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Erik H. Cohen, *The Jews of France Today: Identity and Values*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. xxii + 238 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 102.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-90-04-20753-0.

Review by Ethan Katz, University of Cincinnati.

The early twenty-first century has brought newfound attention to the situation of Jews in France. In the face of thousands of reported anti-Semitic incidents since autumn 2000, increased tensions with Muslims, and an uptick in immigration to Israel, many observers have portrayed the French Jewish community—the world’s third largest after those of Israel and the United States—as in a state of crisis. Such a period of uncertainty, and the sharply conflicting depictions of French Jewish life it has elicited, makes Erik H. Cohen’s sociological analysis of contemporary French Jewry a welcome, if uneven, corrective. In this review, I will begin by focusing on the heart of the book: the “Empirical Study of the Jews of France at the Turn of the Millenium” (chapter two). After discussing many of this study’s important insights, I will more briefly, and with some reservations, treat the book’s other three chapters.

Cohen, a well-established and prolific social scientist of French Jewry who teaches at Bar Ilan University in Israel, is highly qualified to write a sociology of French Jews. The results of his empirical study are based upon several surveys he conducted from 2002 to 2007. The author also draws on his own and other researchers’ prior studies to measure long-term trends. Currently, the Jewish community of France, according to Cohen’s estimate, numbers between 500,000 and 550,000 (p. 63). The majority of France’s Jews were born in metropolitan France; more than 95 percent are French citizens (p. 63). Almost half the population lives in Paris or the Paris region, with Lyon, Marseilles, Nice, and Strasbourg constituting the other major Jewish population centers.

The first sections of Cohen’s empirical study illuminate a series of changes in French Jewish demography and life patterns, by comparing the data of a 1988 study by Cohen on French Jewish education with that from his interviews with 1100 Jewish heads of household in 2002. He shows how a longstanding ethnic shift brought about by Jewish migration from France’s former colonies in North Africa has only accelerated, such that a once largely Ashkenazic Jewish population has now become 70 percent Sephardic (p. 73). Politically, France’s Jewish population has moved away from its longstanding attachment to the left (59 percent were left or left-of-center in 1988), drifting sharply toward the right (in 2002, 57 percent were right or right-of-center) (p. 73).

Education constitutes another shifting ground. Whereas Cohen’s 1988 study found 15,907 students enrolled in the Jewish educational system, by 2005 that number had nearly doubled to over 30,000 (p. 81). Most of these students come from religiously traditional or Orthodox families. Compared to parents with children in public schools, the heads of household in these families are far less likely to be married to a non-Jew or to approve of their children intermarrying, and much more likely to participate or volunteer in the Jewish community, express a strong attachment to Israel, and consider the possibility of making *aliyah*, or immigrating to Israel. Unfortunately, Cohen does little to analyze whether or not such patterns are a catalyst or product of these families’ educational choices.

Regarding broader attitudes toward Israel, particularly with respect to *aliyah*, Cohen's data is ample and sometimes surprising. The rise in anti-Semitic incidents in France since 2000 has led some observers to imagine that Jews are leaving France for Israel in record numbers. Indeed, when asked, nearly 40 percent of Cohen's interviewees say that, if they could begin their life again, they would choose to be born in Israel. Yet this hardly has translated into an evident increase in interest in *aliyah*. In fact, since 1988, the number of Jews in France who plan to make *aliyah* has shrunk (from 22 percent to 18 percent). Meanwhile, the number of those who say they have no intention of doing so has risen substantially, from 40 percent twenty-five years ago to 58 percent as of 2002 (p. 91).

Cohen's invaluable statistics on actual immigration patterns also fly in the face of the frequent, sometimes breathless reports since 2000 of a "massive" French *aliyah*. An average of 2,182 Jews has immigrated to Israel each year since 2000; the preceding decade witnessed an annual average of 1,571. In 2008 and 2009, the numbers were less than 1,900, the lowest since 2001 (p. 90). While clearly an increase, this hardly constitutes the kind of rising flight depicted repeatedly in parts of the American and Jewish press.<sup>[1]</sup>

Rather than highlighting this contrast between perception and reality, however, Cohen concentrates on those (6 percent) who say they plan to immigrate to Israel "very soon," and the correlation between such statements in the 1988 survey and the subsequent *aliyah* that occurred up to 2002, leading him to speculate that "this means that in the near future 36,000 French Jews can be expected to settle in Israel" (p. 91). Cohen does raise other points that strengthen the case: among adolescents in Cohen's 2004 survey of French tourists to Israel, three-quarters said they did not see their future in France, and one-third said that they hoped to make *aliyah* "very soon" (p. 89). Nearly 70 percent of French Jewish heads of household say they would be happy if their children moved to Israel (p. 95). Such statistics suggest that a generational shift is underway regarding *aliyah*, and that the parents' generation is largely sympathetic. In one of his most compelling claims, Cohen insists that the decision to leave for Israel "is often only the final act in the gradual but systematic creation of a Jewish social fabric, of a Jewish environment" (p. 95). He notes that those interested in *aliyah* are overwhelmingly regular attendees at synagogue; more than half were educated in Jewish schools; they are also more likely than others to have taken part in Jewish study circles, organizations, and youth groups; and to have recently experienced anti-Semitism (p. 96).

Anti-Semitism, given its prominence in discussions of French Jewish life since 2000, has a surprisingly limited and ambiguous role throughout Cohen's analysis. When asked about their levels of happiness, satisfaction, and worry, 90 percent of Jewish households affirm that they are satisfied, and a slightly higher number say that they are happy; at the same time 65 percent report being worried, including 11 percent who are "very worried." But among the issues about which French Jews are concerned, 76 percent do cite anti-Semitism, and high numbers express concern about the often-related issues of terrorism (77 percent), racism (70 percent), and the future of Israel (64 percent) (p. 106). Cohen calls this a state of "worried happiness" (p. 104). Thus while anti-Semitism hardly sounds like the constantly lurking presence one might imagine from press reports of recent years, it is a definite factor.

The centerpiece of Cohen's socio-demographic study is the typology he develops of values and identity among French Jews. When asked about the respective importance of various values, he reports, Jews in France focus first on family obligations, rating "honor your parents" and "founding a family" as the top two; these are followed by two individually-oriented values, "studying" and "being oneself," and then two more relating to the wider world, "helping others" and "being useful to society." These different types of values form points on Cohen's "map" of the value system of the Jews of France. At the center of his map, as the agreed-upon priority of almost everyone, is the value of "making the most of life," a phrase that can mean many things, from personal enjoyment for some to fulfillment through study or work for others. On this map, five regions, each named for a cluster of correlated values, surround the center: materialism, tradition, altruism, authenticity, and enjoyment. Cohen utilizes these broad

categories to measure the relationship and likelihood of correlation between different values in a given individual.

Based upon this methodology and the survey results, Cohen breaks down French Jewry into four “profiles,” or categories of values and identity. He terms these four groups 1) Individualists, 2) Universalists, 3) Traditionalists, and 4) Revivalists. In brief, Individualists are those who emphasize values connected to personal pleasure, satisfaction, and comfort. Universalists also value their independence, but more as a means than an end, focusing on sociability and the freedom to make choices. Traditionalists are those most invested in faith and family, placing greater trust in external authorities and having less interest in liberal values like personal autonomy. The final category, Revivalists, is those who care deeply both about their own independence and social time with friends on the one hand, and their relationships with family and religious faith, on the other hand. Cohen finds France’s Jews fairly evenly divided among the four profiles, with 31 percent Traditionalists, 24 percent Universalists, 23 percent Revivalists, and 22 percent Individualists.

One of the author’s key arguments is that his typology is a far more useful and precise way of understanding the multiple trajectories of French Jews than more conventional dichotomies. He shows, for instance, that there is virtually no correlation between any of the four profiles and the political tendencies of Jews therein. The Traditionalists as a group are mostly Sephardic, the least educated with the lowest income, and the most religiously observant with the largest families; Universalists, by contrast, are the most Ashkenazic of the four groups, highly educated with the largest average salaries of any group, the lowest levels of religious observance, and the greatest incidence of single marital status and few or no children. And yet, politically, in *both* groups, a little less than half of the respondents identify with the left, and slightly over 20 percent identify with the center-right or right. For France’s Jews, then, left-right divisions tell us virtually nothing about differences in values or background.

Generational gaps, while important, also have limited explanatory power. Revivalists and Universalists are both thirty to forty years old; Traditionalists and Individualists are mostly fifty and older. Yet the two youngest groups are also the two that contrast most sharply. Unlike the highly integrated, economically successful, relatively secular Universalists, Revivalists are the most likely to describe themselves as religiously traditional, to donate to Jewish organizations, to know how to read Hebrew, and to have visited Israel numerous times, have family there, and consider *aliyah*.

Even in terms of religious observance, while Traditionalists and Revivalists are by far the most committed, Individualists are as likely to be traditional as they are liberal, and even among Universalists, 36 percent say that they regularly have a Shabbat meal with their family and 20 percent that they light candles on Friday night (pp. 121; 125). Likewise, regarding attitudes toward Israel, on the one hand, Revivalists and Traditionalists are much more likely to plan or consider making *aliyah* and to oppose Israel exchanging territory for peace (p. 128). On the other hand, more than 75 percent of all four profiles describe their connection to Israel as close (p. 127). Interestingly, such statistics suggest that, as a whole, French Jewry is more religiously traditional and more comfortable with multiple national attachments than the longstanding image of a highly secular, privatized Judaism that is “French first.”<sup>[2]</sup>

The situation of the Revivalists emblemizes such complex identities, for, as Cohen contends, this group has “a double heritage: Jewish tradition and Republican tradition” (p. 116). That is, along with their high levels of traditional observance and interest in making *aliyah*, Revivalists, more than any other group, describe themselves as “very happy” and “very satisfied” in France, and are integrally involved in their Jewish community. More than others, they embrace *both* “Jew” and “*israélite*” to describe their identity. The latter term has long been associated with attachment to the French Republic and integration in France, and the former with a more visible, ethnic identity. Altogether, many

Revivalists appear to see themselves as at once deeply rooted in France and proudly Jewish, including a strong attachment to Israel.

The last section of this chapter focuses on Sephardic Jews, examining both demographics and the value questions that make up Cohen's typology. Among the most interesting findings here are those regarding Algerian-born Jews. Cohen's results show that they are, like those Sephardic Jews born in France, less traditional religiously than the Jews born in Morocco or Tunisia. Algerian-born Jews are also the least likely to have placed their children in Jewish day schools, and the most likely to identify politically as left wing. Finally, Jews from Algeria were the least likely to express interest in immigrating to Israel. The pattern here, though largely ignored by Cohen, is telling. It suggests that the experience of French citizenship and relative integration in Algeria, as well as the decision to migrate en masse to France at the end of the Franco-Algerian War, left an enduring mark on Algerian Jewry, more so than the vaunted Francophone schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Morocco or Tunisia. The Jews of Algeria appear here to have become almost "more French" than those born in France.

In assessing the overall state of French Jewry, Cohen concludes: "French Jews are a highly educated, financially successful and socially well-integrated population, generally happy and satisfied with their lives. Yet they are also deeply worried about terrorism, anti-Semitism, racism and the future of Israel, indicating a level of disquiet with the current atmosphere in France" (p. 147).

If the empirical study of chapter two showcases the author's expertise and depth of research, the book's first chapter stands on shakier ground. It begins with a reasonably useful overview of the history and current situation of Jews in France. Cohen concludes the chapter with a valuable, if overly detailed section on every previous study since the 1960s of the identity and demography of the Jewish population of France. Yet a section partway through the chapter, on Jewish identity, proves a good deal more problematic. Here Cohen makes a series of sweeping assertions about the psyche of Jews: "Jews have always had some difficulty knowing themselves, though not through any lack of introspection. Questioning one's identity is in fact so widespread among Jews that it is frequently seen as obsessive" (p. 15). "Jewish identity is heavy, it sticks to the skin. This identity is there even without wanting it, and a Jew cannot get rid of it" (p. 15). The author continues to utilize medical terminology: "[The Jewish] fuss about identity sometimes even becomes contagious; this 'Jewish obsession' with self-questioning has in fact passed over to other groups. In France, Catholics too are asking questions about their identity" (pp. 16-7). Finally, Cohen concludes the situation is hopeless: "It would appear that there is something in the Jewish consciousness that is forever disturbing and preventing any repose" (p. 18). This vantage point resurfaces later in the book when the author uses phrases like a Jewish "disarray of identity" that he calls "permanent" (p. 151). Unfortunately, this dizzying array of generalizations that draws upon old clichés cannot help but undermine the book's credibility.

Chapter three, "French Jewish Philosophical Writings on Jewish Identity" offers a penetrating and detailed summary of some of the major books written on Jewish identity in France since World War II. Here Cohen gives incisive, if ultimately highly descriptive, accounts of complex works by important thinkers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Memmi, Emmanuel Lévinas, Alain Finkelkraut, and Benny Lévy. This chapter illustrates vividly the degree to which, since the 1960s, French Jewish thinkers have repeatedly challenged the idea of a compartmentalized Judaism and struggled openly with the issue of how to maintain a Jewish identity in France that is both personal and public. Yet Cohen does little to connect the individual books to one another or to their shifting historical contexts. Even more puzzling and disappointing is the fact that he makes no attempt to link these literary works to the demographic findings of chapter two.

In the book's concluding chapter, the author gives an overview of his empirical findings and raises questions for future research. He pays particular attention to the meaning of the terms "Jew" and

“*israélite*” as used today, the merits of his study’s behavioral approach and typology, and trends in youth and educational programs where Jewish parents are enrolling their children. Finally, he speaks of what he terms—in a manner not altogether supported by the above findings—an ongoing “symbolic departure of the Jews from France” (p. 191).

Beyond the book’s rather disconnected structure and its at times startling generalities about Jews, it also contains a number of factually erroneous or imprecise historical statements. For instance: Jews in French Morocco were never, as the author claims, granted citizenship as a group (p. 135); the 1905 law of separation between Church and State in France was certainly influenced by the Dreyfus Affair, but was not, as the author implies, in part a reaction to the virulence of the latter’s anti-Semitism (p. 7); it is not the case that “much of the Jewish population” in Tunisia was “deported” during World War II, though the author is correct that many were placed in forced labor camps (p. 136); contrary to what Cohen suggests at one point, it was not until the mid-1970s that Muslims in France numbered in the “millions” (p. 135). On a broader point, the author repeatedly puts forth the increasingly outmoded notion that from the time of the French Revolution, Jews in France simply relegated their Jewishness to the private sphere in order to accommodate an uncompromisingly secular political culture.[3] Such a perspective is particularly ironic here, since the book shows in a number of ways that visibly multifaceted identities and negotiations between public and private Jewishness have been the norm in France, however little acknowledged, for some time now.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the above critiques, the empirical centerpiece of Cohen’s study is sound, invaluable, and often highly illuminating. In the short space provided this reviewer could not fully do justice to the wealth of information presented there, including in the fifty-seven statistical tables the author provides. Even the seasoned student of the French Jewish experience, then, will find much to learn and reflect upon in this book.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, “As Attacks Rise in France, Jews Flock to Israel,” *USA Today*, November 22, 2004; “The Very Real Jewish Exodus from France,” *Tablet*, March 14, 2013, online at <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/127076/the-very-real-jewish-exodus-from-france> (viewed August 12, 2013).

[2] For this older conception of French Jewry, which remains influential, see especially Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[3] A far more complex picture of public Jewishness in France has appeared in recent scholarship. See especially Jay Berkovitz, *Rites and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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