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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 Sarah Hammerschlag, University of Chicago Divinity School

Maurice Samuels opens *The Right to Difference: French Universalism & the Jews* with an account of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo and Hypercacher shootings and closes it with an analysis of the political rhetoric that followed. The volume itself is divided into seven chapters chronologically ordered, each one taking up a crucial moment in the history of the Jews in France, along with one or more texts analyzed to shed light on its historical moment. Collectively these episodes reveal the vital role that the Jewish question has consistently played in Modern France's attempt to define itself politically but also, and more importantly for Samuels' purpose, they show French universalism to be less absolute and monolithic than some recent debates seem to suggest. By setting these episodes between his account of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings and their aftermath, Samuels also suggests that the history of France's Jews and the cultural representations that have accompanied it have the potential to serve as resources in the navigation of what he refers to as France's current "minority crisis." Like a film or a novel with a frame narrative, the book's structure suggests that when we return to the present after our journey through the past it will be with new insight, wiser as a consequence of the accounts we've just encountered. Of course, one crucial fact in this scenario is that the minority crisis in question is not merely one that concerns France's Jewish population—only around 1% of the population (though the largest in Europe)—but also its Muslim population estimated in 2016 to be 7.5% of the population. Thus one question runs largely implicit through Samuel's rich and nuanced volume: how can the history of Jews in France shed light on the future of its Muslim community?

Samuels, probably wisely, answers this question only obliquely. Instead of suggesting in any straightforward way that the history of the Jews might serve either as a guide or a cautionary tale in current debates about the role of Islam in France, Samuels suggest that the book's intervention will reorient the conversation by nuancing its very terms. By unearthing "earlier models of understanding," he aims to show that the universal and the particular can "go hand in hand, one reinforcing the other" (5). This perspective provides a fresh take on a debate that pits respect for minority identity against a staunch version of universalism grounded in the notion of *laïcité*. Samuels declares himself to be "not against universalism as an ideal" (6). He defends its historic role in France as a means by which Jews were able to integrate socially, and thus does not share the perspective of critics who see French Universalism as fundamentally imperialist or even totalitarian, but nor does he accept visions of universalism touted now by voices on the right and the left, which represent it as a bulwark against identitarianism. It is rather the history of Jewish negotiations with France's universalist ideal and its shifting definitions which prove instructive, Samuels argues. He thus describes the book as something other than an "intellectual history in the

conventional sense.” It is rather a series of close readings organized chronologically, but whose value emerges from their potential to be analyzed as “moments of counter discourse” (15).

In elucidating these moments to be recovered, Samuels makes inspired choices and provides fascinating readings both of his texts and his chosen cultural moments. When examining the initial debates surrounding Jewish emancipation in the eighteenth century, for example, he reads many of the standard texts often cited to illustrate the role of Jews in Enlightenment rhetoric —Count Clermont-Tonnerre’s famous December 1789 speech on religious minorities, the Assembly of Notables’ response to Napoleon’s queries—but he reads them more closely than most historians, showing how the debate over regeneration shifts in the course of the few years spanning the French Revolution, how the Assembly of Notables produced a description of Judaism not only tolerable to Napoleon, but one that exemplified Judaism’s universalism as it is expressed through its particularity. When analyzing the rhetoric surrounding the fame of the nineteenth-century Jewish theater star Rachel, he shows how her performances provided a forum for debating the nature of French universalism and its capacity to accommodate difference, and how she herself embodied a version of this paradigm such that the Republic’s value was seen in its capacity to “welcome Jewish difference on its own terms” (71).

As much as I appreciated each vignette in the book and the work’s collective ambition to span across four centuries, there was something I found unsettling in its scope. This can be illustrated even in the juxtaposition of two examples: the Assembly of Notables’ negotiation of Jewish difference and Rachel’s choice of stage name. Throughout the book the nature of the “Jewishness” described shifts, from having *halakhic* significance (that is, in traditional Jewish law) to being a marker of ethnic distinction, without much discussion of how different these assertions of difference might be. The attention Samuels gives to the shifting nature of universalism in France’s political discourse should go hand-in-hand with a discussion of the multifaceted means by which Judaism marks out difference: religiously, politically, racially. Has French universalism tolerated some of these facets better than others? I would have liked to see this question engaged in the work.

The fifth chapter in the book, which provides a masterful reading of Renoir’s *La grande illusion*, most successfully accomplishes all of the aims that Samuels sets forth in the introduction—to show that universalism has been the subject of debate and negotiation, that Jews have been central to that negotiation, and that the terms themselves are not as opposed as they appear. In his analysis of the film, Samuels both disputes past interpretations of the text that view it as either philosemitic or antisemitic and treats the interplay between and transformation of its Jewish and Gallic characters—soldiers in World War I, who both assert their cultural differences and find a means of bonding in their allegiance to France and to one another other that allows them to transcend these differences even as they remain in play. What is fascinating here in Samuels’ political reading of the film is how its value as political discourse arises from its *formal* capacity to accommodate contradiction and communicate transformation, all values that Samuels sees as crucial to the health of France’s universalism. But here once again it is in the juxtaposition of this chapter with the two that follow it, one on Sartre’s *Reflexions sur la question juive*, and the following on Finkielkraut, Badiou, and the “new antisemitism,” that I found unsettling. Here it is the difference between *forms* of discourse and how they communicate that seems crucial to the analysis and is left unexplored. Is it any surprise that Badiou and Finkielkraut’s philosophical versions of universalism, as different as they may be, seem brittle in comparison to Renoir’s narrative representation of ethnic difference

and filial loyalty? The juxtaposition of all four of the figures treated in the last three chapters, including Sartre, certainly illustrates Samuels' point that French universalism has never meant any *one* thing in France, but it is only Renoir's film that reads as a "moment of counter discourse." Once again, I wondered whether there wasn't a further implicit claim running through Samuels' book: a plea for modes of polyvalent political speech whose forms involve the capacity to accommodate irony and nuance. As a literary scholar, Samuels is especially talented at analyzing the impact of form and content on meaning, but he treats their function only in the context of his readings, and does not apply this analysis to his overall argument.

It is by emphasizing not only the changing nature of universalism in France but also the impact of its forms of expression, I would contend, that Samuels might more explicitly consider how to extrapolate meaning from the history of Jews in France to the future of minority identity expression in the twenty-first century. Along with paying attention to the ambivalence of these categories themselves—their shifting status between religion, culture, race and ethnicity—it is possible to promote forms of political expression that accommodate complexity and contradiction and to make the history of their ambiguity a resource for resisting easy stereotypes. The great contribution of Samuels' argument is his refusal to equate universalism with uniformity. He concludes the book with the further hope that moments of "counter discourse" might be "summoned at moments of crisis" as an alternative to "familiar slogans that exclude or erase the other" (195). This is a laudable goal indeed, but it will require extrapolating from the past and theorizing the nature and form of these alternatives, if they are going to transcend their status as files in a historical archive and function as true resources for the future.

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