

H-France Forum

Volume 12 (2017), Issue 5, #1

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 Jonathan Skolnik, University of Massachusetts Amherst

The Right to Difference is a timely and compelling study that urges us to rethink some rather widely held perceptions about universalism, secularism [*laïcité*], the French state, and modern European society in relation to religious minorities and ethnic communities. Maurice Samuels combines insightful and sometimes surprising reexaminations of historical sources with sharp analyses of political debates, works of literature and criticism, and film. Samuels offers a broad survey of key debates over universalism that focus on Jewish difference as a touchstone, from the eighteenth century up through most recent history. The book is of interest and value to historians and philosophers, though his methods are those of literary and cultural studies. Samuels' historical range affords many fresh insights into diverse past episodes. Even more significantly, Samuels' temporal span provides an opportunity to observe important shifts in a discourse on universalism that by its nature is often seen as a constant. Samuels' approach to these historical investigations is framed by presentist concerns: the meaning of the response to the linked murderous assaults on writers and artists at *Charlie Hebdo* and on shoppers at the Hypercacher kosher supermarket in 2015 as a reference point for understanding universalism and antisemitism. Samuels takes up the embattled legacy of the Enlightenment with an acute sense for the paradox that there can exist both an antisemitism in the name of universalism (hatred of Jewish difference) and an antisemitism conflated with an opposition to universalism (a hatred of Jews alongside a virulent rejection of secularism and other norms of modern French politics and society).

My observations in the following are rooted in my own work in German-Jewish studies and will sometimes seek to place Samuels' *The Right to Difference* in a comparative context with discussions that center on the German-speaking world. Samuels' book intervenes as a challenge to the view that the Enlightenment, universalism, and secularism are exclusionary ideals, rooted in European norms that are fraught with the legacies of colonialism, racism, and the oppression of women. Samuels positions his study as a corrective to critiques by Étienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, and Joan Wallach Scott. In Samuels' view, the discourse of universalism in France, as it developed beginning in the late eighteenth century, was always more open to pluralist interpretations than its critics have recognized. Furthermore, Samuels argues that the issue of France's relation to its Jews has been and remains a formative benchmark to test the pluralist limits and possibilities of universalist ideals.

In Arthur Hertzberg's classic formulation in *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (1968), the French Revolution ultimately emancipated the Jews not due to any sort of philosemitism, nor were the revolutionary thinkers' discussions informed by much actual experience with Jewish communities. Rather, Hertzberg claims that French Jews were granted rights because to do so was

the pure logical extension of Enlightenment ideals. It was a universalism rooted in an abstraction. Samuels revisits the debates of the 1780s and 1790s and his insights into the contradictions of pre- and post-1789 debates about Jewish “regeneration” (in which leading French political figures sought to define the terms on which they thought that Jews would be able to become equal citizens) reveal that, as they affirmed the universal claims of their new conception of enlightened politics, French revolutionaries demonstrated ambivalence and also sometimes surprising openness regarding minority religious practices and customs. Samuels shows that even an extreme anti-cleric like Robespierre could argue in favor of tolerance of Jews’ rights to their (in his view) odd and irrational religious practices in the name of the higher ideal that political rights are universal. In other words, rather than ignore religious and cultural difference in the pursuit of an abstract ideal, French revolutionaries developed their framework for universalism with some consideration of pluralism. One of the strongest points Samuels makes in this early chapter of *The Right to Difference* is that French Jews themselves did not feel that integration and acculturation to French language, culture, society, law, and politics required their total assimilation. Samuels notes, for example, that in the years that followed the Revolution, French Jews had relatively low rates of conversion and intermarriage. Samuels also references his own earlier work on nineteenth-century French-Jewish literary culture, which illustrated how French-Jewish writers and their readers found their own unique ways to participate in the wider culture and society while preserving and transforming the idea and meaning of Judaism and the Jewish community.

Samuels’ second chapter centers on the cultural debates in nineteenth-century France around the figure of the Jewish stage actress Rachel Félix. Rachel’s much-discussed performances of the French classics (including Racine) evinced a range of reactions, from extreme cultural nationalists who denied that a woman of “foreign,” Jewish origin could authentically lay claim to these roles to enthusiasts who saw in this *belle juive* someone whose unique charm and appeal was due to this exoticism. Yet another strand of criticism, Samuels notes, implicitly built upon the eighteenth-century notion of “regenerating” the Jews to celebrate Rachel as an example of how Jews (and thus anyone) could transcend their origins and participate in a classical culture seen as a universal ideal. This, of course, is the path Samuels holds up to argue that pluralism could remain a central part of the ideal of universalism in France.

Samuels’ presentation of Rachel Félix invites some comparison with perspectives that center on the German-speaking world. Samuels notes that, in denying Rachel claim to any “authentic” presentation of French culture due to her ethnic origins, Rachel’s extreme Romantic-nationalist critics anticipate the outright racism of twentieth-century antisemites. But in Samuels’ *The Right to Difference* this is a dangerous but minor trend, and it figures in his argument as a deviation from pluralist-universalist ideals from the Enlightenment and the Revolution. By contrast, Paul Lawrence Rose’s important study of mid-nineteenth-century texts by German-language writers presents convincing readings that argue that antisemitism was not the exclusive domain of the Romantic/Christian/conservative cultural right, but that many writers on the political left (including the Young German writer Karl Gutzkow, the revolutionary philosopher Karl Marx, and the young artistic rebel Richard Wagner) developed a virulent anti-Judaism rooted in their very understanding of universalism, a “revolutionary antisemitism.” [1] In Rose’s view, this extreme drive to eliminate Jews left deep imprints in German culture and contributed to the murderous world view of the Nazis. Whatever criticisms one can make of Rose’s work (or Samuels’ book, for that matter), we can raise a number of questions. Even if we don’t resort to national

simplifications, i.e. whether there is difference between “French” versus “German” traditions of universalism, we can ask what insights might be gained from a broader, comparative investigation of universalism, pluralism, and minority difference in nineteenth-century Europe? On that point, I wonder, too, what a consideration of figures like Heinrich Heine (whether we see them as transnational, European, or exilic) might contribute to Samuels’ points about French universalism’s ability to accommodate difference? Rachel Félix’s success on the French stage was bound up with her relation to high culture and national symbols, performing classical French tragedy and the *Marseillaise*. Heine — a baptized-German-Jewish-apostate-turned-believer, resident in Paris, writing in German but also French — satirized national symbols and nationalist politics, and crafted his own lyrical and critical style that infused Romantic and revolutionary longing with bitter resentment and disenchantment with the modern world and its imagined pasts and futures. Heine cast remarks at figures like Felix Mendelssohn and Rachel Félix herself which seemed like poignant barbs, ones that also seemed to reopen his own wounds, yet actually celebrated their artistic triumph and tragedy in the context of persistent anti-Jewish prejudice and conflated it with his own sense of artistic self. [2] My sense is that such a consideration would expand Samuels’ main points, seeing a more inclusive universalism not only as something offered from above by the majority society, but also constructed from the margins by individual artists and minority communities.

Rachel Félix’s fame, as noted above, was predicated on the novelty of an outsider’s success in the temple of high culture. Another milestone work of German criticism offers some contrasting insight into Samuels’ interpretations. Hans Mayer’s book *Outsiders* (1975) proceeds from the premise that the Enlightenment has failed [3]; inspired by the thought of Adorno and Horkheimer, Mayer’s readings of classic plays by Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Lessing focus on the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization of women, homosexuals, and Jews. Notably, the role that Samuels tells us made Rachel Félix’s reputation was starring in Racine’s biblical play *Esther*. Mayer illustrates how ideals of universalism falter on the German stage when Jewish figures are involved in plots that raise the issue of intermarriage, as in Lessing’s *The Jews* (1749) or his *Nathan the Wise* (1779). Samuels’ *The Right to Difference* notes the generally positive reception of Rachel Félix in Racine’s *Esther*. Perhaps the ways in which the biblical material provides Racine and his interpreters with a scenario that combines an idea of justice as the thwarting of anti-Jewish prejudice with a narrative of successful intermarriage that allows Samuels to see the spectacle of Rachel Félix as the promise of a universalist vision in which Jewish difference is no contradiction. This link between the imagination of Jewish integration on the classic stage and modern nineteenth-century policies that redefined the terms of Jewish, and now Muslim, possibilities for a place in the French body politic becomes crucial as Samuels turns his attention to the ways that French policy in Algeria both promoted (slowly, for the Jews) and limited (or, rather, blocked for Muslims) the promise of citizenship and universalism, as France now governed many more Jews after the conquest of 1830.

Samuels reviews the evolution of French colonial policy towards Jews and Muslims and he considers the activity of the Alliance israélite universelle as an organization that redefined Jewish identity in relation to French universalism for its metropolitan Jewish patrons as well as for its colonial Jewish targets. (One wish I had for Samuels’ discussion of the former is that he had included comparative perspectives on French colonial policies towards other religions and ethnicities in its Middle Eastern, African, and Asian empire and spheres of influence, including

Christian Arabs, Greeks, and Armenians. One wonders to what extent the Jewish issues Samuels discusses shaped other cases or followed them?) The centerpiece of his discussion of colonialism, universalism, and the Jews is an analysis of a lesser-known Gauthier play, *La juive de Constantine* (1846). Samuels' reading of the play is convincing. He shows clearly how the Jewish characters accept French values and ally with them in ways the Muslim characters cannot, mirroring and even anticipating later government policies in literary form. Universalism's limits vis-a-vis the excluded and defeated Muslims are in Samuels' view offset by the pathways to French law and values. But here, too, I suggest that a consideration of a German-Jewish parallel would be illuminating. Gauthier's play seems to allude to Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*: the main character is a Jewish merchant named Nathan in the "Orient"; the drama of the three religions; the dramatic structure of authority figures from the three religions and an inter-religious romance plot involving three other characters. As such, Gauthier's play is a counterpoint to Racine's *Esther* played by Rachel Félix. If the latter shapes a classical tradition where Roman, Hebrew, and French elements can fuse and welcome a diverse cast and audience who can rise to perform and understand this new synthesis, Gauthier's play revisits Lessing's rewriting of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* but shifts its exclusions: the Jewish characters are neither demonized (like Shylock) nor socially isolated while sublated into a (sterile) symbol of tolerance (like Lessing's Nathan). Instead they are promoted, but at the expense of others who are more excluded. Like Lessing's play, Gauthier writes a "serious comedy" with tragic undertones.

In Samuels' first chapter on the Revolution, we are left with somewhat of a feeling that a question has quietly gone unasked, that is, if this pluralist vision of the universal was present from the outset, what is the story of its forgetting? This is addressed in the chapter on Zola and Dreyfus Affair. Samuels writes with insight and sensitivity about the Combes Law of 1905 and its origins, illustrating how political struggle between left and right over the role of the church in society, and over the way that antisemitism became a flashpoint created a context in which the strict separation of church and state became conflated with a call for assimilation. It seems that Samuels' implicit suggestion in *The Right to Difference* is that for us to recover the original intentions of the Combes Law (against those who trumpet secularism as a "weapon" primarily against Muslim immigrants asserting their place in society), then we must do so by acknowledging and working through the troubling history of antisemitism in France.

Samuels' reading of Renoir's film *La grande illusion* (1937) is an excellent example of that sort of working through. Samuels understands very well how the film operates against the backdrop of the racist antisemitism then sweeping Europe. He sees Renoir not as giving in to the prejudices and stereotypes common in the era, but rather as using these clichés slowly against themselves, building towards an ironic transformation of an anti-Jewish slur into a recognition of friendship from the non-Jewish Frenchman, Maréchal. Here, too, I wonder whether a broader European comparative context would shed light on more aspects of the film. The issue of Jewish participation in World War I was a flashpoint in Germany, with the army conducting a notorious census in 1916 to determine whether German Jews were serving in equal numbers at the front and then suppressing the survey's results when it revealed that they indeed were. A comparative aesthetic context as well would be desirable, contrasting Marcel Dalio's portrayal of Rosenthal in the Renoir film with Vladimir Sokoloff's speechless, traumatized character in an anti-war film such as Victor Trivas' *Niemandsländ* (1931). What I think would be reinforced by such a comparison would be an idea that the universal is not only an overcoming of antisemitism in the French context or in the

service of creating an inclusive ideal of national community but something figured in Renoir's film, also as a force that transcends all national boundaries.

One of the most insightful chapters of *The Right to Difference* centers on Sartre's 1946 *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Noting that most critics have focused on Sartre's book as a theory of antisemitism, Samuels' investigation highlights two other interrelated aspects of the work. On the one hand, he addresses Sartre's critique of Zola, showing that his idea of a "concrete liberalism" is a clear rejection of republican assimilationism. Breaking with antisemitism and acknowledging the meaning of the Holocaust — already in 1946 Sartre was disturbed by the inability of European society to address the genocide — means to be open to the Jews as they are (in Sartre's terms as they "choose themselves" as Jews) and not to project assimilationist wishes onto them. In the 1946 context, I believe this clearly means accepting Jews as survivors of the Shoah, as people with radically difference experiences and approaches to the world. Samuels understands Sartre to be thereby rejecting republican universalism, rejecting all universal claims that could be damaging to threatened subjects. Given the arguments Samuels lays out in the introduction and earlier chapters, it may come as a surprise that he seems supportive of Sartre's conclusions. Samuels sees the shift in historical and moral terms: the promise of universalism gives way to the imperative to reject antisemitism in the wake of the Holocaust. (The last chapters address the fallout of an unforeseen return of antisemitism, as well as a new kind of universalism emerging in response to that.) The second major theme of Sartre's work that Samuels addresses concerns the problematic ways that Jews struggle to assert their identities within Sartre's framework. Samuels offers insightful observations of how writers from the 1960s to the 1980s such as Patrick Modiano and Alain Finkelkraut wrestle with an emptiness that comes as a crisis of authenticity, a symptom of the void created by the Holocaust.

The penultimate section of *The Right to Difference* takes up two thinkers who assert a neo-universalism and a neo-secularism as responses to the "new antisemitism" that has plagued the Jewish community in France since 2000, Alain Badiou and Alain Finkelkraut. Badiou is a crusader against what he sees as the evils of "communitarianism," which for him is the source of ethnic chauvinism and nationalism. Badiou minimizes the violence directed at French Jews (statistics show that Jews comprise about 50% of the victims of all hate crimes in France, although Jews make up less than 1% of the population; moreover, the majority of the hate crimes against French Jews are committed by French Muslims, who are about 10% of the population) and sees the communitarian response to antisemitism as a greater danger. Badiou is also hostile to Holocaust memory and its expansion in France, which he sees only as a promoter of "communitarian" ideals, which he perceives as hostile to his form of universalism and secularism. By contrast, Finkelkraut is a partisan of a militant secularism [*laïcité*] and neo-republicanism that targets those French Muslims whom he accuses of religious intolerance, and lax in pursuing reform, modernization, and integration. For Samuels, both versions of this new republican universalism neglect the pluralist, inclusive dimensions that universalism still has the possibility to reopen.

My concluding observations on Samuels' timely book return again to thoughts regarding the comparative European dimension. Although the passage of the "Brexit" referendum and the election of Trump have prompted much talk of a return of nationalism, I believe greater attention could be paid to the larger context of these debates. In Germany, the legacy of the Holocaust has certainly given discussions of universalism, antisemitism, and the right to difference (cultural,

religious, political, and sexual) a weightier cast, but for at least a generation most (young) Germans don't feel a personal or "national" guilt so much as they understand a general human responsibility to memory and to rights, which they express through their various political identities, not least through the European Union. The French debates that Samuels considers also take place within a European context. Certainly national legacies, and particularly the legacy of French colonialism, continue to be unique factors, and certainly pushback against universalism often takes a specific national or regional shape. Yet perhaps the recent elections, which saw French voters ultimately reject both far left and far right candidates for president (whose perspectives have not a few points of contact with those of Badiou and Finkelkraut, respectively) in favor of one with a positive European vision, augur a new chapter in the discourse of French universalism.

NOTES

[1] Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). Reissued as Rose, *German Question/Jewish Question. Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[2] See Heine's remark on Rachel Félix in "Rossini und Mendelssohn" (1842) in *Lutetitia: Berichte über Politik, Kunst und Volksleben* in Heinrich Heine, *Säkularausgabe*, XI.

[3] Hans Mayer, *Außenseiter* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975). Translated as Hans Mayer, *Outsiders* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

Jonathan Skolnik
University of Massachusetts Amherst
jskolnik@german.umass.edu

Copyright © 2017 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Forum nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 5, #1