



Romanticizing Difference

Identities in Transformation after World War I

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This special issue explores the theme of essentialist discourses about languages, human collectivities, and human diversity during the interwar years, outside of explicitly racist or antisemitic perspectives. It grew out of a conference that Cécile Mathieu and I organized at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne in October 2013. Our original inspiration came from the discovery of thematic overlap in our research on the 1920s in our two quite disparate fields of history and linguistics. In particular, we were both struck by the contrast between contemporary associations of essentialized representations of human collectivities and practices of oppression, discrimination, and genocide, and the prevalence of these kinds of discourses across the political and ideological spectrums in the pre–World War II era.

In our post-Holocaust and postcolonial world, progressive politics and an understanding of differences between human collectivities rooted in unchangeable biological realities do not marry well together. In an earlier period, in which theorizing about human difference was not associated with genocide and European colonialist domination was assumed by all but a few outliers to be the natural and rightful order of things, the borders between universalism, humanism, romanticism, and racism were much messier and intertwined. This volume brings together researchers in history, linguistics, and literary studies to reflect on these issues in order to explore the varied ways in which human difference was conceived of in the interwar years. We particularly emphasize the impact of World War I and the ideological and political shifts of the 1920s.

World War I overturned existing systems of beliefs and values in the Western world, highlighting a growing cultural malaise. While belligerent nationalist discourses were undeniably prominent during this period, other discourses, founded on new hopes and dreams, were rooted in the desire to promote both mutual coexistence and a respect for difference. The fall of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires permitted a dozen small nations to make their dream of self-determination come true, and the creation of the League of Nations in 1920 was a part of this dream of international cooperation and harmony within a nationalist framework. Although this



idealistic or even utopian internationalism drew on Enlightenment values, it reoriented that ideology. Rather than extolling universal citizenship, many progressive thinkers now celebrated national and ethnic particularisms. The founders of the Cité internationale universitaire, in 1925, for example, saw their project as part of a larger “struggle against the great danger that threatens civilization: people’s lack of understanding of one another.”¹

In this spirit, the Rotary International, a professional businessmen’s club, decided to add a sixth objective to its association in 1921: “To encourage and foster the advancement of understanding, good will and international peace through a world fellowship of business and professional men, united in the ideal of service.”²

This predilection for what one might call “multiculturalism” today was often accompanied by romantic imaginings of human collectivities strongly informed by racial determinism. References to “the Jewish soul,” “the French genius,” or “the English spirit,” for example, were prevalent in both popular discourse and also literary and scientific scholarship as explanatory models of individual human personalities during this period. Importantly, these representations could be invoked for many different political or ideological ends.

In the introduction to *Empire’s Children: Race, Filiation and Citizenship in the French Colonies*, Emmanuelle Saada notes her surprise in discovering a reference to “the French race” in a 1928 decree in the *Journal officiel de la République française*. Her surprise, which stemmed from discovering the word “race” as a legal category over a decade before the Vichy regime, was further compounded because the intention of this law was not “the exclusion of racialized others” but rather the inclusion of individuals within the “community of citizens” on the ground of belonging to a specific race—namely, “the French race.” French colonial policy, Saada argues, cannot be simply understood as a hypocritical mirror to the Republican project of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” Rather, her study highlights the instability of categories such as “French,” “citizen,” and “race” in the interwar years, both in the colonies and metropolitan France.³ My own book, *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth-Century France*, similarly reveals the importance of looking beyond contemporary associations between essentialized understandings of human collectivities and racist agendas in order to understand how people in the pre–World War II era thought about these issues on their own terms.⁴

The 1920s saw the burgeoning of Jewish associational life and the Jewish press in France, as well as the emergence of a modern Jewish literature in the French language. During this period, French Jews began to question the narrowly religious definition of Judaism that had emerged in the post-Revolutionary era and to embrace openly the complexity of Jewish identity in the modern world. This phenomenon, which grew out of cultural, political, and demographic shifts that began in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, was bolstered by a general sentiment that antisemitism was in decline. Indeed,

many Jewish commentators in the 1920s expressed confidence that Jews as a group had come to be respected as an integral part of the French nation. Writer and publicist Pierre Paraf (1893–1989) captured this mood in a 1928 article for the *Revue littéraire juive*. Recalling World War I as “a crucible where the French and Jewish souls melted together,” Paraf warned his fellow Jews against turning in on themselves defensively. To the contrary, he suggested, “we must, in the name of respect for all confessions, draw as many sympathizers toward us as possible.”⁵ As Paraf’s comments suggest, many French Jews in the 1920s felt free to challenge an assimilationist model of identity precisely because they felt that the Jews’ place in French society was secure.

But what was the language that Jews used during this era to speak about their Jewishness? How did they imagine their Jewishness outside of a religious context? In order to better understand this phenomenon, I will now present several examples of discourses of identity that we find among French Jews in the 1920s, which demonstrate how they inserted themselves into cultural imaginaries of the day replete with romanticized, exoticized, often essentialized ideas about human collectivities.

At the inaugural ceremony of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925, the writer Jean-Richard Bloch described the “oriental” landscape of the university and the “occidental” origins of the participants, representatives of “science and humanism,” as a paradox: “What is this absurd dream, to implant Western science, Western thinking on Mount Scopus?” he asked rhetorically.⁶ His response, which drew on the ideas of the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and the French Jewish orientalist scholar Sylvain Lévi, was that only the Jews were capable of realizing this “absurd dream” because they had retained an oriental soul, while assimilating outwardly to the West. For Bloch the Jews’ “oriental soul” is the source of their contribution to Western civilization: “Europe offered the Jew liberty, equality, and dignity,” he declared, and now it was the time to return the favor; to fulfill the Jewish mission of reconciliation between East and West. If the Jew retains his essential nature, Bloch concluded, he would be “not only a witness to the drama of the modern soul, but a mediator of the European consciousness.”⁷

Josué Jéhouda’s two-volume novel *La tragedie d’Israel* also portrays a romanticized imaginary of Jewish difference rooted in biological determinism. Jéhouda, himself an immigrant from the Ukraine raised in a Hasidic family, tells the story of David, the son of poor, pious immigrants, who breaks away and consecrates himself to material gain. “Like all those of his generation,” Jéhouda explains, “David ardently aspired to an individual existence.”⁸ Ultimately, however, he finds that this is impossible. David falls ill and recognizes the error of his ways, leading him to renew his connection to Judaism and marry a pious young woman who is the daughter of a rabbi. The primary message of the *La tragedie d’Israel* is that it is impossible—both from a mental and a physical point of view—to reject one’s roots: David’s illness, we learn, stems from the fact that he has turned his back on Judaism. The only way

to cure his illness, Jéhouda explains, is to “unlock the spiritual force that is in each of us.” Both the quest for material gain and a belief in pure science are flawed ideologies because they do not take into account the needs of the soul, which is in fact the driving force of human existence. Importantly, however, this spirituality is necessarily linked to one’s ancestral heritage: “It is only when a Jew becomes a Jew that he can become completely universal. Each individual must have his spiritual home.”⁹ For Jéhouda, as for Bloch, Jewishness is not a set of religious beliefs that individuals have the power either to embrace or to cast aside, but rather an inherited collective identity that determines one’s values and behavior irrespective of individual will.

For Bloch and Jéhouda, the maintenance of Jewish particularism is perfectly compatible with the embrace of universalist values. In fact, it is only by valuing and preserving their difference that Jews can truly become full participants in the larger society. For other writers and publicists of the day, however, Jewish difference inevitably condemns the Jew to the status of eternal outsider. This view is strongly conveyed in fiction dealing with intermarriage and conversion. Characters in Jewish fiction in the 1920s often feel torn between embracing and rejecting their Jewish heritage precisely because they experience their Jewishness as an all-encompassing primal force over which they have little control.

Léo Poldès’s 1928 play *L’eternel ghetto* begins with the dramatic revelation that Max, the son of a pious Jew and Zionist leader, has converted to Catholicism in order to marry Jeanne, a Christian. Max goes beyond his religious conversion to become an anti-Jewish zealot. He formally denounces Zionism, befriends a leader of the antisemitic movement, and denies all sense of solidarity with the Jewish people. Ultimately, however, Max is unable to pursue this assimilatory project. His decision to break his engagement and immigrate to Palestine with his family comes after his fiancée hurls antisemitic epithets at him during an argument. Ultimately, however, it is his own sense of the impossibility of bridging the gap between the French and Jewish worlds that leads him to abandon the engagement. “I love you, Jeanne,” he declares, “but I am not alone. You are not alone. There is around us and between us the invisible presence of our fathers, our grandfathers, and our ancestors. It weighs upon us. It is inscribed in our flesh and in our blood.” She sadly agrees, and the couple parts for good.¹⁰

In his 1930 novel *Solal*, Albert Cohen similarly presents a failed intermarriage between Jew and Gentile. Solal is the novel’s Greek Jewish protagonist, who obtains a position as a minister in the French government and marries a French aristocrat. As soon as he has achieved this incredible success, however, Solal’s world begins to fall apart, as he is constantly caught between his French wife and his Greek family. While Solal and Aude come from very different backgrounds—Solal is not a French Jew, but is instead a Greek immigrant—Cohen does not portray their failed marriage as the result of “cultural differences.” Rather, he reinforces the idea that there are certain inescapable personality traits associated with the Jews, such as passion and

sensuality, that make the union impossible. As with Max, Jewishness for Solal is an irrational force that thwarts his intellectual desire for integration.

Both of these failed love stories suggest that for French Jews in the 1920s, imagining Jewishness as an inherited, deterministic identity was associated not only with a newfound sense of ethnic pride, but also with strong feelings of alienation and loss. Both Poldès's and Cohen's negative assessments of the possibility for Jewish integration were, in fact, characteristic of a kind of ambivalent fascination with "the other" during this era. A renewed interest in folklore and mythology, local languages, and ancestral peoples was characteristic of the 1920s, as were exotic representations of colonized peoples. Very often, however, these representations were rooted in the idea that an underlying racial determinism inevitably influences individual human personalities. As Elizabeth Ezra points out, the African American actress Josephine Baker owed her success in Paris in the 1920s largely to her representations of "the negress" and the "exotic native" incapable of assimilation.¹¹ Baker starred in the popular film *Zouzou*, for example, which makes racial difference the supreme obstacle to a romance between its protagonist, a native of Martinique raised in France by a white adoptive father, and her white lover. Another of Baker's films, *Princess Tam-Tam*, tells the story of Alwina, a Tunisian princess whose integration into contemporary France is undone by the inevitable inability of the native to become anything but superficially civilized.¹²

In a similar vein, Paul Morand, one of the most popular writers of the interwar years, penned a 1928 collection of stories entitled *Black Magic* that features black characters whose essential African nature ultimately undoes their civilized pretensions.¹³ The fact that Morand, known for his world travels and cosmopolitan lifestyle, was in fact a proponent of ethnic separatism, Elizabeth Ezra notes, reflects a larger truth about France during the interwar years: "often identified with a love of the exotic (the Jazz Age) and assimilationist rhetoric, time and time again its cultural representations emphasized (or invented) difference, denying the very possibility of assimilation."¹⁴

The articles in this volume address these often messy borders between cultural relativism, romanticism, essentialism, exoticism, and racism from a variety of different angles, highlighting the particular political and historical contexts that shaped contemporary imaginings of human collectivities, as well as the political strategies behind them.

The volume opens with Sébastien Moret's article, which discusses the critical role that essentialist ideas about the relationship between language and national identity played in determining new political boundaries in Europe after World War I. The notion that a language represents the "soul" or *volksgeist* of a nation, first popularized in the late eighteenth century by German romantic thinkers Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, became increasingly pervasive throughout Europe over the course of the nineteenth century. These ideas reached their apogee during World War I and played a critical role in bolstering the Allies' conviction that the

Austro-Hungarian Empire's linguistic diversity rendered it an unnatural entity. They were supported by prominent linguists of the day, who argued that lack of linguistic unity made the Austro-Hungarian Empire a "body without a soul" in which conflict was inevitable. From this perspective, aligning national and linguistic frontiers was considered both "natural" and "scientific." The countries carved out from the empire were enjoined to respect their residents' linguistic identities as a critical element in ensuring that Europe would have a peaceful future.

Maggy Hary's comparison of representations of Irish and Zionist nationalism in British political discourse between 1917 and 1922 provides us with another example of how essentialist representations of human collectivities shaped political policy in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Paradoxically, while many British statesmen contested the existence of an Irish nation, they were often quick to recognize the Jews as a national group and to support their claim to statehood. Arthur James Balfour himself argued that before the British conquest the Irish had merely been a group of warring tribes, and that their current nationalism was rooted more in Anglophobia than in a shared culture. He thus considered Irish nationalism to be artificial and bemoaned the Irish refusal to be devoted to both Ireland and the Union. The idea that multiple allegiances unite people without threatening national identities did not mesh, however, with Balfour's support for the Jews' national aspirations. As he saw it, the Jews, though scattered throughout the world, comprised a united community made of individuals sharing the same racial characteristics and aspirations. As a result, it was only natural that they would aspire to reunite in their ancestral homeland. As this comparison between Balfour's attitudes about Irish nationalism and Zionism reveals, representations of "the other" did not always rely on a coherent ideology, but often varied depending on the political strategies behind them.

With Cécile Mathieu's analysis of entries related to human collectivities in the 1922 *Larousse universelle*, we turn from the realm of power politics to that of cultural representations intended for the general public. In keeping with the ambient fascination with travel and "exotic" foreign cultures and peoples, the large range of peoples and nations covered in this illustrated French-language dictionary, Mathieu notes, "enabled readers to travel to faraway lands while remaining in their living rooms." Her analysis points to several important distinctions as to how those foreign peoples and places are portrayed. Entries on non-European peoples were generally accompanied by detailed physical descriptions absent in entries on European groups: the "sameness" of fellow Europeans was assumed to make such descriptions unnecessary. Mathieu also observes that, in contrast with the earlier European representations of the "noble savage," physical descriptions of non-European human collectivities that we find in the 1922 *Larousse universelle* are generally derogatory in content. Importantly, however, Mathieu also draws our attention to an overarching similarity in representations of human collectivities in the volume. In the immediate aftermath of the violence of

World War I, the stranger, whether in a far-off land or close to home, is first and foremost associated with potential danger. Thus, for example, the entry for “Bedouin” includes the descriptive “brutal and savage,” and the image accompanying the entry “German” is that of a soldier in full World War I military regalia.

Amélie Auzoux’s study of the travel literature of Valery Larbaud turns to the literary representations of human collectivities by a writer and translator whose fascination with group particularism did not preclude his continuing commitment to a universal humanism. Taking advantage of living in an age in which modern transportation made it possible to observe and describe different cultures in detail, Larbaud rejected the touristic approach to travel. Rather, he made every effort to immerse himself in the native cultures of the places he visited. For Larbaud this obsession with authenticity grew out of his desire to “penetrate the soul” of each of the peoples he wrote about. It also stemmed from his conviction—similar to that of the linguistics discussed by Sébastien Moret—that language represents “the most complete spirit of a race.” Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Larbaud did not associate this romantic nationalism either to notions of “ethnic purity” or to French linguistic chauvinism. Rather, he drew on a tradition of Christian universalism and distanced himself from racist notions of human hierarchy, maintaining the conviction that while people are diverse and varied, the human race is one and indivisible. Importantly, however, aside from several trips to North Africa (about which he wrote very little), Larbaud’s travels were limited to Europe. As a result, Auzoux notes, his appreciation of human diversity remained firmly rooted in a single civilization, that of the Christian West.

Nicole Abravanel’s article considers the importance of a group’s relationship with time and space in terms of the imaginary they produce. Her discussion of A.-H. Navon’s 1925 novel *Joseph Perez: Juifs du ghetto* provides a rare window into the gaze of someone from outside of Europe—in this case an Ottoman Jewish immigrant to Paris—both on his own society and that of Western Europe. Navon, she notes, does not fall into Western bifurcations between a picturesque and ossified “Orient” and a progressive, modern “Occident.” Rather, he presents the world of the pre-World War I Ottoman Empire as a vast space where people often traveled between seemingly disparate locations that, in fact, comprised a unified cultural sphere. Abravanel’s discussion of the reception of the novel also provides a window into how the Sephardic world was imagined—and to what end—by both Jews and non-Jews in interwar France. The novel was reviewed in all the major literary publications of the day. While this reception can be understood within the context of the vogue for orientalism and exoticism of the day, Abravanel argues, it was an orientalism that—in contrast to nineteenth-century armchair romanticizing—valued “authenticity” through firsthand observation. Just as Valery Larbaud sought to capture the soul of European peoples in his travel literature, Navon’s reviewers praised Joseph Perez for providing them with

an authentic window into Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire. Abravanel's discussion of the relative lack of interest in the novel in the French Jewish press of the day also draws our attention to the Eurocentric orientation of the (Ashkenazi) French Jewish world of the 1920s that I describe in *French and Jewish*. The "oriental Jew," she notes, was not integrated into the Jewish imaginary as an equal partner, but rather understood as an auxiliary, as someone to be observed and described, rather than as a narrator in his own right. Abravanel also nuances my own reading of Albert Cohen's novel *Solal*. She argues that Cohen—a Sephardic Jew who emigrated from Greece to France as a young child—does not oppose Orient and Occident so much as he depicts a chaotic, fantastic space with a dislocated sense of time.

Claudine Moise's study of representations of French colonial societies in interwar school textbooks provides an example of European representations of non-European peoples with a discreet set of political and social objectives. Unlike dictionary editors, travel writers, or novelists who sought to transport their readers mentally into foreign lands, French school syllabi intended to reproduce nationalist ideologies and produce proud and patriotic citizens. Representations of French colonial possessions and their inhabitants therefore focused first and foremost on their profitability for France. Within this context, native colonial populations are represented primarily as exploitable labor forces and assessed in terms of their degree of "civilization," that is, conformity to French social and cultural norms. Moise then compares those interwar representations of the colonial other with contemporary travel literature intended to promote tourism in French Canada. By romanticizing the collective past of Quebec's French and Native American histories, she notes, these guidebooks try to sell tourists on the region's "authenticity." The language that we find in these brochures recalls Larbaud's disdain for tourism and desire to "go native" in his European travels in the interwar years. This contemporary example of the creation of imaginaries of human collectivities for economic gain thus allows us to take stock of certain continuities between essentialist representations of "the other" in the interwar years and the present day.

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Notes

1. These are the words of Emile Deutsch de la Meurthe, one of the founders of this international student campus in southern Paris, which is still in existence today. Cited in Fabienne Chevallier, "Sortie de guerre et enjeux urbains: Histoire de deux projets parisiens (1919–1939)," *Politique, culture, société*, electronic review of Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, no. 3 (Nov.–Dec. 2007), <http://www.histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=03> (accessed 30 March 2017). This and all other translations are author's own unless specified.

2. Cited in Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 111. Although Rotary International now admits women (they integrated in 1987 after a ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States), it was founded only for men.
3. Todd Shephard makes a similar point in his analysis of the Algerian war's effect on French political structures and notions of national identity. See Todd Shephard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
4. Nadia Malinovich, *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth Century France* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2008). This book also appeared in French with the title *Heureux comme un Juif en France: Intégration, identité, culture* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).
5. Pierre Paraf, "Le réveil du Judaïsme française," *Revue littéraire juive*, July 1928, 591 and 593.
6. Jean-Richard Bloch, "Quel service les Juifs peuvent-ils rendre au monde?," *Pal-estine*, December 1927, 97–102, here 99.
7. *Ibid.*, 102.
8. Josué Jéhouda, *La tragédie d'Israël*, vol. 1, *De père en fils* (Paris: Grasset, 1927), 66.
9. *Ibid.*, 187.
10. Léo Poldès, *L'éternel ghetto* (Paris: Editions Radot, 1928), 122.
11. Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 97–128.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 129–144.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.