

# The Universal and the Particular

*by Maud S. Mandel*

---

**Intellectual historian Maurice Samuels offers a timely corrective to simplistic renderings of French universalism showing that, over the years, it has been far more nuanced and far less anti-particularistic than usually argued. However, studying Jews as the paradigmatic minority, he tends to forget the growing focus on Muslims in contemporary conversations.**

---

*Reviewed: Maurice Samuels, [The Right to Difference: French Universalism & the Jews](#), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, 264 p.*

Ever since France began debating the place of the Islamic headscarf in public schools in the late 1980s, French discourses around minorities and universalism have attracted international media attention. Indeed, each new controversy –whether the one surrounding the 2010 “burqa ban” or the 2016 “burkini” debates– calls into sharp focus the particularity of French discussions around diversity, secularism, and universalism. Whereas those outside the country, and particularly those from the United States, rarely find public displays of ethnic and religious distinctiveness worthy of commentary, much less political diatribe and polemic, in France the issue has repeatedly become a topic of public policy and journalistic debate. Such passionate debate stems from the distinctive features of French universalism. Although in the Anglo-American sphere universalism is understood to mean that law should be equally applied to all individuals, in France, universalism has also come to mean that the state should not recognize the rights of ethnic and religious groups and that the distinctions dividing one French citizen from another in the realm of religion or ethnicity should be relegated to the private sphere. The state thus does not recognize difference in law; difference is personal or confessional, and national institutions are “French”.

In contemporary debates over the headscarf, burqua and burkini, this French version of universalism is often presented as essentially French, which is to say a timeless set of characteristics or legal traditions, dating back to the Revolution and wound into the historical

origin of the nation. Whether supporting these “French” traditions or opposing them, advocates and critics alike share a fundamental belief that French universalism rejects minority difference when expressed in political terms.

In *The Right to Difference: French Universalism & the Jews*, Maurice Samuels challenges such ahistorical perspectives on French attitudes toward universalism by documenting both alternative traditions and the way seemingly rigid and timeless perspectives on universalism have changed over time. In his telling, while French republicanism hardened with the establishment of the Third Republic and the legal separation of Church and State in 1905, thereby introducing the French brand of secularism, *laïcité*, which theoretically positioned the state as religiously neutral and insisted on a secular public sphere, at no time during the French Revolution or thereafter did alternative visions of French universalism disappear. Rather, always subject to negotiation and debate, French attitudes regarding minorities and difference evolved over time and were highly contingent. Moreover, Samuels argues that discourses about Jews have been fundamental to these evolving ideas. Although a tiny minority within France’s larger demographic landscape, Jews –Samuels argues– have been essential to French understandings of difference and inclusion, a paradigmatic minority that has provided evidence both of universalism’s reach and of its failings. Lastly, Samuels seeks to document the entangled nature of the universal and the particular. Far less oppositional than they have sometimes been portrayed, the universal and the particular, Samuels posits, were often understood to reinforce one another.

## **A counter narrative**

These three arguments are tightly interwoven in Samuels’ account, since he asserts that despite their small numbers (currently about one percent of the French population), Jews were central to the articulation and hardening of French law and discourses around universalism. Indeed, originally having set out to write a study of French philosemitism –the numerous polemics defending and celebrating Jews– Samuels became increasingly drawn to the way philosemitic and universalistic discourses had become integrally fused in French political rhetoric. Thus, often times the greatest defenders of the Jews, which is to say those most critical of antisemitism and seeking to ensure Jewish political equality, argued that it was only the codification of universalistic principles in law and the inevitable subsequent erasure of Jewish difference in the public sphere that would fully end anti-Jewish antagonism. For Jews, then “the political ideology that allowed the Jews the most freedom did so abstracting or erasing their specificity, their difference as Jews” (p. 7). As proponents and opponents of universalism and pluralism argued the merits of their respective traditions, Samuel argues, Jews were always part of the equation.

In some ways, two of Samuels' three key claims are not all that surprising. To be sure, his account of evolving theories of universalism convincingly shows the ways in which assimilationist arguments co-existed with pluralistic arguments and practice throughout much of French history—an important and timely corrective to simplistic renderings of universalism in contemporary political polemic and the media. Through his careful curation and expertly rendered close reading of a diverse range of sources, including newspaper articles, governmental reports, theatrical and literary works, and political speeches, Samuels provides a far broader range of views on difference and Frenchness than one typically finds when speaking of minority visibility in France. The result is that even while documenting how the more rigid articulation of a public sphere devoid of the particular came to harden in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Samuels shows a well-articulated counter narrative that persisted over time. Moreover, he highlights the space that debates over assimilation and pluralism provided for minorities in France, making clear that there was more room to display visibly distinctive “ethnic” traits in the public sphere than the more calcified view of universalism suggests. However, for the intellectual historian, accustomed to thinking of ideas as ever-changing, such arguments seem almost intuitive. Indeed, from an historian’s perspective, it would have been more surprising to learn that these ideas stood fixed and immutable from the French Revolution forward. While showing *how* they evolved is crucial—and the crux of Samuels’ argument—the *fact* that they did does not astound.

## **Jews: a paradigmatic minority?**

More surprising is Samuels’ assertion of the centrality of Jews to the story he is telling. Republican traditions are, after all, bound up with the very definition of Frenchness as constituted at the moment of the nation’s revolutionary birth. To argue that the small, highly marginalized and, at times, much despised Jewish population was so significant to the articulation and implementation of this political theory is a controversial claim that is sure to raise some eyebrows without an empirical breadth that this study lacks. Samuels is, of course, not the first scholar to place Jews at the heart of French or European political thought. David Nirenberg, for example, has explored why so many diverse cultures focused so much disproportionate attention on Jews, arguing that many aspects of Western self-understanding evolved out of Christian and later Enlightenment grappling with Jewish difference<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, historian Ronald Schechter has argued that Jews played a disproportionate role in the French Enlightenment imaginary despite their small numbers because Jews proved ‘good to think’ for

---

<sup>1</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

philosophes trying to understand political participation, universalistic principles and citizenship<sup>2</sup>.

Samuels takes Schechter's argument to the next level, contending that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews remained central to French articulations of universalism. In his words: "[Jews] have continually spurred some of the most significant theorizing about the place of minorities within the French nation over the past two and a half centuries" [p. 14]. The texts Samuels analyzes help ground that claim, making clear the centrality of Jews to Revolutionary and Napoleonic debates about minority integration and inclusion. Subsequently, however, *The Right to be Different* suffers from a certain selection bias, since Samuels' original interest in philosemitism drew his attention to certain moments (such as the debates around the Dreyfus Affair), figures (such as the famous Jewish actress Rachel Félix), texts (such as Jean Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*), or films (such as Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*) that by definition emphasized the centrality of Jews to the story Samuels was telling. As he himself notes in the Introduction, by the mid-1960s, one could easily argue that Muslims had become the paradigmatic minority through which France henceforth negotiated its relationship to public difference. Debates over immigration, Islam, communitarianism, and Muslim female bodies now dominate where discussions of Jewish moneylending or marriage practices once caught national attention. And while it is true that recent anti-Jewish violence and responses to that violence has made fully clear again the ways in which antisemitism remains a tangible force in France to this day, Jewish difference still remains secondary to Islamic difference in contemporary debates over Frenchness. Indeed, one of the ironies of current debates is the ways in which Jews are sometimes held up as the paradigmatic example of the potential of republican assimilationism as a way to highlight Muslim "failure" to accept the republican bargain. Such discussions do underscore Samuels' point that Jews continue to be evoked in contemporary discussions of republicanism and assimilation. Nevertheless, without taking account of the growing focus on Muslims over Jews in contemporary conversations around these issues, Samuels seems to suggest a timelessness to the very discourses he is trying to show are historically bounded.

This critique notwithstanding, Samuels' expert textual analysis does allow him to see things that other scholars have missed. Thus, although modern Jewish historians have long made the case that living under French universalism was never as assimilationist in practice as the political rhetoric around radical republicanism suggested and that Jews were always far more visible politically, religious, and culturally than initial scholarly assessments claimed, such scholarship was less successful at documenting the ways in which the broader culture encouraged such expressions of Jewishness to flourish. Samuels fills that gap, showing the pliability of French republican norms as articulated in a broad range of non-Jewish thinkers over many decades. His analysis makes clear that the history of French republicanism was far more nuanced than has previously been understood and that what makes it "French" is less its

---

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (University of California Press, 2003).

assimilationist, anti-particularist proclivities than its constant grappling with those tendencies, as thinkers, actors, journalists, pundits, political theorists, and academics debated a spectrum of pluralistic and integrationist ideologies that have shaped minority life in France for the last two and a half centuries.

### Further reading

Jean-Philippe Dedieu, “Jews and Muslims in France: the History of a Relation. An Interview with Maud Mandel”, *Books and Ideas*, 18 September 2014.

Published on [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 30 October 2017.