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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 Sharon Marquart, Wilfrid Laurier University

In the days following the January 2015 Paris terrorist attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket, I was at a dinner with some friends from Europe and Quebec over the course of which our conversation quickly turned into a verbal war over French universalism, North American multiculturalism, and minority rights. For my counterparts, the events were a clear demonstration of fundamental French Republican values such as freedom of expression to which minorities must assimilate if they are to be members of society. France is not the United States, they reminded me, and if satirical drawings of Mohammed can lead to terrorist attacks, it only proves that religion is irreconcilable with the universal values on which French citizenship depends. I replied by saying that I was troubled by the actions of three terrorists being upheld as somehow representative of all Muslims, but also at the idea that anyone must accept outright attacks on their religion as the conditions for their social inclusion. Soon all of us were finding different ways of saying “You do not understand universalism!” and “Your universalism is not universal!” with mounting frustration. The evening did not end well, and none of us have broached the subject in the numerous friendly encounters we have had since.

Exchanges such as these are surprisingly common when French universalism is at stake. Conversations quickly come to an impasse in which each side becomes entrenched in its initial positions. The debate is often framed as a battle between an Anglo-American pluralist model that tolerates the particularity and difference of its minority communities, and a French assimilationist one that requires individuals to eschew their ethnic and religious differences in order to access their universal rights before the law. Maurice Samuels’ thought-provoking and important work, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* provides a much-needed point of reference that should help these discussions take place on less polarizing terms. Through detailed analyses of French literary texts, films, theatrical reviews, and polemical and theoretical works from the Revolution to the present, Samuels argues that universalism has a long, varied history within France’s borders, and that understandings of how Jewish difference has been conceived in relation to Republican values help to reveal that history. Rather than the rigid set of assimilationist rules and practices frequently invoked in the contemporary period—often as a response to France’s Muslim population and its perceived unwillingness to integrate into French society—the proper understanding of universalism has in fact been subject to much debate and negotiation in France, including during the Revolution. Samuels convincingly demonstrates that universalism has had different meanings in different periods, and that responses to Jewishness indicate that minority difference has not always been viewed as an obstacle to Frenchness. *The Right to Difference* ultimately argues in favor of more pluralistic models of universalism that exist as a counter

tradition within French thought and that have surfaced in defense of minority communities from the earliest days of the Republic through to the present day.

When and how did this emergence of universalism as an assimilationist model that promotes loyalty to the French nation at the expense of all ethnic and religious affiliations occur? Samuels argues that it has been a dominant tendency in French Republican thought since the years leading up to the Revolution, and that it morphed into a more extremist version in the early twentieth-century during the Dreyfus Affair. His use of close readings to analyze this transformation allows him to make fine, thought-provoking distinctions to support his claims. The details he highlights in the context of the Revolution are essential for the arguments he advances more broadly and are worth noting at length. Before 1789, there were important variations in the arguments defenders of the Jews such as the Abbé Grégoire made in favor of Jewish citizenship. Samuels shows that some revolutionaries thought that assimilation must occur *before* citizenship, as a requirement for it being granted, while others proposed that assimilation could only occur *after*, as a hope or an expected outcome. The publication of the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* in August 1789 changed these positions, and many revolutionaries, including the Abbé Grégoire, now argued for treating the Jews equally without the need to transform them. Samuels shows that the actual emancipation decrees that granted the Jews full citizenship during the Revolution did not require them to renounce their religious or cultural practices, only their autonomous legal ones, and that key revolutionaries such as the Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre and even Robespierre offered defenses of Jewish equality in similar terms. For Samuels, these details demonstrate that French universalism was the site of a conflict between an array of assimilationist and pluralist views amongst revolutionaries before the Terror. It was not—as many scholars (and my conversation partners) have claimed—a definitive doctrine whereby equality meant homogeneity for all revolutionaries. Subsequent chapters on the mid-nineteenth century explore an important pluralist vein of French Republican thought on display during the July Monarchy (1830-1848) and ways in which the Jews of the period, such as the star Comédie Française actress Rachel Félix, sought to perform and redefine their own Jewishness within the Republic. Samuels draws further parallels between the strategic playing of Jews against Muslims in colonial Algeria in the name of universalism in this period and state-backed responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks today.

What clearly emerges through all of Samuels' recuperation of historical and rhetorical detail before the Dreyfus Affair is that, by the fin-de-siècle and on through the twentieth century, the models of pluralist universalism that had previously been part of the debate are forgotten, and an assimilationist model alone, one that requires minorities to blend in in the public sphere, is embraced as what French Republican and Revolutionary values were all about. Samuels makes a thoroughly convincing case through his original analyses and overviews of scholarship that this new assimilationism is an even more radical model than the assimilationist ones of the Revolutionary period, and that such measures were not even called for by the 1905 Law of Separation of Churches and the State itself. I find these to be major, socially important contributions made by *The Right to Difference*, and only in part because it helps this critic of contemporary uses of French universalism make her case more convincingly over dinner. Such facts alone radically change the terms used to frame current debates about minority difference, and about Islam in particular, which tend to cast any challenges to the dominant, assimilationist ideology of Republican identity as both un-French and antiuniversalist because of their openness to the particular. These facts further make clear the extent to which contemporary debates about

universalism – such as the ones Samuels deftly analyzes between Alain Finkelkraut and Alain Badiou – overlook some more flexible models that have existed within French thought since the Enlightenment. The concept has attained an almost mythic status that has eliminated many crucial facts about its development in contemporary intellectual circles and in the French public sphere. *The Right to Difference* helps to revive those historical details and to show how selective many understandings of universalism have been when looking at France’s past.

I am particularly struck by Samuels’ understanding of the counter tradition of pluralist universalism in French Republican thought as what he calls a kind of “relation” or “struggle.” The framework that his book lays out for this in the context of Jewish difference can be extended to think through the place of minority groups more broadly. For the pluralists since the time of the Revolution, Samuels suggests, universalism is not a state of being, a set of rigid values, or an established fact, as it is for the assimilationists. Rather, it emerges from a process that takes particularity and difference into account and does not demand conversion or conformity for inclusion in the nation. Samuels writes of the Jews’ status during the Revolution:

Because of their very strangeness, their cultural and religious difference, their position on the literal and figurative margins of the nation, they became the symbol of what it would mean to conceive the nation as a primarily ideological entity. This, I believe, was why Revolutionaries like Clermont-Tonnerre bothered to defend them in the first place. And this was why the Jews’ difference became actually valuable to the Revolution: rather than trying to assimilate it away through regeneration, they needed to prove how inclusive, how *universal* they could be. (38-39; original emphasis)

A later work such as Renoir’s *La grande illusion* is exemplary of this pluralist universalist heritage, Samuels argues, because it does not try to assimilate away the particularities of a Jewish character such as Rosenthal. The film instead evokes stereotypes all while including its Jewish character within the symbolic nation, thus calling for “a kind of French universalism that includes difference within it” and is composed of “embodied subjects, complete with their particularities, and accepting of each other” (137). Unlike the assimilationist model that demands that minorities shed their difference to gain access to a nation composed of abstract, featureless individuals, the pluralist model must prove its universalism through its encounters with minority particularity, and modify itself, time and again, if it is unable to accommodate difference.

In *On the Defensive: Reading the Ethical in Nazi Camp Testimonies*, I analyze how the responses that well-meaning people offer to the Nazi camps have unintentionally repressed and denied the experiences of their victims. [1] Theoretical understandings of the ethical do not prepare people to respond to the ethical demands of their encounters with disaster victims, and they cope with this instability by offering rigid and inattentive responses that affirm their inadequate conceptualizations and lose sight of survivors. Samuels similarly understands assimilationist universalism as a discourse produced by well-meaning people that results in a rigid application of principles. I am drawn to the insights his book offers in this vein. The dividing lines in the debate over universalism are too often drawn in France between, on the one hand, the antiuniversalist xenophobes, racists, and nationalists who posit a model of collective identity that excludes minorities because it links French identity to blood, soil, tradition, and religion, and, on the other, the universalist republicans who defend minorities as abstract individuals and see Frenchness as

an ideological affiliation that accords citizenship to anyone who wishes to gain access. *The Right to Difference* demonstrates the limits of this framework and that the well-intentioned defenders of minorities must further be considered a heterogeneous group who combat xenophobic nationalism from different standpoints, with different tools, and with varying effects.

Samuels' reading of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*, for example, highlights a contrast between Sartre's syncretic defense of the Jews in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and an analytic approach used by the assimilationist republican left – or, in Sartre's terminology, the “democrats” – to counter antisemitism. Well-meaning “democrats” commit an error in these debates, Sartre suggests, because they assume antisemitism to be an opinion from which one can be dissuaded through objective arguments and counter-demonstrations of facts. Antisemitism should instead be conceived as a form of hatred that is a priori: “it precedes experience,” Samuels explains, and is immune to all rational arguments because it adopts a certain idea of Jews in advance (145). In light of Samuels' overall argument about the rigidity of assimilationism, it seems there is room here to understand this form of universalism in similar terms: as a stance in which universalism is problematically taken as a priori rather than as something that must prove itself through a struggle with concrete facts. An abstract universal that precedes experience, in other words, cannot be rigidly applied if there is to be universalism in social reality. Of course, in contrast to antisemites, well-meaning universalist republicans do not *intend* to exclude anyone. The hostility to minority difference that thinkers such as Sartre ultimately detect in them results, it would follow, from the predetermined relation they seek out with others and their unwillingness to struggle with the individual particularity of embodied subjects in the concrete.

I have some reservations, however, about the three primary categories – antiuniversalism, assimilationist universalism, and pluralist universalism – that Samuels returns to throughout his book. While this tight focus helps to illuminate the contrast between assimilationism and pluralism since the Revolution, it leads to some missed opportunities to further theorize how each functions as a process and transforms over time. Samuels attributes the distortion, limitation, and consolidation of republican universalism in the fin-de-siècle, for example, to a strain of Dreyfusard thought that, much like Sartre's democrat, simultaneously defends the Jews against antisemitism and calls for their eventual disappearance as a people through assimilation. The process that Samuels describes here in the context of Zola's texts *L'argent*, “Pour les juifs,” and *Vérité* is complex: French Catholics tolerate Jews and imitate their good and productive qualities, such as their “financial wizardry,” in order to enrich themselves; then they discard the rest of the Jews' qualities to make their difference disappear. However, it seems limiting to describe such a process as merely assimilationist, as it depends on elevating an essentialized and stereotypically damaging trait linked to minority difference to justify social belonging. In his work on France's response to the AIDS crisis and homosexual difference in the 1980s and 1990s, David Caron notes:

The indivisible Republic and its divisive minorities are in fact inextricably bound...the republican model needs to construct a homogenous other against which to define itself and hide its internal contradictions...Thanks to the built-in ambiguity of such dichotomies, the intended effect is that the French model will absorb the qualities of its polar opposite so that it too will appear homogenous and uncontested. (153-154) [2]

Samuels' analysis suggests that Zola's writing deploys a similar process here: it homogenizes Jewish identity in order to absorb it, which allows its defense to appear homogenous and uncontested in turn. But Zola's writing also clearly does this in a well-meaning effort to defend the Jews in a period of intense public antisemitism in modern France's history. The well-meaning defenders of the Jews, it seems, are a crucial figure for understanding how assimilationist universalism is in danger of sliding into antiuniversalism through its essentialization of minority particularity and its attempts to stamp out differences that detract from a unifying national narrative.

The broad scope of *The Right to Difference*, moreover, leads to some problematic omissions in the book's overall narrative about French universalism and its relation to the Jews. Samuels' analysis of Sartre's defense of Jewish difference, for instance, describes an oppressive pact of silence about the Jewish experience of the Nazi camps after the Second World War that Sartre helped to break (143). This is, in part, completely true. As scholars such as Henry Rousso and Annette Wieworka have shown, to help unify a divided nation in the immediate postwar period, the French state backed universalizing understandings of the French experience of the war that glossed over the significant differences between the experiences of political deportees and Jews. [3] Postwar memory initially coalesced around the accounts of deported Resistance fighters interned in Buchenwald. Narratives such as that of David Rousset offered heroic visions of resistance with which the French public was eager to identify and that the French state was eager to disseminate. [4] Sartre's text was clearly important for the public recognition that it offered of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust given these dominant, state-backed trends that denied difference in the public sphere, and it had a profound effect on many Jewish readers. But, as Auschwitz survivor Simone Veil makes clear, France's Jews were far from silent about their experiences in this period. The community was, rather, belittled and ignored by others when its members sought to bear witness to outsiders. "We would scarcely begin to tell our stories," she reflects on the period immediately after her return, "before being interrupted as if we were children who were too excited or talkative by parents who were the ones burdened with real concerns." [5] The silence of the period was indeed oppressive, but it was in part produced through the hostility that many displayed when survivors offered narratives that departed from the predominant, nationally unifying model of the day.

Universalism has more recently led to the elevation of the Jewish experience of Auschwitz as a symbol of human suffering with which all can identify in French society. In the 1970s, Auschwitz emerged as the primary site of French national memory as well as a universal response to it – the ethical "duty to remember" the plight of Europe's Jews – that dominates the public sphere to this day. Samuels describes this latter part of the twentieth century as a period of decline for republican universalism's prestige in which "the right to difference" was acknowledged more broadly in French culture, and Jewish writers were able to affirm their difference before a resurgence of assimilationism at the start of the new millennium. But I wonder if these shifts in World War II memory might not point instead to how assimilationist universalism works as a process to eradicate difference in a particular historical moment. Scholars tend to link the emergence of Jewish memory to a series of historical events of international importance – from the 1961 Eichmann trial to the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War to the events of May '68 – that served as catalysts for the French nation finally recognizing the particularities of the Holocaust in the ethical way that we all should. [6] Bruno Chaouat has argued, however, that the "duty to remember" actually constitutes a denial of

difference, as all citizens – including former political deportees – now routinely identify their own experiences of humiliation, shame, and degradation with the Jewish experience of the camps. [7] This elevation of Jewish particularity to a symbol of universal suffering with which all can identify has led, that is, to the eradication and appropriation of Jewish particularity in the public sphere in a process similar to what Samuels describes in the work of Zola. Identification is, it seems, a key process for policing the boundaries of Frenchness in the public sphere, rather than a conduit for the recognition of Jewish or minority difference more broadly.

Many have criticized the dominant ideology of universalism in France for its hostility towards the nation's minority communities, but they make a damaging concession in these debates by accepting assimilationism as synonymous with universalism. Samuels' book opens up new possibilities for pluralism to be framed as a tendency within French thought itself rather than as an imposition of American-style multiculturalism onto France. Perhaps even more crucially, *The Right to Difference* presents a compelling case for pluralism as something both universal *and* particular in scope, and provides fine conceptual distinctions that can serve as a foundation for future scholarship in fields such as Jewish studies and French studies, as well as those interested broadly in questions of immigration, national identity, multiculturalism, assimilation, universalism, and particularism. In addition, I will be using it to ground future conversations on minority difference with concrete details and facts, in an effort to avoid the exasperation and entrenchment that too often result. Though I am, of course, guilty of digging in my own heels just a bit.

NOTES

[1] Sharon Marquart, *On the Defensive: Reading the Ethical in Nazi Camp Testimonies* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2015)

[2] David Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001)

[3] See Henry Rousso's conference on "Collective Memory and the Shoah" given at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris (15 February 2005) and Annette Wieviorka's texts *Déportation et génocide: Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), *L'ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998) and *Auschwitz, 60 ans après* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005).

[4] See David Rousset's *L'univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Pavois, 1946) and *Les jours de notre mort* (Paris: Pavois, 1947).

[5] I translate here from the French: "À peine commençons-nous à raconter que nous étions interrompus comme des enfants excités et trop bavards par des parents accablés, eux, de vrais soucis" (quoted in Alain Finkelkraut, *La mémoire vaine: Du crime contre l'humanité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 39).

[6] See Rousso's "Collective Memory" and Annette Wieviorka, *Auschwitz, 60 ans après*.

[7] Bruno Chaouat, "Forty Years of Suffering," *Esprit Créateur* 45.3 (2005): 49-62. The trial of Klaus Barbie in 1987 is an important example of this phenomenon. On this, see Alain Finkelkraut's *La mémoire vaine* and Joan Wolf, *Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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