



Pierre Birnbaum. *Jewish Destinies: Citizenship, State and Community in Modern France.* Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Hill & Wang, 2000. vii + 324 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-6101-3.

Reviewed by Jonathan Judaken (Department of History, University of Memphis)
Published on H-Antisemitism (February, 2001)



French-Jewish 'Emancipation' and its Discontents

French-Jewish 'Emancipation' and its Discontents

'Let us be grateful to assimilation. If at the same time, we oppose it, it is because this ' withdrawal into the self' which is essential to us, and which is so often disparaged, is not the symptom of an outmoded phase of existence, but reveals a ' beyond' to universalism.' –Emmanuel Levinas'

The vise gradually tightened. The first stage was the roundup of a thousand prominent Jews in December 1941. One of my uncles was in that group. He and most of the others never returned from deportation. That roundup proved conclusively that Nazis were going to destroy the Jews, whatever their origin. Until then—not to their credit or foresightedness, it must be said—French Jews thought they would be treated differently from foreign Jews. That day, they realized that they shared a common destiny. This important lesson influenced the French Jewish community in the postwar years. They realized that they shared a common destiny whatever their background. That explains, I believe, the warm, generous welcome extended to the Jews from France's former colonies.' –Annie Kriegel

These two epigraphs encapsulate the historical, political and sociological questions raised in this excellent translation of Pierre Birnbaum's tour de force, *Destins juifs: De la Revolution francaise a Carpentras* (1995). *Jewish Destinies* is an outstanding overview of key debates and personalities that have shaped the history of Jews in modern France. Birnbaum, a Professor at the University

of Paris I (Pantheon-Sorbonne) and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris, a leading political sociologist, and one of France's most eminent scholars of the political history of Jews in France, has written close to twenty books, several of which have appeared in English. Unlike Paula Hyman's masterful social history of *The Jews of Modern France* (1998), which offers a general historical survey, Birnbaum's book focuses on how the conflicts faced by the contemporary Jewish community between universality and particularity, the national community and individuality, and religiosity and secularism were shaped by France's distinct path through the modern period.

The text is divided into three parts with twelve chapters framed by an introduction and conclusion, with a preface for American and English readers that sketches the differences between the constructions of citizenship, state and community in France, the United States and Great Britain. An ' Afterword' discusses events in the French-Jewish community since the book's French publication. Even for readers familiar with Birnbaum's other work, his discussions of the 'Different Roads to Emancipation' (Part I) and 'The Scope of the Opposition' (Part II) are nevertheless intriguing to revisit here because they are framed by the concerns he raises most directly in Part III, ' The Unknown Present.' This section is richly informed by the perspective of the *longue duree*, which Birnbaum concludes is sorely missing from much of the discussion in France today (p. 277). Since his book is less a survey than a tableau that allows Birnbaum to intervene in the major historiographical debates of mod-

ern French-Jewish history, I will discuss each chapter to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of what constitutes the unifying leitmotif of this work, Birnbaum's own defense of French Republicanism. His apologia is muted by his deep understanding of the problems of the Republican model, but it nevertheless fails to go beyond reaffirming the promises of Franco-Judaism because of the dangers he identifies with a different path.

Birnbaum's first chapter lays out the debates on citizenship, state and community in the Revolutionary period. The French conception of citizenship depends upon a sharp dichotomy of the public and private spheres. Birnbaum discusses these as 'the civic,' which 'emphasized the nation and its glory,' and the 'civil,' which was characterized by a withdrawal into the private realm, in this instance [by] a particular religious community' (p. 20). He contends that three key factors determined how the state adjudicated the demarcation between the public and the private: (1) the right to vote; (2) access to the civil service and eventually to the machinery of government; and (3) the compatibility of communal structures with citizenship and the structures of the nation-state (p. 19).

On the basis of these principal issues, Birnbaum revisits the historical debates of the Revolution that eventually led to Jewish emancipation on September 27, 1791, showing clearly that the price of Jewish emancipation was cultural integration. Therefore, taking the civic oath, which conferred the right to vote and participate in civic life, meant limiting Judaism and Jewishness to the private sphere and that citizenship would be in conflict with communal affiliation. This tension was the cost of the Franco-Jewish social contract that remained unchallenged until the Dreyfus Affair and that was torn asunder by the Vichy betrayal of the Jewish 'fous de la Republique' [zealots for the Republic] (p. 4).

The limits of the model of French citizenship as the pathway to emancipation were best represented by Abbe Gregoire, the outstanding spokesman for Jewish emancipation, since in diagnosing the degeneration of the Jewish people, Gregoire 'the emancipator, and Edouard Drumont, the indefatigable antisemite, were virtually identical' (p. 17). The crucial difference was, of course, that for Gregoire, while Judaism was inherently degenerate, Jews were not. He thought that through the ineluctable effects of an education steeped in French culture, Judaism's deleterious effects could be overcome leading ultimately from Jewish assimilation to conversion.

Birnbaum's second chapter, 'Responding to the Rev-

olution,' retraces the different positions of the two major Jewish communities in France in the Revolutionary period: the Sephardic and more integrated Jews of southwestern France and the Ashkenazic and largely religiously observant Jews of Alsace-Lorraine and Metz. In assessing how the differences in their positions were negotiated in the course of the Revolution, he suggests that there was a paradoxical effect to the centralization of the state and the universal model of citizenship to which Jews would have to adhere as the cost for their normative integration into French society.

In doing so, Birnbaum lays out three major interpretations of the consequences of the Revolution for French Jewry. The first is that of North American historians, most prominently Michael Marrus and Paula Hyman, who Birnbaum claims ultimately denigrate the Franco-Judaism that emerged from the Revolution because it turned Jews into *Israelites*, ultimately excluding Jewish communal solidarity and a distinctive Jewish historical consciousness. Birnbaum reduces the complexity and the historical nuances of these leading American historians of French Jewry whose critical perspective on Franco-Judaism, in my opinion, certainly seems warranted by the teleology of events that each narrates (i.e. the Dreyfus Affair and Vichy). The second interpretation, advanced most prominently by Phyllis Cohen Albert, argues that while Jews did embrace the Republic as universal citizens, they still maintained their social ties and some cultural traditions so that communal solidarity continued to survive. The third position, which Birnbaum himself advocates, is Michael Graetz's provocative argument that 'the French Revolution promoted centralization not just of French society but also of the Jewish community, which emerged from the Revolution stronger and more unified than ever' (p. 33-34). Birnbaum closes the chapter by discussing the reforms undertaken by Napoleon to establish the state-controlled Central Consistory and the subsidiary consistories in the provinces that were intended to encourage assimilation. Following the logic of Graetz's argument, he asserts that 'the existence of a powerful central Jewish organization endowed with certain powers of enforcement unified the many isolated Jewish communities throughout France and helped them survive. Once again, the logic of the strong state produced unexpected results and ultimately strengthened the bond between Jews and the state' (p. 44).

Birnbaum's third chapter, 'From Court Jews to State Jews' succinctly covers the whole of the nineteenth century via an analysis of the relationship between Jews, the growth of the modern French state, and industrial and

capital development. The chapter is framed by cautionary remarks about the pitfalls of both Hannah Arendt's and Werner Sombart's analyses. Birnbaum argues that while exceptional Jews like the Rothschilds had a long history as 'court Jews,' financing some of the state's affairs and handling some of the finances of princes and aristocrats, in France, Jews played a minor role in the development of banking and industry. Rather than captains of industry or even leaders of financial capitalism, the evidence of the success of French integration was the prominence of 'state Jews' – 'men who would owe their careers to the ultimate victory of the universalistic principles laid down by the French Revolution' (p. 60).

While there certainly was social mobility and cultural integration of Jews in the first half of the nineteenth century, by mid-century, there was still little evidence of Jewish emancipation in the upper levels of government and the civil service. This changed dramatically with the advent of the Third Republic when Jews became highly visible as 'state Jews.' The Third Republic (1870-1940) saw a profound transformation of the Jewish community demographically, geographically, culturally, socially and politically, especially with the influx of Eastern European Jews after the pogroms in Russia beginning in the 1880s, which also fundamentally altered French antisemitism (p. 58). Birnbaum's understanding of this new antisemitism ultimately parallels Arendt's by asserting that precisely those groups who wanted to oppose the state often targeted 'state Jews' as the ultimate representatives of what was pernicious, decadent, and degenerate about Republican France.

Birnbaum's fourth chapter, 'The Love of Learning: Sociologists and Their Roots' is focused on the response of the developing discipline of sociology to the crisis of the Dreyfus Affair. Emile Durkheim constitutes Birnbaum's central case study. Since he was 'the thoroughly assimilated son of a rabbi, the founder of positivist sociology, an advocate of republican secularism, and a dedicated patriot who defended Dreyfus in the name of the ideals of 1789' (p. 92), Durkheim's life and thought represent precisely the competing pressures that Birnbaum seeks to explore. As a result of his courageous interventions on behalf of persecuted Jews during and after the Dreyfus Affair, Durkheim was vilified by the nationalist and antisemitic right. Like many assimilated Jews (*Israelites*), therefore, Durkheim was haunted by the fear that he would be too closely associated with his Jewishness. Birnbaum shows by quoting from some of Durkheim's unpublished letters that some of his attitudes 'came close to Jewish self-hatred,' (p. 96) for ex-

ample when he suggested that his support of Russian immigrants in 1916 had led to his becoming 'so 'Jewified'. If this thing continues, I will become exotic Judaism's adviser and tutor' (p. 92).

Birnbaum also tentatively explores how the historical tensions that crystallized in the Dreyfus Affair impacted the shifts in Durkheim's thought. At the heart of these shifts, Durkheim's notion of *anomie* gained central significance. Durkheim suggested that a crucial dilemma lay at the heart of modernity: that modern industrialization and secularization, which enabled the growth of individualism and rationalism, simultaneously led to the collapse of traditional communal norms, values and social bonds. The paradox is that many people therefore experienced the liberation of modern life as filled with anxiety, disintegration, disappointed expectations, and a disoriented system of values. Since his theoretical emphasis is on the strong state/weak state dichotomy, and perhaps because his advocacy of Republicanism mirrors Durkheim's, Birnbaum does not pursue the provocative and contextually specific possibility of conceptualizing French antisemitism as the result of modern French anomie.

Birnbaum's fifth chapter examines 'The Drumont Paradigm' as the pattern that contains the various threads of antisemitism in France. While Drumont is the key figure in every discussion of French antisemitism, Birnbaum's succinct discussion is excellent in disentangling the various strands that tie together Drumont's discourse. The key motif of Drumont's obsession was that Jews and Judaism were the source of France's decay and decadence in the modern period. Drumont's diagnosis of this decadence is characteristic of antisemitism in the modern period (continuing today) in his employment of the props of objectivity and scholarly norms. Drumont studiously incorporated concepts and 'evidence' from the elitist sociology of Gustave Le Bon and that of Gabriel Tarde and legitimized his work by what Robert Nye calls 'the medical concept of national decline.' This includes the theories of neuropathology developed by Charcot, of criminology elaborated by Lombroso, and of degeneration advanced by Morel. Drumont also linked the notion of the *degenere* [degenerate] to Barres's characterization of the *deracine* [uprooted] thus becoming the exponent of a new, and specifically French, scientific racism.

Having outlined the key discursive elements in antisemitic rhetoric, in Chapter six, 'The Era of Leagues,' Birnbaum sketches the major groups that constituted the radical right from 1870-1914, unified behind the banner

of antisemitism (p. 120). In the midst of the Dreyfus Affair, the Action Française unified the fragmented and unstable leagues increasingly 'around antisemitism as the defining characteristic of a new French Catholic community, which would otherwise have been deeply divided' (p. 127).

Birnbaum's analysis of the period of the Dreyfus Affair, misses the mark, however, when he insists that 'the nationalist public sphere did not coincide with the republican one' (p. 139). Venita Datta's *Birth of a National Icon* (1999), which builds on the work of several other scholars, shows that there were significant overlaps between the nationalist discourse of Republicans and the Right as they waged a polemic over *la nation and la patrie*. These concepts converged in their elitism, in their defense of heroism and male codes of honor, in their use of organic metaphors, and in the extent to which Jewish difference was excluded from their conceptions of the nation.

Chapters 7 and 8 form a couplet in which Birnbaum examines the sociological distinction between the theory of a strong state versus a weak state by reinterpreting the Franco-French conflicts of the fin de siècle in terms of institutional conflicts within the state, showing ultimately that 'in contrast to the predictions of the strong-state model, outside ideological conflicts did find echoes inside the councils of government' (p. 143). He shows that despite the Republican rhetoric, antisemitism did have an impact on the careers of 'state Jews,' focusing primarily on the legal and prefectural corps in Chapter 7 and the military in Chapter 8.

Birnbaum closes Part II with an exceptionally important discussion comparing and contrasting 'Jews, Italians, and Arabs: Public Violence and Private Violence' from the fin de siècle to the present. The violence against all of these groups has taken place against the rise of nationalism, economic competition, and crisis. However, Birnbaum argues that xenophobic clashes (i.e. directed against immigrants as opposed to citizens), from brawls to riots, have systematically involved 'private' violence that has led to physical attacks and numerous murders. On the other hand, he argues that physical violence against Jews is rare (with the notable exception of the pogroms against Jews in Algeria at the zenith of the Dreyfus Affair), although violence against property, and threats, insults, tracts, pamphlets and graffiti are prevalent. He argues, therefore, that antisemitism in France is largely symbolic (p. 188) and that public manifestations of antisemitism by extremist movements are the result of their determination 'to redefine France's national iden-

tity in terms of certain exclusionary cultural and ethnic criteria' (p. 186).

Birnbaum contrasts anti-Italian incidents in the period between 1867-1893 and the racist violence against North Africans in France today with antisemitic demonstrations along geographic, social and religious axes. He convincingly argues that 'anti-Jewish prejudices are less likely to be acted on in France, whereas the inhibitions against acting out racist prejudices are far less powerful' (p. 187). In short, Birnbaum maintains that those most victimized by exclusionary politics, which eventually included all Jews during the Vichy period, are those who are categorically defined outside the national community. A point that is not stressed by Birnbaum, however, is that the Jewish body within the larger body politic was and remains a crucial and vexed site in determining the borderline for inclusion and exclusion from the French nation.

In Part III, Birnbaum focuses squarely on 'The Unknown Present.' The overriding concern here is to consider the post-1945 stresses resulting from determined efforts to reshape the French Jewish community and the expansion of its mediating functions between Jewish citizens and the state.

In Chapter Ten, 'On Secularism' Birnbaum addresses the rejection by different groups, including some within the diverse Jewish community, of 'the idea of unity implicit in the revolutionary tradition of 1789, which recognizes only identical citizens subscribing to the same principles of rationality and stripped of their distinguishing characteristics so as to participate in the public sphere in the universalistic mode' (p. 205). In this and subsequent chapters, he points to several intertwined factors contributing to the reexamination of the Republican model of citizenship: (1) the decentralization of the state, especially in economic matters and the rise of 'free market liberalism'; (2) diminished influence of institutions of republican socialization, especially public schools, but also the military; (3) decline of 'universalistic' ideologies of political emancipation, especially Marxism; (4) the revisionist and post-revisionist interpretations of the French Revolution; (5) the rebirth of regional sensibilities; (6) decolonization and the return of many French citizens, including North African Jews and Muslims to the metropole; and (7) Europeanization and France's role in the European Union.

Birnbaum's focus in Chapter Ten is on public education since this has proven to be a key by which Jews "joined modern society" (p. 194), which for him means

the Jewish path to cultural integration and upward social mobility. He traces the dramatic rise in choosing private, often religiously inclined schools, by Jews, Catholics and Muslims, which he sets against the backdrop of the historical debates on the secularization of education from the mid-nineteenth century and the recent revival of religion in France.

He stresses, in particular, the role of Lubavich communities in this return to Jewish traditions, a role that Birnbaum seems to find rather disconcerting since the 'Lubavitchers have imported from the United States pressure-group tactics alien to French Jacobin tradition. They have made the Jewish community visible in a new way, quite different from the dialogue that used to be carried on between the state and citizens of various confessions' (p. 204). In addition, Birnbaum stresses that their 'strict traditional codes of behavior are constantly inculcated in all students. The study of French, on the other hand, is virtually 'clandestine' and 'since the Lubavitchers have little interest in French political traditions per se, they feel no compunctions about adopting such a position, at odds though it may be with traditional Franco-Judaism' (p. 205).

Birnbaum's treatment of 'the Lubavichers' and of orthodoxy in general is troubling, since he discusses the constituent orthodox groups in an undifferentiated fashion and flirts dangerously with reiterating the *Israelite* castigation of Eastern European Jewry. He projects onto this particular Hasidic group much of what he finds disconcerting in the Jewish community writ large today: a questioning of the Republican social contract, affirmation of 'American' models of multiculturalism and the 'right to be different,' a greater visibility of Jews and their Judaism in the public sphere, and a resurgence of spiritual values and religiously inspired norms that for him are the antithesis of rational, secular, modern and 'universal' values.

Chapter Eleven, 'Identity and Public Space' continues the discussion begun in the previous chapter by tracing the major events that have led to a significant reorientation of 'Franco-Judaism.' The Franco-Jewish synthesis was radically ruptured when both the politicians and the bureaucrats of *l'etat Francais* under Vichy betrayed the Jews. Susan Zuccotti has shown that the relatively high percentage of Jews who survived in France did so because of luck, ingenuity, and help from many courageous members of French society. Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton also show that the murder of the approximately 75,000 Jews during World War II was significantly

connected to the indigenous policies of the Vichy government. According to Birnbaum, the experience of depending upon the assistance of French individuals rather than the state has led Jews in the postwar era to raise questions about state-centered notions of citizenship and influenced the establishment of distinct organizations to represent them in their relations with the state, for example the *Comite Representatif des Institutions Juives en France* (CRIF), and the *Fonds Social Juif Unifie* (FSJU), formed in 1944 and 1949, respectively. The arrival of large numbers of North African Jews in the wake of decolonization contributed to the development of a more variegated and visibly distinctive Jewish community.

If Vichy marked the point of rupture in the Franco-Jewish synthesis, then a series of events have continued to reorient the relationship between Jewish citizens and the state in the post-war period. These include the response of the French state to the Arab-Israeli conflict, encapsulated in de Gaulle's remark that the Jews were 'an elite people, sure of themselves and domineering,' and the subsequently 'pro-Arab tilt' (p. 218) on conflicts in the Middle East; a series of antisemitic events in the 1980s; and most dramatically, the Carpentras Affair, which he discusses in Chapter 12, 'Carpentras, or the Toppling of Clermont-Tonnerre.'

Birnbaum shows that Carpentras was far from an isolated assault, recounting an almost 'endless, albeit incomplete, list of similar antisemitic attacks preceding the one at Carpentras' (pp. 236-39). His focus in evaluating the significance of the affair is on how politicians, the public and the press responded. This response, Birnbaum contends, consolidated 'the communitarization of the French Jews' (p. 231), by which he means the process whereby Jews are consistently identified or reified as a separate community within the national community. He shows that both Francois Mitterand and Jacques Chirac affirmed their solidarity with "the Jewish community of France' (p. 232), as did groups like SOS-Racisme, one of the leading groups advocating 'the right to be different.' This was reinforced by the press who were 'only too eager to dwell on the distinctive culture and traditions of the 'Jewish community' (p. 233).

An overarching concern for Birnbaum is how Jewish 'communitarization' figured in the twentieth-century fin de siecle that saw the reemergence of the National Front, which since the eighties has had considerable success, especially in municipal elections, by building an effective grass roots political organization and reworking the exclusionary integral nationalism of the extreme right.

Birnbaum's solutions for how to respond to this threat, especially compounded by a significant Muslim North African minority in France, are unsatisfying.

Axiomatic for Birnbaum is his claim that the 'challenge to the universalist principle of 'one culture for all' has 'the unintended consequence of encouraging the 'differentialist' racism of Jean-Marie Le Pen's radical-right National Front' (pp. 220-21). The philosophical, ethical and political issues here are complicated. However, Birnbaum's concern that asserting '*la droite a la difference*' facilitates efforts 'to cast Jews and Muslims as 'anti-France' (p. 226) depends upon his own failure to think through a politics of cultural difference that neither reiterates the defects of universalism nor those of American multiculturalism.

While aware that a key factor in the scapegoating of Jews and Arabs is that 'both groups are portrayed as unified and homogenous' (p. 226), Birnbaum does not acknowledge that universalism ultimately depends upon the exclusion of difference and particularity and an appeal to sameness, which is precisely what underpins the essentialism at the heart of both orientalism and antisemitism. Birnbaum's reaffirmation of universalism, even when it takes the form of Mirabeau's liberal *Girondiste* tolerance, still falls short of the affirmation of Jewish difference asserted by the Alsatian Jews in the Revolutionary period and echoed by some Jews today who maintain that their Jewish communal traditions contribute to the role they can play as French citizens.

Symptomatic in this regard is Birnbaum's analysis of a provocative and widely discussed article by Paul Yonnet, 'Machine Carpentras' who argued that the 'self-

communitarization of the Jews' was 'Petainism in reverse,' that 'Jews were voluntarily ostracizing themselves, refusing to marry non-Jews, deliberately segregating themselves in order to protect their purity and that this 'implied a kind of 'racist' antiracism,' to which the response was 'xenophobic 'antiracist' racism' concerned with avoiding a 'dissolution of national identity' (p. 247). Birnbaum clearly condemns 'Yonnet's offensively one-sided arguments about Carpentras' (p. 250), asserting that '... [they are] utterly devoid of compassion for the fears of French Jews and ... [show] no sign of comprehending their reactions,' adding for good measure that 'despite Yonnet's hostility to the National Front, his views have been most warmly received on that end of the political spectrum' (p. 248). Yet Birnbaum is more concerned with attempting to gauge the degree to which French Jews have indeed 'embraced the politics of communitarization' (p. 248) than he is with demolishing the underlying assumptions of Yonnet's argument because he, too, sees communitarization as a serious problem and because ultimately he cannot visualize another solution to 'the Jewish Question' beyond the universalist Republican model. Neither his 'Afterword' nor his 'Conclusion' offers any escape from the quagmires that he outlines historically. Birnbaum therefore ends this troubled and thought-provoking work rather plaintively: 'Carpentras ultimately proves that, for Jews at any rate, it is no small feat to negotiate the arduous path between citizenship and community, assimilation and identity' (p. 251).

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-antisemitism>

Citation: Jonathan Judaken. Review of Birnbaum, Pierre, *Jewish Destinies: Citizenship, State and Community in Modern France*. H-Antisemitism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4903>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.