

# H-Net Reviews

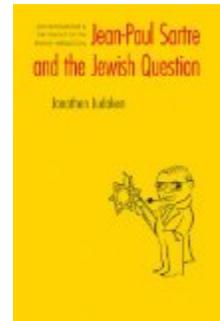
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Judaken. *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual*. Texts and Contexts Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 408 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-2489-6.

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## Reflections on a Jewish Mirror

Given the sinuous tale of the distinctive relationship between France and Judaism and especially because the figure of the French intellectual was born through the Dreyfus affair, it is altogether surprising that we have had to wait until now for a full account of how the Jewish Question was handled by the master French intellectual of the last century, Jean-Paul Sartre. Any future attempt to come to grips with the figure of “the Jew” and with antisemitism in French intellectual politics will have to pass by way of Jonathan Judaken’s formidable, thoroughgoing, and engaging account of Sartre and the Jewish Question. As he patiently demonstrates, many French intellectuals themselves, including prominent French Jews, have grappled with Sartre’s treatment of that Question on their way to deeper and more satisfying engagements with Judaism and Jewish life. A recapitulation of the many ways Sartre thought and wrote about the “cultural ‘code’” of Jews’ relationship with modernity and of the fact of antisemitism (p. 9), the book additionally advances new ways of reading Sartre’s intellectual biography as a whole, uncovering continuities and recurrent themes that offer new purchase on and therefore reasons to return to a thinker whose moment allegedly passed long ago. If Judaken ultimately stretches in his contention that the Jewish Question was a “pivot” for Sartre’s thought (pp. 51, 151, 183), sometimes bordering on the suggestion that it was the animating, secret linchpin of the entire Sartrean enterprise, he illustrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sartre yielded philosophical insight by reflecting throughout his life on Jews and the

Jewish Question. Appropriately, Judaken criticizes how Sartre’s approach to “the Jew” was often poorly informed and involved a figment that sometimes replicated anti-semitic stereotypes. “Anti-antisemitism” in some sense took shape on the same ground as that which it opposed. Sartre negotiated the position of a non-Jew caught between ignorance, the will to think the Jewish Question alongside his other concerns, and an eventual drift toward a philosemitism that was irreverent in its own way.

*Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question* investigates three main fields: Sartre prior to, during, and after the Second World War; the landmark *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*) (written in 1944, published in its entirety in 1946) and its reception over the subsequent fifty years; and Sartre during the postwar era as he continued to deal with the Jewish Question in the contexts of decolonization, Israel, and his late, cursory encounter with Jewish messianism. The opening chapters on the 1930s and during the war are rewarding. We learn that Sartre used the Jewish characters he stitched into his fictional writings to first demonstrate the dynamics of authenticity, alienation, and freedom that would find more formal and abstract expression in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Judaken usefully collapses the black-and-white logic of wartime occupation and resistance to note the “gray zones” of life at that time; subjugation and censorship fed the kinds of ambiguities one finds in Sartre’s thought, in spite of his protestations that writing was a singular form of resistance. The myth of the

resistance–*résistancialisme*—is exposed to withering criticism for the way it homogenized the victims of Nazism (Jewish particularity was disregarded) and repressed the facts of collaboration. In these chapters, Judaken reveals his Derridean leanings: he reads Sartre’s fiction for its “mirror” structures; he dissolves the resistance-collaboration dyad in gray ambiguity—Jews, for Sartre, were caught in “ambivalence” and “undecidability” between sacrifice and subversion; and he criticizes *résistancialisme* for its “double strategy of forgetting” (pp. 33, 40, 74, 110). As in other fields, deconstructive historiography loves to hate binaries and finds them everywhere. Judaken simultaneously praises Sartre for his proto-poststructuralism and chastises him for his residual Enlightenment-revolutionary universalism.

Examining *Réflexions sur la question juive* is essential because this was Sartre’s most thorough intervention on the Question and ultimately his most influential. This gratifying close reading walks us through the book’s four parts, on the dynamics of antisemitism, the dismissal of Republican assimilationism, the “double binds” of Jewish identity, and the revolutionary solution to the problem of antisemitism (a solution that, in its universalizing erasure of difference, consequently undermined Jewish particularity). Although he tends to typecast Christianity and the Enlightenment tradition as homogenous and dangerous (where otherwise he is assiduously cautious about the costs of generalization), Judaken is right to see a Christian hermeneutics at work in the “closed dialectical logic” of *Réflexions*: Sartre repeats antisemitic stereotypes as he submits Jews to a “sacrificial logic” whereby their martyrdom is the price for achieving universal revolution (p. 127). Incapable of ennobling Jews with any positive existence, he offers them a surprisingly anti-existentialist choice: either “scorned” marginality or the bad faith of assimilation (Sartre’s term, p. 138). Obviously, *Réflexions* makes for trying reading today; the notion that Jewish experience is shaped principally by the alienating gaze of the antisemite crumbles before the complexities of Jewish history and life. And yet Judaken astutely points out the audacious novelty of the book. Not only did it extend and culminate Sartre’s prewar reflections on the Jewish Question, but it also anchored the abstract dynamics of *Being and Nothingness* in historical reality. No other gentile French writer confronted the Question so explicitly in 1944, no matter how figurative, limited, and unwittingly antisemitic his effort. Above all, notwithstanding its clear limitations, *Réflexions sur la question juive* played a crucial role for several generations of French intellectuals as a launching pad or, to

borrow a term Judaken uses to describe the place of the Jewish Question in Sartre’s oeuvre as a whole, a “foil.”

This reception is the topic of the book’s final chapter, a hurried tour of over fifty years of Sartre-inspired reflection among Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers. “We are many,” Jean Daniel is quoted as saying, “to have recognized ourselves in the Sartrean text” (p. 240). If French Jewish life itself is not Judaken’s primary concern here (suggestions that “the vast majority of French Jews never rejected the French model of emancipation” and “the Jewish community in France underwent a radical change in the 1960s” remain undeveloped [pp. 125, 214]), his own position on the Question seems to emerge indirectly through the voices of Claude Lanzmann, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Albert Memmi, Pierre Goldmann, Alain Finkielkraut, Shmuel Trigano, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. The key words of this theoretical ventriloquism are “perpetual reflection,” “reflexivity,” “multifaceted,” “different,” “decentered,” “destabilizing,” “exodus,” and “exile” (pp. 261, 266–67, 271, 274, 284). The terms echo the reference above to ambivalence, undecidability, and the deconstruction of stranglehold binaries, and they join similar themes apparent in Sartre’s catch-and-release influence on anticolonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s (Memmi, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Franz Fanon). Particularity, difference, and open-endedness are the values at hand. In a very limited way, Judaken appropriates aspects of the Sartrean vision of Jewish marginality and embraces them, fittingly, on his own terms (or would that observation merely recapture Judaken’s reading within the closed logic of *Réflexions*? ). The situation of an imposed double bind can generate what W. E. B. Dubois called “double consciousness,” which, though burdensome, can also generate perspectives unavailable to more myopic eyes. For there is a difference between a distinctiveness that is freely embraced and one that is commanded by thuggish, smirking, or unconscious racists. And there is a difference between, on the one hand, a universalism based on the right to difference and on solidarity with others searching for autonomy on their own terms and, on the other hand, an imperious universalism that tells others to be the same. Judaken never makes such claims explicit, but one does not have to search very hard to find them.

Sartre engaged with the Jewish Question during the postwar period on three fronts: decolonization, Israel, and Jewish messianism. He and others found parallels in the statuses of Jews and nonwhite peoples, and he began to hold his tongue somewhat in the face of a new incipient subaltern speech. Still, his inability to fully

grasp cultural difference stymied his capacity to fully comprehend negritude.[1] And in spite of Judaken's efforts to salvage Sartre's late interviews with his secretary Benny Lévy, in which the aging philosopher indulges in vague philosemitic vagaries, those texts remain problematic. In response to Simone de Beauvoir's claim that his younger Jewish companion led Sartre astray, Judaken deconstructs the notion of single authorship—two were richer than one. But such a justification seems somewhat beside the point, since Sartre's comments, while demonstrating his capacity to continue to learn and think, strongly depart from the overall thrust of his previous positions on the Jewish Question and especially on Judaism itself. Curiously, the "emancipation of all humanity" seems less troublesome at this point, perhaps because it is qualified by messianic hope and Levinasian responsibility (p. 237).

Even though I have not done justice to Judaken's meticulous account of anticolonial ferment and Sartre's final years, it is the philosopher's positions on Israel that merit special mention. We learn that already in *Réflexions* Sartre had posited a third alternative beyond scorned marginality and assimilated bad faith; namely, "the creation of a Jewish nation possessing its own soil and autonomy ... a Jewish national community" (Sartre, p. 186). He recognized the familiar tension between Diaspora and territorial nation-state. Indeed, Judaken suggests that Sartre's famous 1966 definition of the intel-

lectual as a "torn consciousness" who "lives in tension" related productively to his awareness of Jewish and non-white double consciousness (p. 189). In comments on the Israeli-Arab conflict in 1965–66 and in a visit to the Middle East in early 1967, Sartre, the paragon of the *intellectuel engagé*, took a somewhat uncharacteristic (though thanks to Judaken, not incomprehensible) stance of "neutrality" and "impartiality" (p. 191). He declared himself not competent to judge a situation whose complexity made easy commitments difficult and a conflict whose parties each had legitimate grievances. This stance of non-competence is not without its own problems. However, it foregrounds a basic theme of *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question* that hovers over the book without being explicitly thematized: the story of a non-Jew thinking the Question. Generally oblivious to Judaism and Jewish culture, indirectly formulating an "antifoundationalist and antiessentialist" approach to the Question on the margins of his thought, Sartre's reflections have nevertheless proved their value to those who have responded to, built on, and found a worthy adversary in them (p. 283). The Sartrean gaze, though, was never fully returned by the Jewish mirror that was largely his own creation.

#### Note

[1]. See also Jonathan Judaken, ed., *Race after Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

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