

The response to the Dieudonné affair in France risks demonising French minority groups in the name of tolerance

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/02/27/the-response-to-the-dieudonne-affair-in-france-risks-demonising-french-minority-groups-in-the-name-of-tolerance/

27/02/2014

The French comedian Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala has caused controversy in France over the alleged anti-Semitism of his performances. **Paul A. Silverstein** writes on the wider issues related to anti-Semitism in French society, and why Dieudonné has proved so controversial. He argues that while Dieudonné's supporters deny the accusations of anti-Semitism, they feed into a broader social and institutional context that can make Jewish citizens feel targeted. There is also a danger that in attacking Dieudonné, the French establishment risks demonising other French minority groups who make up many of his supporters.



On December 28, 2013, upon scoring his first goal for his new football club West Bromwich Albion, the veteran French striker Nicolas Anelka ran across the field with his right arm extended by his side and his left hand touching his shoulder. Completely unremarkable by the flamboyant standards of goal celebrations in professional football, the gesture touched a raw nerve in France where the match was being televised live, with viewers immediately identifying it with the *quenelle* developed by controversial shock comic Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, who has repeatedly been accused (and on several occasions found guilty) of propagating racial hatred, particularly against Jews.

For over the last decade, a moral panic has arisen in France over the rise of a “new anti-Semitism” feared to propagate among the under-employed multi-racial youth precariat inhabiting council estates (*les cités*) along the French urban periphery where many of Dieudonné's most ardent fans reside. The “new anti-Semitism” is also seen as being underwritten by far left anti-globalisation platforms that are highly critical of American imperialism and decidedly sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle.

Outside of his comic performances, Dieudonné has been directly engaged in these latter causes, running political campaigns on first an anti-racist, then an anti-globalisation, and most recently an anti-Zionist platform. This has led to him ultimately collaborating with far right activists like Front National founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, and polemicist Alain Soral — associations that have led a number of Dieudonné's former political allies on the far left, and even his former performance partner, the Jewish comedian Élie Semoun, to definitively break with him. Given such a trajectory, Dieudonné, like the *quenelle* itself, has had a polarising effect on an already tense French public debate over free speech and the limits of toleration.



Dieudonné graffiti, Credit: Jack Rabbit Slim's (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Anti-Semitism in France

The question of an evolving anti-Semitism in France has received increased attention over the past decade by

scholars, activists, human rights organisations, politicians, and the popular press. If the vast majority of those surveyed in opinion polls disavow any hatred of Jews, the Interior Ministry has [reported](#) periodic spikes of up to nearly 1,000 yearly threats or acts of anti-Semitic violence against persons and property across the last decade, generally followed by equally precipitous dips.

To a certain extent, these statistics reflect new reporting guidelines that came into effect during this period, as well as new laws increasing the criminal sanctions for those found guilty. Likewise, they parallel an even more pronounced and consistent increase in anti-Islamic attitudes and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim acts affecting marginalised groups that do not benefit from the same juridical oversight and protections.

Nonetheless, a number of high-profile cases — including the 2006 kidnapping and murder of Jewish cell phone salesman Ilan Halimi by a multi-ethnic group of youths from the Paris *cités* led by Youssouf Fofana, and the 2012 attack on a Toulouse Jewish day school by Mohamed Merah — have fostered for many French Jews a sense of being embattled, have spurred waves of new emigration to Israel, and have even encouraged occasional vigilante reprisals by extremist Zionist groups like the Ligue de Défense Juive (Jewish Defense League).

While scholars have pointed to the fragmented nature of anti-Semitism and the heterogeneity of perpetrators — including a still-active neo-Nazi movement — media pundits have linked it directly to the multi-racial, impoverished urban periphery described by educator [Emmanuel Brenner](#) as “the lost territories of the Republic” and by philosopher [Alain Finkielkraut](#) as “savage lands” (*lieux féroces*), where an “ethnicization of social relations” (in the words of sociologist [Michel Wieviorka](#)) coexists with anti-American and anti-Israel political commitments, particularly among young-Muslim French citizens with leftist leanings.

Increasingly, as feminist philosopher [Wendy Brown](#) has maintained, anti-Semitism, alongside homophobic and patriarchal ideologies, are taken to be unacceptable cultural attitudes which delegitimise foreigner (and especially Muslim) belonging in liberal polities. Such abject practices define the limits of Republican toleration, as policed through integration contracts for new immigrants, the ban on public veiling, and the criminalisation of Holocaust denial.

There is of course something deeply ironic about ideologically linking the fate of the French Republic to the elimination of anti-Semitism. As historian [Esther Benbassa](#) has underlined, Jewish citizenship in France came at the price of disavowing religious community institutions and embarking on a fraught path of cultural and social assimilation. The [Dreyfus Affair](#) and the Vichy government’s complicity in the Holocaust only underlined the uncertainty of this incorporation and the tenuousness of French Jewish citizenship more generally.

Given this history, many French Jews have aspirationally tethered their cultural belonging to a post-Revolutionary Republican ideology of civility, solidarity, and state secularism (*laïcité*). Jews, as a group, make a double ethical claim on France, both as moral censors to whom an unpayable debt is owed, and as potential victims of ongoing global hatred deserving of special protections. As [Wendy Brown](#) argues, “Jews emerge as the ultimate champions and foot-soldiers of tolerance by virtue of their need for it.”

Hence contemporary anxieties around what some Jewish groups perceive to be the banalisation of the Shoah in public discourse, or around the global left’s instrumentalisation of Palestinians as the poster-child victims of Israeli-cum-imperialist aggression — both of which Jewish watchdog organisations decry as ultimately anti-Semitic. Jewish suffering continues to be articulated as unique and incommensurable even as most French Jews present themselves as undifferentiated citizens of, and even spokespeople for, the Republic.

The Dieudonné effect

Dieudonné’s linked comedic and political engagements play precisely on such ambivalences of belonging, traumas of toleration, and narcissisms of victimhood. In his long-term efforts to raise public awareness about France’s past participation in the African slave trade and its contribution to contemporary white privilege, Dieudonné condemns

what he takes to be a double standard in the recognition and indemnification of past suffering, as well as the hypocrisy in the French state's vigilance against anti-Semitism while allowing other forms of institutionalised racism to propagate.

Moreover, he directly links Jewish privilege to black suffering, both in terms of his claims about the historical role of Jewish financiers in the slave economy, and with regards to what he decries as the contemporary racism of the "Jewish lobby" (iconised by one of his Jewish characters parodying a Nazi salute and shouting "Isra-heil!"). In the absence of such state protections for other French minority groups, Dieudonné presents himself as what [Wieviorka](#) terms a "moral entrepreneur," calling forth popular resistance to the "[békés](#) and bankers" who he claims control the political and economic "system."

In his comedy sketches, Dieudonné draws on the French comic legacy of Pierre Desproges and Coluche (and indeed the Americans Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor) who sparked controversy through their rejection of respectable discourse to call out ethnic and racial prejudices. Dieudonné arguably takes this strategy a step further, courting controversy with his public calls for the liberation of [Youssef Fofana](#) or by sharing the stage with unapologetic Holocaust deniers, and then incorporating the resulting accusations of anti-Semitism directly into his sketches as a meta-critique of French hypocrisies of tolerance.

By presenting the accusations as a selective regulation of free speech, he implicitly questions the privilege of those who determine the bounds of liberal toleration. Journalist [Sylvain Cypel](#) recently likened the *quenelle* to the repressed Nazi salute performed by Peter Sellers in Stanley Kubrick's satirical film *Dr. Strangelove*, and one might indeed interpret Dieudonné's gesture as a commentary on repression and mandatory self-regulation. Dieudonné and most of his fans vehemently deny that the *quenelle* has anything whatsoever to do with a Nazi salute, but like his comedic performances, the *quenelle* precisely plays on the slipperiness of meaning, the polysemy of signs, and the ambiguous relations between verbal, facial, and gestural expression.



Dieudonné, Credit: Axis for Peace (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Therein arguably lies the brilliance of Dieudonné's comedy, where lines between performer and character are multi-layered and blurred, and where the racialised irreverence dares the spectator to take seriously that which is presented in the frame of satire. Who are the real racists, it seems to ask us: those who play with popular stereotypes or those who can only see race and racism in the play?

The uncomfortable frisson of having one's liberal moral commitments laid bare clearly drives part of the mass appeal of Dieudonné's performance art, as does the blatant populism of the comedian speaking directly to those who feel "taken up the arse" by the political and economic establishment — a sentiment that the *quenelle* (translated colloquially as a "suppository") graphically illustrates. For a comedian who has utterly

polarised the French public sphere, inciting either condemnations or defenses with little room (as Swiss-Muslim intellectual [Tariq Ramadan](#) has bemoaned) for nuanced critique, Dieudonné's shows, gatherings, and online performances gather together an incredibly heterogeneous audience from across the French racial, ethnic, class, and ideological spectrum — a veritable counter-public that [arguably](#) better represents contemporary, quotidian France than the public intellectuals who participate in television talk shows and parliamentary debates.

While the Muslim-French *cit*é residents, neo-Nazi punks, and even French soldiers who have all posted online *quenelle* performances may not agree on much, they share a general belief in the existence of a hopelessly sclerotic "system" in which they see little personal future, and thus find in Dieudonné's comedy, and even his satirical

electoral campaigns, a welcome attempt to figuratively upend it. That such postcolonial populism, as anthropologist [Jean-Loup Amselle](#) and other commentators have bemoaned, seems to instrumentalise anti-Semitic prejudice as a rallying point is surely deplorable. It is also highly doubtful that the counter-public called forth by Dieudonné's multi-media act equally upholds the broader anti-racist ethical critique the comedian avows to profess.

Dieudonné and his fans may repeatedly insist that they are not “anti-Semites”, and that they do not harbour any particular hatred for Jews, but in doing so they misrecognise anti-Semitism as an individual mental state rather than as a set of social effects, historical practices, and institutional forms that give it an undeniable reality even for those who in other regards benefit from relative political and economic privilege. Satire may provide plausible deniability for those within its arena, but it does not eliminate the sting for those who understandably feel targeted by it.

Lamentable as well is the instrumentalisation of the Dieudonné affair by the French political establishment who have once again sought to displace the burden of public civility on French minorities. In the wake of the Anelka *quenelle* celebration and responding to a public outcry particularly from French-Jewish advocacy groups, French Interior Minister and presidential hopeful Manuel Valls moved to legally block Dieudonné from staging his show, *Le Mur* [The Wall], as a risk to “public order” and in which the representation of Jewish characters was adjudged by the French high court to challenge “human dignity.”

The appeal to humanitarian principles struck many as particularly ironic coming from a public figure who had gained notoriety and bipartisan political capital for his support for immigration quotas, calling for the deportation of Roma, and being caught on tape deploring the lack of white residents in suburban Evry. The demonisation of Anelka and other French sporting figures — including fellow Muslim-French footballers Samir Nasri and Mamadou Sakho — who have posed with Dieudonné performing *quenelles* reiterates a long-standing demand that celebrities from minority groups serve as representatives of multicultural quiescence.

Much like the public debate following Zinedine Zidane's infamous 2006 [head-butt](#), the *quenelle* affair risks bolstering an increasingly popular view that the French Republic is under threat from internal incivility, from an increasingly fragmented population that refuses to sign an already-written contract of liberal toleration. And that is probably the last lesson one might hope would be drawn from the comedian's efforts, problematic as they may be, to insist on the inclusion of a broader population into national narratives of suffering and belonging.

**The term ‘béké’ refers to French colonial settlers of the Antilles and their descendants, but Dieudonné deploys it as a general term for white privilege built on the back of ongoing black enslavement.*

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1kaozGi>

About the author

Paul A. Silverstein – *Reed College*

Paul A. Silverstein is Professor of Anthropology at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. His publications include [Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation](#) (Indiana University Press, 2004), and [Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa](#) (Indiana University Press, 2006 – edited with Ussama Makdisi).



