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Crossing Boundaries: The Significance of French Jewish History

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Crossing Boundaries Introduction

The last edited volume to appear in English on the Jews of Modern France was published in 1985. Edited by Frances Malino and Bernard Wasserstein, *The Jews in Modern France* is still worth reading for its incisive essays on the relationship between Jews and political ideologies such as republicanism and socialism, the experience of Yiddish-speaking immigrant workers, the integration (or lack thereof) of North African Jews into the French Jewish community, the scourge of anti-Semitism, and other aspects of Franco-Jewish history. Like all anthologies (including the present volume) and perhaps like all scholarly studies of large topics, *The Jews in Modern France* is not comprehensive, but rather reflects the interests of the authors and the questions of the day. For example, it is heavily focused on the post-1870 period and does not include any work on the Jews of Old Regime France. It contains several essays on anti-Semitism but nothing on the Jewish religion. It is largely innocent of the linguistic turn and cultural-historical methodologies that would come of age in the 1990s, and (again, typical of its time) it has nothing to say about women or gender. Yet its editors do not pretend "to produce a comprehensive survey of French Jewish history," and see their book "as a first rather than a last word."[1] The present volume is a belated acceptance of the invitation to join the conversation. It makes no claims to conclusiveness and should also be seen as an invitation to further dialogue.

Why study the Jews of France? Bernard Wasserstein notes that the majority of participants in the conference that gave rise to *The Jews in Modern France* believed the study of Franco-Jewish history was "worthwhile, not merely because of any paradigmatic utility it may hold but in its own right and for its own sake."[2] Speaking only for myself and not on behalf of any of the contributors to this volume, I do not think that any history is worthwhile for its own sake and believe that all scholarly studies must be justified. The case of the Jews in France does not "merely" have paradigmatic value, it *importantly* has paradigmatic value. The experience of the Jews has been a test case for assessing the success or health of the French republican model of citizenship. It has been observed that anti-Semitism, like any other form of racism, constitutes a failure of French aspirations for a republic in which all citizens are considered equal. It is also known that the emancipation of the Jews came with costs (i.e. threats to a distinctive Jewish identity) as well as benefits (i.e. more extensive rights). These sociocultural problems, moreover, are not only relevant to France, but to all societies striving for a balance between consensus and pluralism, national unity and the right to be different.

By now, however, a great number of studies have addressed the issues described above. Georges Weill, in his contribution to *The Jews in Modern France*, complained of "French academics, who, on the whole, remain as indifferent as before to marginal cultures…."[3]

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[1] Ref.

[2] Wasserstein, "Preface," in Malino, *Jews in Modern France*, xi.

[3] Georges Weill, "French Jewish Historiography, 1789-1870," in Malino, *Jews in Modern France*, 314.

Today things are different, and the attention to "*l'autre*," whether women, colonial subjects, post-colonial immigrants, and Jews is flourishing in French studies on both sides of the Atlantic. (Indeed, scholarly and popular commentary on the history of the Jews, especially during the *années noires* of Vichy and the Occupation, is a flourishing industry.) Much of this turnabout emerged out of the controversies surrounding the bicentenary celebrations of the French Revolution in 1989, which called attention to the demands that Jacobin "universalism" placed on groups designated as marginal. Whatever the reasons, in 2005 we are now well aware of the power of official discourses, ideologies, laws and social practices to exclude, disempower, and "other," in France and elsewhere.

This is not to say that there is nothing left to say about Jews or other "others." On the contrary, if one takes the opportunity to reassess the paradigms by which they have been understood, the conversation can be reinvigorated. Now that the study of the Jews of France, by "Jewish" and "French" historians alike, is well past its infancy, it is useful to take stock of the concepts that historians and other scholars have used to work on the topic. The linguist Fernand de Saussure observed that we apprehend ideas in terms of their opposites.[4] Whether this is always the case I am not prepared to judge, but binary thinking is typical in the humanities and social sciences. For example, one speaks of centers and peripheries, power and weakness, communities and individuals, Jews and gentiles, particularism and universalism, prejudice and tolerance, the secular and the religious, and tradition and modernity. Scholars use these terms to organize the data they encounter, but every now and then it is worth questioning the concepts themselves and their relationship with each other. I therefore asked the authors contributing to this volume to use research they have conducted on the Jews of France as an occasion for reflecting upon concepts that scholars in the humanities and the interpretive social sciences habitually and often unreflectively employ. (I contributed an essay as well.) Concepts are useful because they contain, or restrain, data that otherwise threaten to move randomly from place to place, depending on the researcher's (often unconscious) inclinations. They draw borders around information, but borders exclude just as they include. The essays in this volume assess, redraw, but above all, cross the borders that prevent us from seeing the connections between phenomena on either side. Like the proverbial Jews themselves, the subjects they investigate wander from one demarcated area to another.

For example, in chapter 6, "Institutrices in the Metropole and the Maghreb: A Comparative Perspective," Frances Malino discusses an extraordinary group of fin-de-siècle Jewish women who moved from the Magreb to Paris to be trained as school teachers and then returned to North Africa, under the auspices of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, to educate their coreligionists' children. In a real and a metaphoric sense, these women were "peripheral" to the "center," the (male) director of the AIU in Paris. Yet they were turned out to be *central* to the mission of the Alliance. Working in regions that were dangerous, particularly for Jews, they taught children who otherwise would have gone without an education. Their knowledge of local conditions, moreover, gave

[4] Note***

them the confidence to reproach the director, who from his seat in the metropole was in a poor position to judge what the AIU schools and their teachers needed in North Africa. Though ostensibly weak as women and employees, they exercised strength when negotiating for more equitable compensation and greater autonomy.

Chapter 2, "A Jewish Agent in Eighteenth-Century Paris: Israël Bernard de Valabrègue," considers on the idea of communities. In this essay, I attempt to reconstruct the world view of a man who considered himself Jewish and was seen as Jewish by his contemporaries but who is hard to place in any particular community. Born in the papal enclave of Avignon and living most of his life in Paris, where Jews were only officially permitted to live on short-term visas, Valabrègue worked at the royal library (and therefore for the king) and considered himself a man of the Enlightenment, yet also scrupulously practiced Judaism and worked as an agent for his coreligionists in the capital. The famous corporate nature of Old Regime society does not account for him, as it does not account for many others who maintained ties to their "community" while striving to succeed as individuals in a society that increasingly recognized and rewarded individualism.

Thomas Kselman questions the boundaries of "community" more radically still. In chapter 5, "Turbulent Souls in Modern France: Jewish Conversion and the Terquem Affair," he analyzes the case of Dr. Lazare Terquem, a Jewish physician who may or may not have converted to Catholicism on his deathbed in 1845. Contradictory testimony by Jewish and Catholic witnesses led to a row over Terquem's religious and communal identity, but Kselman shows that the situation was more complex than the simple notion of conversion suggests. For years before the deathbed mystery Terquem had wavered in his adherence to Judaism and identification with its followers, maintained cordial relations to family members (including his wife) who had converted to Catholicism, and thus lived "with a complex religious identity that struggled to express itself in the borderlands between religious communities."

In addition to being defined in opposition to the individual, the community is often seen as removed from a larger group, whether that group is the nation or humanity. Supporters of communities are therefore "particularistic," an epithet long used against the Jews in France, whereas those who consider the general welfare are "universalistic," though universalism is frequently limited to the French "nation" and is therefore merely a synonym of nationalism. Three of the contributions to this volume raise questions about the border typically drawn between particularism and universalism. In chapter 7, "Between Universalism and Particularism: Discourses of Jewish Identity in France, 1920-1932," Nadia Malinovich notes that in the nineteenth century French Jews tried "to legitimate Jewish particularism by demonstrating Judaism's universal value," but that by the 1920s Jewish intellectuals had become less defensive about the compatibility of Judaism with the universalist principles of French republicanism. On the contrary, they fashioned themselves an ethnic group and celebrated their difference. If the Bretons could consider themselves French, one Jewish writer asked, why should the Jews be deprived of this right? In chapter 9, "Alain Finkielkraut and the Nouveaux Philosophes: French-Jewish Intellectuals, the Afterlives of May '68 and the Re-birth of the National

Icon," Jonathan Judaken shows that contemporary Jewish intellectuals have asserted their authority as moralists by drawing on the universalism that they see as "the essence of Jewishness." Rather than occupying the defensive position of nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals who made similar claims, however, the subjects of Judaken's work have become "consummate icons of the French nation."

The problem of particularism and universalism appears as well in chapter 8, "Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* and the Jewish Question," by Maurice Samuels. The 1937 film, set during the First World War, was supposed to raise questions about reputed national and racial identities and thereby promote universal brotherhood at a time when war threatened to decimate Europe again. As Samuels shows, however, this universalist message was undermined by the rules of cinematic realism, which required that characters be portrayed in an easily recognizable way. In other words, it necessitated the use of stereotypes, including most prominently that of the Jew. Renoir's aim was to transcend prejudice by showing the essential humanity of each character, yet it was the image projected on the screen that remained in the minds of viewers, paradoxically reinforcing their prejudices. In addition to raising questions about where universalism ends and particularism begins, Samuels' intervention blurs the conceptual line between tolerance and prejudice.

Another venerable dichotomy is that of the sacred and the secular, which in turn is closely related to the conceptual split between tradition and modernity. According to this mode of thinking, traditional society was the realm of the sacred. Kings were God's lieutenants on earth, and laws, the organization of society and events were the product of Divine will. Worldly phenomena were therefore explicable in reference to heavenly intentions. At some point – and historians disagree on when it took place – a process of desacralization led to a secularization of thought. The modern or secular outlook entailed a scientific examination of nature, including the nature of government and society, and insofar as religious belief remained it was a remnant of the pre-modern era.

Lisa Leff places this received wisdom in question. In chapter 5, "Jews, Liberals, and the Civilizing Mission in Nineteenth-Century France," she focuses on the writings of liberal Jewish intellectuals from roughly 1840 to 1860. Surprisingly, Leff finds that these men, along with their non-Jewish liberal allies, repeatedly used religiously-infused language to describe their goals. They referred to their aims – political liberty, social equality, economic growth, education based on scientific principles, and the elimination of human misery more generally – as "sacred" and "holy," and described their endeavors as "crusades." As Leff reminds us, the civilizing mission, which justified the acquisition of a French colonial empire as well as Jewish efforts to educate and defend the rights of their coreligionists abroad, was a *mission*. Thus "the clerical right did not have a monopoly on religious fervor."

Religious fervor as a defining characteristic of liberals, the reputed harbingers of modernity, raises the question of the meaning of modernity. In addition to its association with secularism, modernity usually implies the attenuation if not abolition of "traditional" institutions, practices and beliefs. The experience of the Jews, once again, is paradigmatic. When the deputies in the Constituent Assembly emancipated the Jews,

they did so under the understanding that the Jews would also lose their "privileges," the foremost being communal autonomy. Vestiges of the hated Old Regime, corporate bodies, including the legally recognized Jewish communities, were to be abolished in favor of an unmediated relationship between individual citizens and the state. Michael Shurkin therefore surprises us by finding that the French state, in its efforts to "modernize" the Jews of France and Algeria in the first half of the nineteenth century, pursued a conscious policy of reviving or buttressing the "traditional" institutions that had separated them from their neighbors. In particular, they reinforced the power of the rabbis, those reputed advocates of superstitious beliefs and barbarous practices.

The problem of modernity vs. tradition is present in each of the essays collected here. Malino shows that more than a century after the French Revolution the "modern" process of centralization did not always concentrate power in the center. Rather running things from Paris, the director of the Alliance Israélite Universelle found his power severely limited by the women he had employed to teach school in North Africa. In my essay, the life of an eighteenth-century Jew with loose ties to an ill-defined and quasi-legal association of coreligionists problematizes the traditional nature of a corporate or community-based Old Regime society. On the other side of the tradition-modernity divide, Shurkin finds state-sponsored corporatism well into the nineteenth century, as seen in successive governments' policies toward the Jews of France and Algeria. Kselman shows religion to be crucial to social identity – as exemplified in the dispute over Lazare Terquem's final religious affiliation – in the heyday of the famously liberal, secular, and therefore "modern" July Monarchy. Similarly, Jewish and gentile liberals around the middle of the nineteenth century think of promoting civilization abroad as a sacred mission, as Leff's chapter shows. In Malinovich's essay, a "particularistic" Jewish identity is alive and well, indeed more self-assertive than it had ever been, in the late Third Republic, by which time the allegedly homogenizing process of modernization should have diminished if not eliminated it. Judaken finds that contemporary Jewish intellectuals have little trouble reconciling the specificity of Judaism with the universalist demands of modernity. Samuels demonstrates that the quintessentially modern techniques of cinematic realism, epitomized by *La Grande Illusion*, can reinforce ancient prejudices in the minds of viewers.

The chapter that most explicitly conceptualizes tradition and modernity is the first one. In "Ritual and Emancipation: A Reassessment of Cultural Modernization in France," Jay Berkovitz plays havoc with received wisdom concerning the relationship between the Jews and modernity. To begin with, he finds features typically associated with modernity, namely lay control over the Jewish communities, to be thriving as early as the middle of the seventeenth century. The much-discussed emancipation of the Jews, emerging out of the Revolution of 1789, turns out to be relatively unimportant in the process of modernization. If anything, it *slows* modernization by encouraging Napoleon and his successors to support a consistory system in which rabbinical power is strong and calls for reform are silenced. Moreover, as the essays by Leff and Judaken confirm, post-revolutionary Jewish thinkers increasingly saw the Revolution as "the fulfillment of the Judaic ideal of justice." Berkovitz continues, "From this it followed that the Jews were

destined to complete the effort begun by the Revolution and would, ultimately, work toward the regeneration of society at large."