

**Sarah Hammerschlag.** *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. x + 298 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-31511-9; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-31512-6.



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## Refiguring Jewishness in Postmodern Thought

Impressive in its sweep both philosophically and historically, Sarah Hammerschlag's book is an account of the contradictory and changing ways in which French thinkers have used the figure of the Jew to construct social and political philosophies. In this book we follow a trail leading from Maurice Barrès through Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, touching on its way the Dreyfus affair, the dilemmas of nationalism, Vichy France, and May 1968, with references to the veil debates of today, all united by a recurring questioning of what it means to be an intellectual. Hammerschlag argues that the focus on and valorization of Jewishness by postwar French intellectuals must be read as a self-conscious engagement with a literary trope. Understood as such, the figure of the Jew becomes the centerpiece of postmodern intellectual engagement, which avoids the pitfalls of identity politics by recognizing that every claim to represent a political or social group is also a betrayal.

While the figural Jew became a mainstay of radical leftist thought after World War II, Hammerschlag traces

its origins back to the reactionary and racist politics of the late nineteenth century. In debates over the French State and its revolutionary heritage, Barrès chose Jews as the focal point of his attack on the "rootlessness" of the republican system. Nevertheless, Barrès's string of identifications Jew=1789=intellectual=rootlessness also provided the means to recuperate the figure of the Jew in later debates. Despite opposing political positions, Barrès's racialized language came to inform such critics of anti-Semitism as Bernard Lazare and Charles Péguy, who used it to oppose the assimilationist model of French republicanism.

It was only in the postwar period, according to Hammerschlag, that rootlessness itself came to be valorized. Sartre's central contribution to Hammerschlag's narrative was the way in which he turned Barrès's idea of rootlessness against the racialized thinking of which it had been a part. Hammerschlag embraces the suggestion that Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) recapitulated anti-Semitic stereotypes. But she suggests that this was, at least at some level, a conscious appropriation of

the figure that allowed him to open up a new political space beyond the categories that had previously structured French politics. Sartre rejected the determining power of a racial essence, but did not thereby come to embrace republican universalism, a position attacked in *Anti-Semite and Jew* in the character of the democrat.

For Sartre then, the rootless Jew manifested a nonessential particularity, and for this reason was exemplary of the human condition. Like the Jew we are all cast into a particular role, without that role determining our essence. The politics inherent in this typification of the Jew become clearer in Sartre's later writings. Sartre used the idea of a non-territorially based unity demonstrated by "Jewish History" to argue against a Marxist politics and promote a messianism that kept open a gap between the is and the ought (p. 107). The trouble about Sartre's reading, according to Hammerschlag, is that he was neither explicit nor consistent in this figural reading of the Jew, and at certain moments he seemed to use "Jewish" as a descriptive category, rather than a trope.

Levinas moved on from Sartre by giving uprootedness a moral dimension. As part of his criticism of Martin Heidegger's thought and politics, Levinas conceived of Judaism as the necessary antidote to Western philosophy, which had been complicit with the forces leading up to the Second World War and the Holocaust; more than just a tradition, Judaism became for Levinas a universal ethical idea. But there remained in Levinas's thought a tension between the Jews as a people and the figure of the Jew, something that Hammerschlag sees in its most pointed form in Levinas's views on Zionism. She foregrounds the "inevitable conflict and hypocrisy that result from Levinas's attempts to hold together the real historical people of Israel with the ideal and universalizable idea of Israel" (p. 161).

Blanchot, for Hammerschlag, was the first to address the figural character of "the Jew" directly, using his conception of literature (later writing) to disrupt those moments in Levinas's thought when he seemed to lapse into unreflective particularity or to embrace too uncritically Judaism's universalizing function. It was only with Derrida, however, in Hammerschlag's presentation, that we have the most developed idea of the figural Jew. Derrida took his lead from the act of circumcision. Circumcision was, he argued, exemplary of the processes of community formation, and for this reason it could be transformed figurally into a universal. But as Derrida empha-

sized, this universalization only makes sense insofar as it recalls the particular. Circumcision can only stand in for all forms of community making because it recalls the concrete act by which the Mohel performs the *brit milah*. Further because this concrete act marks the boundaries of a community, the figure of circumcision welcomes and encloses simultaneously. In a parallel fashion, Derrida deployed a literary mode, which intensifies Jewish rootlessness to open it up to a universal while never forgetting the particularity of its idiom. This constant contamination of the universal with the particular was crucial for Derrida because it prevented political complacency. As Hammerschlag concludes, "what is ultimately at issue here for Derrida is the possibility of an ethics or a politics that never claims a good conscience for itself" (p. 246).

Hammerschlag has constructed an intricate and compelling narrative in *The Figural Jew*, but there remain moments where one might question her account. In particular, for a book that challenges national narratives, *The Figural Jew* remains perhaps too focused on France. Hammerschlag makes a convincing argument about the genealogy of this figure of the Jew back to the anti-Semitic discourse at the time of the Dreyfus affair, but at times she seems to downplay a German element to the history. In the chant with which she opens the book, the 68ers declared that they were German as well as Jews, and, as Hammerschlag notes on several occasions, the story draws on the German context: Levinas often made reference to this different tradition of anti-Semitism, and for all the postwar thinkers, Georg Hegel and his exclusion of the Jews from the history of *Geist* were more prominent than Barrès. Because she discusses French philosophers who were deeply influenced by German phenomenology, Hammerschlag might have spent a little more time working out the relationship between the two national traditions to bolster her argument about the priority of the French.

This criticism is, however, minor in light of Hammerschlag's achievement here. Her book takes the "figural Jew" as its guiding thread, but in her careful construction of the influences on and debates between Sartre, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida, Hammerschlag weaves a more expansive tapestry. In *The Figural Jew*, Hammerschlag teaches us new ways to read the intellectual history of postwar France and helps us appreciate the complex articulations of philosophy, politics, and literature that make up postmodern thought.

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