

Former French Culture Minister: Arabic is “A National Treasure” (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Jack Lang is a former French culture minister who has launched a campaign to make Arabic widely available in French schools. He regards the Arabic language, he says, as a “treasure of France” that deserves a special place in the French curriculum. “It is our heritage,” he says.

No, The Greeks, the Romans, these are France’s – and the West’s – cultural “heritage.” The Jews, too, are part of the West’s spiritual heritage. The Arabic language, the Arabs themselves, have made no significant contribution to Western or French civilization. Arabic is the language of the historic enemy of the West, the language of Muslims, whose faith discourages free inquiry and encourages the habit of mental submission to authority. It’s the language of those who have been taught to regard themselves as the “best of peoples” while Infidels everywhere, including the French, are the “most vile of created beings.”

Now it's hardly surprising that Jack Lang should have started such a campaign to encourage such exaggerated veneration of Arabic. He is not a disinterested scholar, nor a cultivated connoisseur of comparative cultures, but a bought-and-paid-for propagandist for the Arabs, the Arabic language, and – joined at the hip with the Arabs and their language – Islam. Jack Lang is, after all, the president of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, where he is handsomely paid out of the contributions of 18 Arab states. The Institut does not lack for funds. Its building was constructed between 1981 and 1987, and at that time cost \$250 million – which is \$500 million in 2020 dollars – making it one of the most expensive properties in the world. It is very well endowed. From his luxurious eyrie, Lang does the bidding of those who so lavishly fund his plush sinecure. His current campaign feeds the amour-propre – and the politico-cultural desires – of his Arab paymasters. This insensate promotion of the Arabic language (has he bothered to learn it himself? No, he admits he can't even carry on a simple conversation in Arabic) is part of his task, as he attempts through lectures and exhibitions and colloquia at the Institute to convince the French that the Arab world is, as he puts it, “rich, dense, and passionate,” and to insist “how very far it is from the clichés that are being spread and published in the media in the West and elsewhere.” “Clichés,” he means, about “violence and terrorism” – where do people get these strange ideas that Arabs, and Islam, have anything to do with violence and terrorism?

Perhaps Jack Lang has forgotten, or wants us all to forget, the attacks by Muslim terrorists in Europe, after Muslim terrorists have many times struck in London and Paris, as well as in Manchester, Toulouse, Nice, Magnanville, Madrid, Barcelona, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Hamburg, Anspach, Munich, Vienna, Copenhagen, Malmö, Stockholm, Turku, Helsinki, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Beslan. In America, we have not only endured the mass terrorism by Muslims in New York and Washington on 9/11, but since then, there have been terror

attacks in New York (several times), Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, Fort Hood, Little Rock, Chattanooga, San Bernardino, Orlando and many other places.

And there are more than 36,500 separate attacks by Muslim terrorists since 9/11 that Jack Lang has overlooked, that just might explain those “clichés” about Muslims and terrorism that he so deplures.

And what about Muslim violence unconnected to terrorism? Does Jack Lang not realize why the French associate Muslims to violent crime? Does the fact that the prisons of Europe are overflowing with Muslims – as in France, where more than 70% of all prisoners are Muslim, despite being less than 10% of the population – suggest that, despite the lavishing of every conceivable welfare benefit on Muslim migrants, their integration is not exactly going well?

Lang would like us to believe, as an article of faith, what his unwitting comrade-in-arms, Pope Francis, pontificated: “Authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence.”

Lang goes further than Pope Francis. It’s not enough that the French should embrace this non-violent “understanding” of “authentic Islam.” They must also, in his view, be convinced of the enormous debt that French culture owes to the Arabs and to the Arabic language. It is that language, according to Jack Lang, which allowed the French, uncultivated barbarians until the Arabs came along to enlighten them, to become “open to mathematics, history, medicine.”

Lang has titled his latest book “La langue arabe, trésor de France” – “The Arabic language, a treasure of France.” This claim deserves examination. Just how valuable is this “treasure” that Lang wants to be taught in French schools, privileged above all other foreign languages, a mandatory subject? About 274 million people in the world speak Modern

Standard Arabic, and another 100 million speaking dialects. But that makes it only the fifth language in number of users, behind Mandarin, English, Spanish, and Hindi. It's a moderately useful language, if you are doing business in Arab countries (though the Arab elite in North Africa and Lebanon speak French, while the rich Arabs in the Gulf, the kind you are likely to do business with, have English as their second language) but not for anything else. It's not the language of science, art, literature, music, philosophy, political science. For business purposes, it is not nearly as useful as Chinese, Spanish and, especially, English. Lang calls Arabic "a universal language," but that usually describes a language whose users are spread widely over the globe. Arabic is limited in its geographic range to a contiguous swath of territory covering North Africa and the Middle East. English is a true universal language, indisputably the most important one of all, with 380 million native speakers and 750 million for whom it is a second language; it is the one which French people most need, and want, their children to master. Spanish, too, is a universal language, with 450 million native speakers on three continents, and 120 million non-native speakers. French itself, which has more than 300 million native or fluent speakers (and another 80 million for whom it is a second language), given its much wider geographical distribution, on three continents, has a stronger claim to being a "universal language" than does Arabic. And the prestige of French culture has made it the second language, with English, of diplomacy and international exchanges, from the E.U. to the U.N. to the IMF.

Lang says, in a sentence that should be inscribed in some Annals of Sublime Idiocy, that "Arabic has enabled French culture to open to mathematics history, medicine." What can he possibly mean? When he refers to "mathematics," what is he thinking of? He can only be referring to the fact that more than a millennium ago, some Arabs, or possibly non-Arab Muslims, in India, having studied the Sanskrit mathematicians,

brought back what they discovered to the Middle East, and thence to Europe. What did they bring? A rudimentary knowledge of algebra, a branch of mathematics founded and first developed by Indian mathematicians, not Muslim Arabs, though it is true that Al-Khwarizmi further developed algebra and Al-Kindi disseminated to Europe the use of Indian numerals that, in transmission, became known as "Arabic numerals." But the Muslims were more of a conduit than an original source.

The Arabic language did not "enable" French culture to "open to mathematics." Almost all of the Arabic treatises mathematics remained untranslated, and therefore unread in Europe. There was a long mathematical tradition in France, going back centuries, that had nothing to do with, and had no need of, any putative "Arabic" influence to "open" French culture to mathematics. Jack Lang constructs this soi-disant Arabic contribution on the flimsy basis of "Arabic numerals" and "algebra," both of which were borrowed from Hindu mathematicians. Or does Jack Lang know something about Arab mathematicians and their influence in France that has escaped the notice of historians? He is unfair to his own country's rich history of mathematical achievement – it's one of those fields in which the French have historically excelled. Think of the roster of outstanding French mathematicians: Rene de Fermat, Rene Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Pierre-Simon Laplace, Adrien-Marie Legendre, Augustin-Louis Cauchy, Evariste Galois, Rene Poincare are all world-famous. Think of the hundreds of others whose names you can find on-line by searching the Internet for "French mathematicians." No one in France needed Arabic to be "open to mathematics."

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