

H-France Forum
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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 Maurice Samuels, Yale University

Let me begin by thanking the four reviewers who responded in such thoughtful ways to my book, as well as the editor, Rachel Mesch, for putting this forum together. Reviewing and editing are acts of intellectual generosity that often go unrecognized so I want to make clear how grateful I am for these engagements. All writers dream of such serious reviews, and I am happy to have this opportunity to respond to the interesting points they raise.

Sarah Hammerschlag makes many valid points. She argues that I do not devote enough attention to discussing the differences among types of discourse. I do locate theories of universalism in a wide range of texts—political tracts and speeches, but also novels, plays, films and philosophical treatises. I am not always explicit, however, about what a given form or genre allows that others don't: my preference for the irony and complexity manifested in a film like *La Grande illusion* may very well have more to do with the form of film itself than I let on. She furthermore points to the importance of the shift in understandings of Jewish difference—from religious to racial—from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and to how Jews themselves understood and contributed to this shift. These issues are key to the story I am telling—for instance the way that the actress Rachel's difference was perceived as a function not just of religion and history, but also of innate biological characteristics that observers (including Jews) were beginning in the 1830s to refer to as "race." But I certainly could have done more to theorize the implications of this new perception. I also could have done more to highlight the similarity in the racial sense of Jewishness that unites the very different approaches to the question of universalism in Zola and Sartre.

Dorian Bell highlights my disagreements with Wendy Brown and points out that I underplay one of the key features she ascribes to universalist discourse, namely its need to produce difference even as it effaces it. Liberal forms of tolerance, Brown tells us, need difference in order to assert the state's authority to control it. Although I point to a version of this dynamic in the Revolution's need to include the Jews to prove just how inclusive they can be, the opposition I construct between assimilationist and pluralist forms of universalism is perhaps less absolute than I suggest. Sharon Marquart offers a version of this same criticism. She also points out that my characterization of the 1970s-90s as a period in French history that allowed for a greater expression and appreciation of Jewish difference, epitomized by the reception of Lanzmann's film "Shoah," overlooks the fact that the widespread identification with Jewish suffering can serve an assimilatory function: the specificity of Jewish difference is often erased when the Jewish experience becomes universalized in this way. Finally, Jonathan Skolnik underlines the fact that the debate over universalism in

France takes place in a broader European context, and he furnishes a number of valuable points of comparison, mostly with the German case.

Moving now to more general issues, I note one major question that surfaces in all four reviews: is there a connection, or analogy, between the arguments that I make about Jews and the situation of Muslims in contemporary France? Indeed, this question hangs over my book and had more than a little to do with my motivations for writing it. As Hammerschlag correctly points out, however, I make the connection between Jews and Muslims only "obliquely." The issue surfaces at four main points in the book. In the Introduction, I describe how the response by some contemporary intellectuals and political figures to a perceived lack of Muslim integration has been to double down on a hardline form of universalism opposed to difference. In Chapter Three, I describe nineteenth-century debates over extending citizenship to the indigenous populations of Jews and Muslims in Algeria and show how the French perception that the Jews were more willing to assimilate French legal and cultural norms than Muslims led to the enfranchisement of the former rather than the latter. In Chapter Seven, I describe the way that Alain Finkielkraut and Alain Badiou have reacted to the rise in violence directed at French Jews by French Muslims since 2000 with renewed calls for a hardline universalism. And in the Conclusion, I examine the speech made in the National Assembly by Manuel Valls, the Prime Minister, following the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher supermarket in 2015. I point to a surprising openness to Jewish difference within Valls' French universalist rhetoric, even while he suppresses Muslim difference in the name of *laïcité*.

If I avoid drawing out the implications of these points of comparison between the treatment of Jews and Muslims, the lacuna is not unintentional. Jewish emancipation in France took place in specific historical circumstances that are quite different from those faced by Muslims today. Relative population size alone would make comparison perilous: Jews at the time of the French Revolution represented less than .2 percent of the French population and even after massive immigration from Central Europe in the 1930s, they still represented only .75 percent of the national population, although their relative numbers in Paris were much higher. By contrast, Muslims constitute between 7 and 10 percent of the French population today. Moreover, it's very different to gauge relative levels of hostility and resistance to integration faced by the two groups at different points in French history. My goal, therefore, is certainly not to hold up the Jews as a kind of model minority or to suggest that Muslims need only to follow the path marked out by Jews to improve their situation.

My aim in the book is quite different. I want to show that French universalism is not the stable and fixed ideology that many people today, across the political spectrum in France, take it to be. Most significantly, it has not always implied a hostility to minority difference or to the existence of minority "communities." On the contrary, universalism has been open to debate and negotiation since its inception: even during the French Revolution, when universalism first became a political reality, ideas about what should be expected from the Jews in exchange for their emancipation differed. While some continued to call for Jewish religious and cultural assimilation, others—including Jacobins like Robespierre—were far more pluralistic in their vision of how Jewish difference could be incorporated into the nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, this more pluralistic vision vied with competing approaches to minority integration—anti-universalism and assimilationist universalism. It was the Dreyfus Affair, I argue, that led to the dominance of the

hardline model of assimilationist universalism we know today, although more pluralistic visions still made their presence felt in the twentieth century. By recovering this history, I hope to show that other destinies for France's minorities were imagined besides just blending in, and that allegiance to universalism need not imply a hostility to difference.

What applying these lessons to France's Muslim population today would mean in practice, however, I leave it for others more knowledgeable than myself to determine. I certainly understand the desire to see all French people embrace certain universalist values—including and especially the respect for others, including women, LGBT people, and other religious minorities. I also understand the wish to see minorities show respect for France, its history, culture, and institutions. But I feel that respect breeds respect and that legislating away difference is not the best way to foster integration. One thing I wanted to avoid in the book was to seem to be urging the French to embrace an American-style model of multi-culturalism. The more pluralistic models for dealing with difference that I excavate in the book are all drawn from within the French tradition itself. I want to emphasize this point again here: French universalism has been both pluralistic and assimilatory—sometimes both at once—throughout its history, and it is up to every generation to adapt the concept to changing circumstances.

I'll conclude by asking myself a question that the reviewers do not raise but that has come to the fore in disturbing ways since the book's publication: what to make of the fact that the US has taken such a major step backward in the treatment of its own minorities? When I wrote the book, the example of Ferguson was very much present, but I couldn't have imagined that far-right nationalist groups would so openly preach a "blood and soil" kind of anti-universalism on American shores like they are today. Might the French examples of openness and embrace of difference that I discuss in the book—the decree granting citizenship to the Jews during the French Revolution, the admiration for Rachel at the Comédie Française, Renoir's remarkable film—have something to teach Americans? One can only hope.

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