

Maurice Samuels, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 264 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN: 9780226397054

Review Essay by Dorian Bell, University of California, Santa Cruz

Winding through Maurice Samuels' conversation-shifting *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* is a central irony about the recent vicissitudes of Gallic universalism. Like Gary Wilder, who considers French imperial conquest less a deviation from republican universalism than an extension of that universalism's own constitutive contradictions, Samuels rescues the actual, fluctuating practices of universalism from ideological caricature. [1] So, for instance, does he distinguish between the history of *laïcité*—often understood since 1905 as the absence of religion from the public sphere—and the longer history of a French universalism that, as he carefully demonstrates, has at times proven subtly accommodating of religious difference. Samuels' historicizing account punctures the contemporary myopia of what he calls "hard-line" French universalists who demand total assimilation from France's substantial religious minorities (p. 10). But if Samuels takes issue with universalism's nationalist cooptation by the right, he also marks his distance from a left too reflexively dismissive, on his reading, of "what is good about universalism," namely the "ideal of justice at its core" (p. 10). The implicit irony is pungent: postcolonial, Marxist, and feminist critiques having so successfully chronicled, in deeply historicizing ways, the centuries-long gulf between French universalism's theory and practice, the left has found itself blind to any historicizing appreciation of universalism's occasionally more promising past incarnations.

Put another way, Wilder and his fellow travellers have perhaps done their work too well, historicizing French universalism so effectively into a shorthand for Enlightenment liberalism's bad faith as to de-historicize everything else about it. Samuels responds by pressing historicism into corrective service once again, and with good cause. Just as some have recognized that the necessary work to decolonize and provincialize the Enlightenment project need not mean dispensing wholesale with its universalist values—Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Harvey, and Immanuel Wallerstein come to mind, among others. [2] Samuels cautions against throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Canny re-evaluations and close readings distinguish his method, peeling away received notions about Jewish emancipation to reveal how generations of French political, literary, and philosophical commentators have, since the Revolution, often refracted through the Jewish Question a more pluralist than rigidly assimilationist vision of universalism.

The contrast Samuels draws between a historical universalism at times friendly to heterogeneity and an assimilationist universalism bent on homogeneity opens the way, I think, to more nuance still. His engagement with Wendy Brown is instructive in this regard. Samuels takes Brown's critique of liberal tolerance, as she understands it to have been applied in France's emancipation of the Jews, to index a leftist assumption about French universalism working to "eliminate

minorities under the guise of welcoming them” (p. 8). His rejoinder is that, *pace* Brown, the French architects of Jewish emancipation were hardly monolithic in expecting Jewish identity to disappear completely in the newly minted abstract citizen. But it is also worth remembering that for Brown, French universalism served a regulatory function—to use her Foucauldian language—designed to police subnormative populations. And that function, Brown makes clear, required the continuous reinscription of Jewish difference, since effacing Jewishness entirely would have nullified the state’s capacity to identify and thus regulate a population of which it remained wary.[3] True, such a continued surveillance held out the possibility of the Jews’ eventual elimination were they ever to disappoint as subjects of tolerance. My point, however, is that if we are to believe Brown, even (and especially) the most dogmatically assimilationist universalism was just as interested to produce difference as to erase it.

So I wonder whether the most useful contrast might reside not between a pluralist universalism willing to countenance particularity and an assimilationist universalism that refuses to, but rather between these formations’ contrasting deployment of a difference they in fact both produce. After all, as Samuels demonstrates, French pluralist universalism did more than accommodate Jewish difference; sometimes it constructed and valorized it as well. For a certain brand of philosemite in early nineteenth-century France, the Jews’ imagined qualities represented a distinctive “conduit” to the universal (p. 72). If a pluralist strain in French universalism had, in Samuels’ telling, previously accepted Jewish difference as useful for proving the Revolution’s emancipatory reach, here that difference went beyond its utility as a test case to become something worth celebrating in its own right. Merely reaffirming the Jews’ suitability to the universalist body politic marked Jewish citizenship as revocable at any time—this much Brown tells us. The affirmation and inclusion of Jewish difference as integral to that universalism, however, is a different, less sinister proposition entirely.

The distinction is capital, and Samuels’ work allows us to see it. When evaluating variants of universalism, then, the question ought not be whether this or that universalism remains more or less amenable to the lived particularities of its subjects. Instead, we should examine how universalisms themselves inevitably generate the particular, and most importantly, *to what end*. Samuels identifies a tendency in French Marxist thought to construct certain particularities into useful stepping stones toward a socialist universal that would ultimately moot them: as Sartre once located in Jewishness a way past conceptual failures in fascism and republicanism alike, while nevertheless imagining the Jews’ eventual disappearance in a socialist revolution, so today does Alain Badiou’s own Marxist universalism make only temporary allowances for a Muslim difference putatively aligned against the entwined “false universalisms” of liberal democracy, capitalism, and nationalism (pp. 178-79). I would add that the converse is true of hard-line republican universalists like Alain Finkielkraut, since the more stridently they demand that Muslim difference disappear into the Republic, the more they render permanent that difference into universalism’s definitive other. Samuels’ book charts a path through the impasse, looking beyond left and right to imagine a universalism that could make peace with the particular without either predicting its disappearance or reifying its difference.

NOTES

[1] See Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

[2] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4-5; David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35; and Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (New York: The New Press, 2006), xii-xiii.

[3] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 70.

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H-France Forum
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 5, #3