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Jews and Antisemitism in Teaching Modern France

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In the immediate aftermath of the lethal Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher attacks of January 2015, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls sought to reassure French Jews of their secure place in the Fifth Republic. In the face of calls from some quarters for Jews to migrate en masse to Israel, he insisted that "France without Jews is not France." For many of us trained in French history over multiple generations, and even for many of our peers without such training, the logic of Valls' oft-quoted statement was obvious: since the Revolution of 1789, Jews have been bound up in the fabric of French history, lying at the seam of many of the country's most critical political, cultural, and social fracture points. France has often treated Jews' emancipation and social advancement as indicative of the country's liberal openness; in their more halcyon moments as what Pierre Birnbaum memorably termed "fools of the Republic," many Jews in France have seen things much the same. Yet simultaneously, France has periodically proven fertile ground for the development and rise of antisemitism, first in the late nineteenth century, subsequently in the 1930s and under Vichy, and more recently since the early 2000s. If one wants to understand the contradictions of French universalism, citizenship, nationhood and empire, the shifting positions of Jews are a good place to start.

Yet for many students in the French history classes I have taught at the University of Cincinnati and UC-Berkeley, the logic of Manuel Valls' statement is not only far from obvious; it is downright puzzling. Studying antisemitism has never been more fraught in American universities than it is today. I would also argue that it has never been more important. On the one hand, in many contemporary political discourses, Jews have come to be perceived less as an historically oppressed ethnic and religious minority facing resurgent hostility, and more as a group that is simply White and privileged in America's racial divide, and whose members are largely allied with an oppressor colonialist state overseas. On the other hand, in the face of lethal antisemitic attacks by white nationalists in 2018 and 2019 and increased antisemitic rhetoric spanning the political spectrum, a major effort has been undertaken to institutionalize protections for Jewish students on college campuses. This has occurred most notably around the "working definition" of antisemitism created by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which formed part of the basis for a controversial Executive Order from the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Office in 2019. If the first development has left many Jewish students feeling misunderstood, as well as marginalized or attacked for any connections – real or perceived – to Zionism or Israel, the latter has raised significant concerns about how formal adoption of any definition of antisemitism constitutes a potential threat to academic freedom. At this writing, two major new definitions of antisemitism have recently appeared: The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, or JDA, and the Nexus Document. Largely crafted by academics, both of these seek to bring greater precision to some of the more ambiguous parts of the IHRA

definition, or to replace the IHRA definition altogether. It remains to be seen how these competing definitions will affect debates around antisemitism and free speech on campuses.

For those of us teaching French history, matters are of course even more complicated. Like many of us, I have sought for years to turn greater attention in my French history courses to the place of various groups deemed marginal to the French nation, such as colonial migrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, slaves and free blacks in the Caribbean, women, and indeed Jews. I have spoken of how these and other groups help us to appreciate the challenge for France, since the time of the Revolution, of negotiating inclusion and difference, the possibilities and limitations of French universalism and its fundamental contradictions--what it means to be simultaneously a democratic republic seeking to form citizens and an overseas empire reliant upon the subjugation of millions of indigenous people. I have applied postcolonial theory to interrogate the complex position of Jews in colonial spaces, particularly French Algeria. Through primary source readings, lectures, and recent scholarship, students puzzle with particular interest over the way that Jews there were at once victims of fierce and often violent settler antisemitism and simultaneously implicated in aspects of the colonial project, particularly the selective bestowal of citizenship that made them "Europeans" and denied that legal and racialized status to their Muslim neighbors. Writing about this fraught history has led at least one French colleague to accuse me (and my colleague Maud Mandel) of seeing contemporary antisemitism in France "through American-made binoculars." Thus, I am well attuned to the current backlash against such multiculturalist, postcolonial approaches that is unfolding today in France, as certain government officials and conservative intellectuals decry the alleged rise of a dangerous, American-imported "Islamo-gauchisme" at French universities.

These multiple ongoing conversations have forced me to think more precisely about what it means to teach about Jews and antisemitism in my modern France and the world class, and even in my course on Jews of France and the Francophone world from Medieval to the present (both of which I teach regularly). First, I now operate from the assumption that many of my students know next-to-nothing about Jews, and that they are unfamiliar with antisemitism. To the extent that some of them may be very familiar with it, I imagine that they think of it in singular terms divorced from historical context or other historical or contemporary oppressions or ideologies of hatred. But more substantively, I aim to communicate several aspects of the history of antisemitism in French history, all of which have importance to the broader history of France today, as well as to its current political formations and challenges:

1. Antisemitism is inseparable from other systems of hatred and oppression in the French past and present. It forms a kind of Rorschach Test for larger issues of inclusion, legal rights and protections, and the general health of democracy in France (and many other countries). In studying moments like the Revolution and Napoleonic era and the Dreyfus Affair, I bring out the way that the place of Jews serves as an index for wider debates about France's national character and its religious and racial hierarchies.
2. Antisemitism has at times been one structural inequality among many (the renewed restrictions of Napoleon's "Infamous Decree" and of course Vichy's anti-Jewish statutes serve as illustrative examples here). At the same time, it has a longer and more consistent history of underpinning wider systems of oppression and power. The

dominance of the settler classes in Algeria; the ascendant political claims of both "True France" and anti-socialism on the part of many on the right in the 1890s and 1930s (from the traditionalists of Action française to the radicals of the Cagoule); and the desperate efforts of the Front National in recent decades to cling to a vision of France as predominantly white and "European" are all striking instances of this.

3. The colonial dimension is crucial to the history of antisemitism in France. Discussing the ideas of Edouard Drumont, I trace for my students how – as Dorian Bell has written about compellingly – the colonial dimension enabled the fusion of capitalist antisemitism and racial antisemitism in new ways through the figure of the "Jewish colonial conspirator."
4. More broadly, there has been a persistent, complex, and important intersection between antisemitism, colonialism, and Islamophobia. Jews and Muslims in France and French North Africa repeatedly were ever linked in their fates and paths. They were periodic victims of exclusion and racism, but rarely in precisely the same ways. As I have written about elsewhere, Jews were both constantly linked with Muslims and differentiated from them, often (though not always) at the latter's expense. I visit this issue repeatedly as we study broader moments so important to the history of citizenship, belonging, and exclusion in modern France like the Crémieux Decree of 1870, the Constantine riots of 1934, the racial laws of the Vichy years, and the hour of decolonization in Algeria in 1961-1962. The powerful writings of figures such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon illuminate the complex interplay between antisemitism and other hatreds, particularly in the colonial context.
5. France has, through it all, remained a frequent and genuine land of possibility for Jews. Not only do I try to explain that their emancipation during the French Revolution was exceptional for its time, but when discussing the Revolution's centenary in 1889 I quote from rabbis' sermons at the time that expressed their sense of at-homeness in France in Biblical, even messianic terms. Students are always stunned to learn of France's several prime ministers of Jewish descent, and they come to understand the sense of shock that Jews in France and Algeria experienced at the hands of Vichy's racial laws: their fatherland that they loved and trusted entirely had betrayed them.
6. Laicité has been a double-edged sword for Jews. While the separation of Church and State was welcome for its anti-clericalism and decentering of Christianity from public life, there has been a way in which Jewish bodily practices such as keeping kosher or publicly wearing traditional clothing have repeatedly been treated as anti-modern and as hindrances to being fully French. Here again the connections with the position of Muslims become unmistakable.

All the while, I seek to place the story of Jews in wider contexts. I always treat Jews alongside other marginalized groups, and note their frequently "in-between" status along various hierarchies. What I see emerge with many students from this multifaceted picture is that Jewish history is suddenly alive, complicated, captivating, and situated within and alongside other historical knowledge. Jews are a historical minority once again, with distinctive histories of persecution and distinctive elements of culture and ethnicity. The benefits of such realization extend far beyond their understanding of France. They also hopefully make more legible the notion that modern France would not be France without its Jews.

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