here, but politics has a greater one, according to the definition of the political man: “In order to re-establish the balance, our philosophy is certainly not enough [...] But the motto I would suggest to the philosopher, and even to the most common man, is the most simple of all, and I believe, the most Cartesian. I would say that we must act like a man of thought and think like a man of action”<sup>48</sup>. However, Bergson does not mean that theory is the best form of praxis; rather that praxis has its own autonomy. Thus it is that philosophy on its own will not be able to reform the social tissue<sup>49</sup>.

The openness of human societies requires awareness of the openness of man to humanity, but as this opening does not spring from any natural tendency<sup>50</sup>, it means, firstly, the free action of some people, those who grasp it intuitively and offer it to the other human beings, who tend to imitate them: the geniuses, saints, artists, charismatic leaders. These exceptional beings have overcome the original limited meaning of politics. So the objective of politics, in this situation, is dominance. That is the profile or temperament of a boss, but not of a charismatic leader<sup>51</sup>.

This action manages to transform society into an open society: “This new form is enough to lay emphasis above all on intelligence. Yet it is true that in animal societies we can find a certain division of labour similar to that of human societies. But what characterizes human society is the faculty to react against purely physical laws (which favour general inequality due to the diversity of functions), and formulate, after having devised it, the equality of rights and of persons. [...] To summarize, the error of naturalism is to have approached human society at that aspect it has in common with animal societies, that is: the division of labour and heterogeneity of the elements. It has not seen the human aspect, that is: the perfect homogeneity of the elements, the equality of all in right [...] We could say that human society, which in principle is no more than an organism and a prolongation of the individual merely because of the effect of nature, tends more and more due to the

---

<sup>47</sup> Bergson, H., “Bergson à A. Hébrard. (*Le Temps*, 24 January 1915, p. 1). Progrès matériel et progrès moral”, in *Mélanges*, pp. 1138-1139.

<sup>48</sup> Bergson, H., “Message au congrès Descartes. Il faut agir en homme de pensée et penser en homme d’action”, in *Mélanges*, p. 1575, p. 1579.

<sup>49</sup> This is the meaning of his speech in honour of E. Ollivier. Cfr. Bergson, H., *Mélanges*, p. 1283.

<sup>50</sup> “The route of amplification will never function to go from a closed society to an open one, from the city to humankind. Their essence is different”; Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 340.

<sup>51</sup> However, Bergson does not give enough detail, as would be desirable, on the difference between them.

influence of reason and freedom to become an assembly where each individual exists for himself and affirms his independence”<sup>52</sup>.

For Bergson this openness is the establishment of democracy, as “of all political concepts, democracy is the most distant from nature, the only one that transcends, in intention at least, the conditions of a ‘closed society’”. It ascribes inviolable rights to man and these rights, in order to remain inviolable, demand from everyone an inalterable fidelity to duty”<sup>53</sup>. This explains the idealistic image Bergson has of his homeland and of the United States, as the places where revolution gave birth to democracy, which “for a start and above all, enters the world as a protest. Every sentence of the Declaration of Human Rights is a challenge to injustice. When summarizing the complaints made to the *Actes des États-Generaux*, Émile Faguet somewhere wrote that the Revolution was not carried out for freedom and equality, but simply ‘because people were dying of hunger’”<sup>54</sup>.

Secondly, true openness demands the cooperation of nations, and therefore, the creation of international organizations. The main problem is that, under no circumstances, does openness mean exalting oneself. Thus openness is not achieved by alliance, empire or a nation which seeks to exalt itself.<sup>55</sup> Bergson indicates patriotism on the one hand.

On the other, he indicates the creation of international organizations, beginning with the League of Nations, which is not easy and will not be able to solve all problems. Bergson analyses the diplomatic-judicial model proposed by Wilson and concludes that the main problem is that nations, unlike persons, do not have to recognize a judge from amongst themselves, and especially, that their problems are not litigation, but *le différend* because they have nothing in common<sup>56</sup>. In the presence of the American version, the Frenchman suggests fostering knowledge of other nations and their cultures, and international cooperation mainly on economic and demographic matters<sup>57</sup>, which would not eliminate the principle of national sovereignty and at the same time would emphasize the awareness of interdependency of the different nations. Then again, he does not forget his critical outlook and soon states that the most important problem is that the institutions are not truly worldwide, although

---

<sup>52</sup> Bergson, H., *Cours II*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>53</sup> Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>54</sup> Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 360. “In the democratic state of the soul there is a great effort, directed opposed to nature”; Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 361.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, pp. 351-352. The Frenchman was very aware, and spoke publicly of the danger of the rise of Nazism. Cfr. Bergson, H., Participation at the *Congrès mondial juif*, probably in 1934, reported in the Horace Kallen papers, *Yivo Institute for Jewish Research*, 20740.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, pp. 288-289.

<sup>57</sup> “Eliminating these causes or lessening their effect, this is the principal task of an international organization that aims to abolish war. The most serious cause is over-population”; Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 369. “It is a perilous error to think that an international organization can achieve a definitive peace without intervening, with authority, in the legislation of several countries and perhaps even in their government”; Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 370.

they are effective; therefore he includes the “international organizations beside the ‘small means’ that humanity has to avoid its self-destruction”<sup>58</sup>.

In conclusion, we can say for Bergson the philosopher in his role as philosopher must not interfere in politics. We can also say that politics is the area of decision-making, where good sense plays a key role; but it doesn't have any magic recipes or miraculous solutions. True politics is practised by very few people who are capable of finding how to overcome politics as dominion that leads to war and violence, because they have found a means of dialogue with others, a means of knowing them and cooperating with them to establish justice and democracy. Clearly, this task is extremely complicated and always runs the risk of failure, including that of never beginning: “A decision must be taken. Humanity whimpers, semi-crushed under the weight of its own progress. It is not aware enough that its future depends on itself. It is its own responsibility, for a start, to decide if it wishes to keep on living. And then humanity must ask itself if it merely wishes to live, or if, on the contrary, it will make the effort necessary for the fulfilment, even on our reluctant planet, of the essential function of the universe which is a machine for the creation of gods”<sup>59</sup>.

---

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. Soulez, P., *Bergson politique*, pp. 292-293.

<sup>59</sup> Bergson, H., *Las dos fuentes*, p. 404.