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Fabien Jobard

Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, between anti-racism, anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial

Introduction

French recent history has been marked by a wave of deadly attacks (human bombings, machine guns, truck used as a killing weapon, knife strangulation ...) mostly claimed by the Islamist State in Iraq and the Levant. Three years after a young French named Mohammed Merah killed 3 French soldiers of North-African descents and 4 people in a Jewish school, among them 3 kids, January 9 2015 by a young Black French man, Amedy Coulibaly, launched an attack in a kosher supermarket in Paris, killing four. Coulibaly was an accomplice of the Kouachi brothers, the two men who two days before killed a dozen of people (most of them journalists of the weekly paper *Charlie Hebdo*, and two police officers) as an act of revenge in the lasting controversy of “the prophet’s cartoons”. French society was deeply shocked by these events, and approximately 1.5 millions people gathered and marched in Paris the Sunday following the shootings.

At the end of the day on January 9, a French black humorist Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala (known as Dieudonné) posted a Facebook message stating: “As far as I am concerned, I feel I am Charlie Coulibaly.” This position was a mix of the popular slogan “*Je suis Charlie*” used to support the memory of the journalists killed in the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices, and a reference to the supermarket’s gunman Amedy Coulibaly. On March 18, Dieudonné was sentenced to two months of prison on probation for “incitement of terrorism.” This was a crime issued from a law adopted in November 2014, the week of the appeals for support of middle-east terrorist activities on the Internet. As one should note, Dieudonné expressed solely support to the one of the three gunmen of January 2015 whose action explicitly consisted in targeting Jewish people.

The next day (March 19), Dieudonné is again sentenced by a Paris court, this time to a €22,500 fine for hate speech. In December 2013, Dieudonné stated the following in a public show about Patrick Cohen, a famous French journalist who had appealed his ban from French broadcast: “You see, if the wind ever turns, I am not so sure he will have time to pack his suitcase. When I hear Patrick Cohen speak, you see, I think to myself: ‘Gas chambers... well, too bad.’” It should be noted that the show during which he expressed this heinous anti-Semitic position, *Le Mur (The Wall)*, was banned by the government once the hate-filled position about Cohen became known. This very rare decision found the acquiescence of the administrative Supreme Court¹.

Some years earlier, by the end of December 2008, Dieudonné had offered the notorious Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson his highest and (rather unexpected) “moment of fame”.² On the occasion of a show held in one of the largest theatres of Paris, before a crowd of around 5,000 with special guests including the French extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, Dieudonné let his assistant dress up as a concentration camp detainee and wear a large yellow star (“a lightening dress” – according to Dieudonné). He then awarded Faurisson the “prize for being an insolent outcast”; judging from audience reactions on YouTube, the show was warmly received.³ Dieudonné was sentenced to a €10,000 fine for “anti-Semitic insult committed in public” as a result of his actions. In June 2008, a few months before he invited Robert Faurisson to step on stage with him, Dieudonné was sentenced to a €7,000 fine for characterizing Holocaust commemorations as “memorial pornography”, and in November 2007 for describing Jews as “slavers” (in French: “*négriers*”).

Still, this is only an incomplete list of cases against Dieudonné, who faced the criminal justice in 2016 again for “incitement to hatred” with a two-months on probation and a 10,000 € fine sentence – he was sentenced for a show in which he ironized on the Holocaust dressed in a

¹ Conseil d’Etat, Décision en référé n°374508, ord. 9/1/2014.

² Valérie Igounet (2012), pp. 370-371.

³ “Dieudonné invite Robert Faurisson au Zénith de Paris” (2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OyaUaXwpko>.

Guantanamo detainee outfit⁴. It is tempting to cast him as one of only a few extremists amidst a small crowd of radical right-wing supporters who regularly breach the rules on the freedom of speech. However, Dieudonné enjoys a large popularity in France, and most of the judicial cases filed against him make for passionate discussions throughout French society. His mix of anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, and conspiracy theories is even more surprising given that in the early stages of his career Dieudonné was initially viewed as an anti-racist activist with a strong personal commitment fighting the radical-right party Front National. Dieudonné is now at the center of a curious constellation of people who were once foes but are now finding common ground through his hate speeches. My goal in this article is then to try to understand how such a constellation developed, and analyzing what role Holocaust denial plays in this set of popular ideas and representations. In order to do so, I will briefly summarize Dieudonné's career, highlight the extent of his social resonance, and finally analyze the nature and role of the kind of Holocaust denial he promotes.

Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala

Dieudonné has undoubtedly been one of the most talented humorists of the last 20 years in France. He began as a salesman selling cars, cell phones, and copy machines – an activity that surely impacted the way he viewed the impact of speaking and rhetoric in the citizens' lives. From the beginning of the 1990s he enjoyed substantial success both on stage and on TV, performing together with fellow humorist Elie Seimoun. The duo used the contrast between a thin white Jew (Cohen) and an average Black Frenchman (Bokassa) to exaggerate stereotypes and confront casual everyday racism.

⁴ Agence France Presse, Dieudonné condamné à 2 mois avec sursis pour le spectacle 'La Bête immonde', *Le Figaro*, 10 Mai 2016, Accessed 4 August 2016.

Dieudonné turned to a solo career in 1997, making more and more appearances in French blockbusters movies. At the same time, he developed a stronger off-scene political commitment. In 1997 he received eight percent of the votes in a legislative election for a city in the greater area of Paris; it was a city where, in 1983, the Front National had reached its then highest electoral support. The same year, Dieudonné staged his first one-man show. His act described a murder from the different accounts of the witnesses and wannabe witnesses, and the show gained favor with the critics. The act was also welcomed by the press, which underlined the humorist's power to provocatively deal with controversial issues, often targeting race relations and religious faith.

Dieudonné continued his leftist political involvement: like Coluche, one of the most famous stand-up comedian of the 1970s-1980s, Dieudonné considered running for president in 2002.⁵ After the 2002 presidential race, Dieudonné ran for Parliament in a precinct that was then a stronghold of the Socialist Dominique Strauss-Kahn. He did not reach three percent of the local votes, but he did receive repeated attention from Jewish organizations wanting to repress the humorist-turned-politician's anti-Semitic expressions.

The months between the attacks of 9/11 2001 and the 2002 elections were Dieudonné's political turning points. On the national scene, these months were marked by heightened youth unrest in the deprived suburbs of major French cities, mostly migrant young males, and the rise of the Front National, which culminated in Jean-Marie Le Pen reaching the second stage of the presidential race for the first time. On the cultural scene, controversies surrounded an eminent philosopher and publicist, Alain Finkielkraut, who once authored a recognized book on Holocaust denial and was now lauding Oriana Fallaci's views on the clash of religious groups in Europe.⁶ On the international scene, the 9/11 attacks had a sudden and major impact on French public opinion.⁷ Further, the Israeli army's massacre at the Jenin refugee camp caused a vivid

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu (1981) and (2008).

⁶ Alain Finkielkraut (1982).

⁷ Vincent Tiberj and Laure Michon (2013).

emotional reaction among the Arab population in France (a population which totals approximately up to 4 million individuals, or nearly seven percent of French residents)⁸.

In the time preceding this crystallization of events, Dieudonné's commitment became more and more linked with the promotion of Black consciousness. In 2002, the main public funding organization sustaining cinema in France refused to financially support one of his movie project on the *Code Noir*, the royal edicts codifying slavery in the French colonies from the end of the 17th century onwards. Dieudonné publicly and resolutely attributed this decision to the "Zionists" who supposedly led the funding organization and who were willing to protect the memorial interests of the Holocaust to the disadvantage of the memory of the slave trade. He later described Judaism as "a sect, as fraud, which is the worst of all since it is the first one ever" (an expression for which Dieudonné later faced a sentence confirmed by the highest criminal court, *Cour de cassation*)⁹ and Jews as "a people which cut prize of the Holocaust, which sold suffer and death in order to build up a country and to make money."¹⁰

In the following years, Dieudonné's core anti-Semitic views were diversified and amplified. His views were more and more oriented against the Jews, signaling a clear radicalization of his positions. The radicalization of his views caused him to lose more and more of his supporters among fellow humorists and in the media. Dieudonné then shifted to different allegiances, from radical Black associations to Iran and Hezbollah's organizations (with a welcome in 2009 by President Ahmadinejad in Iran), Holocaust deniers, extreme-right publicists, and even Jean-Marie Le Pen, who is now allegedly the god-father of one of Dieudonné's children.

⁸ Insee 2012. Beside the « arab population » (which is here understood as the migrants from North Africa and their immediate descents, so that only two generations are taken into account), one should mention the muslims living in France – which is particularly difficult since there is no central registration of the religious belonging in France. The largest inquiry on migration in France (« Trajectories and Origins » Survey, see Beauchemin et al. 2015) gives an estimation of a bit more than 4 Millions people living in France and defining themselves as « muslims ».

⁹ Cour de cassation, n°552, Feb. 16, 2007.

¹⁰ The interview occurred in October 2002 and was uploaded to the website blackmap.com ; it was later removed.

Dieudonné's turn to radical anti-Semitism and support of Holocaust denial was the result of his failed interactions with certain social and political institutions, institutions in which he believed Jews played a predominant role. In this respect, Dieudonné's situation is original. Usually, deviancy is characterized by the growing socialization of the deviant among groups of peers, and the subsequent isolation from the rest of the society. Dieudonné, for his part, has certainly lost some of his fans as he gathered supporters from different extreme-right corners. But he succeeded, in the same time, in keeping some bonds with his earlier fans, a group mainly made up of members of ethnic minorities and left-oriented young people who are themselves sometimes targets of the Dieudonné's newer supporters from the extreme-right. As such, Dieudonné's place in French society can offer a better understanding of the social reception of these popular forms of Anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

Dieudonné's place in French society

What is the place, role, and importance of Dieudonné in French society? One aspect is the size of the Dieudonné's audience, its social composition, and the degree of political support by his public. Another dimension of this includes the kinds of networks he might be part of, and the characterization of these networks.

Despite the fact he is practically banned from public broadcast for a sketch perceived as being anti-Semitic, more than 8,000 spectators comes to Dieudonné's performances in France, and he is perhaps the most well-known humorist in all French-speaking countries – even if his performances are controversial outside of France. In 2012 police interrupted one of his shows in Brussels – a decision then rebuked by the Belgian justice system, and Brussels mayor forbid his show planned in 2015 in the Belgian capital, and some months later Liège's criminal court sentenced him to a 2 months prison sentence for incitement to hatred, and for anti-Semitic and

negationist stances¹¹. His 2012 shows in Montreal were also cancelled and he even was barred from entering Canada in 2016 when he was about to perform a series of sold-out shows in Montréal, despite the protesting position of Montréal mayor. However, his performances are far too politicized to attract the same large masses as other humorists. In comparison, Dieudonné's audiences are only a quarter or a third of that of other prominent humorists in France (based on the estimation of the director of Nantes' theatre in 2014).¹²

Dieudonné's shows on the Internet channel *youtube.com*, however, manage to reach hundreds of thousands of viewers. Some anti-racist sketches without reference to Jews attracted between one and two million viewers over the last five to ten years. Other sketches with heinous views on Jews and Holocaust denial stances attract the same amount of viewers. Among these is a video on Dominique Strauss-Kahn ("a Jewish billionaire all the same"), in which anti-Semitism is linked to statements of deception. In this sketch, Dieudonné states that there are good and bad conspiracies. His example of "a good conspiracy" is Dominique Strauss-Kahn actually being innocent of sexual violence. As for his example of "a bad conspiracy", he states: "do not even try to doubt on the gas chambers ... in France, beware, there are laws, there are official versions of historical accounts that shall not be questioned." His videos in which he invites anti-Zionist Jews, Robert Faurisson, or some second-ranking figures from diverse extreme-right camps, however, attract fewer viewers (some hundreds of thousands at the most). As another sign of public success, Dieudonné may have recently gathered up to 1,500 financial contributions in the wake of his various convictions, reaching a total amount of approximately €500,000.¹³

¹¹ Dieudonné condamné à 2 mois de prison ferme après son spectacle à Herstal, *La libre Belgique*, 25 November 2015, <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/dieudonne-condamne-a-2-mois-de-prison-ferme-apres-son-spectacle-a-herstal-565582103570ca6ff92bd513>, accessed 4 Aug. 2016.

¹² Sibylle Laurent, 2014, Pour le directeur du Zénith de Nantes, 'il faut relativiser le succès de Dieudonné', *Metronews*, Jan. 7th Accessed August 4, 2016. <http://www.metronews.fr/nantes/pour-le-directeur-du-zenith-de-nantes-il-faut-relativiser-le-succes-de-dieudonne/mnag!7LkVXrwi7t2ls/>.

¹³ Willy Le Devin and Dominique Albertini (2014), Le Devin, Willy and Dominique Albertini. "Dieudonné mis en examen, un vrai problème de fonds." *Liberation*, October 17, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2016. http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/10/17/dieudonne-mis-en-examen-un-vrai-probleme-de-fonds_1124303.

So far there is no systematic study on the public gathering at Dieudonné's shows. News reports of recent shows do not differ from the assessment made by John Lichtfield at a 2014 Dieudonné gig in Bordeaux: "The audience of at least 5,000, which fills the venue to capacity, is predominately male. It is mostly a white and working class audience. There are older people and some students, but the great majority seem to be in its thirties and forties."¹⁴

These smaller groups suggest that Dieudonné also succeeded in gathering a motley political network around him as soon as he took clear positions about Jews and the Holocaust. The first of these groups were radical Black activists inspired by the Nation of Islam, which places an emphasis on the allegedly prominent role Jews played in the slave trade¹⁵. Anti-Semitic Islamist groups joined them and helped Dieudonné raise money to overcome financial hazards. Like Maurice Bardèche and Roger Garaudy before him, Dieudonné was welcomed in Libya, Lebanon, and Iran, even giving interviews on Iranian public broadcast, and applauding Gadhafi and Ahmadinejad for their roles in helping the world preserve peace against war-like Zionists and US American imperialists. In this, Dieudonné joined a certain French tradition inherited from far-left groups as he tried to merge anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, support of Palestinian movements, Holocaust denial, and systematic suspicion of historical accounts long embodied by intellectuals like Roger Garaudy.¹⁶ Dieudonné's success contributed to the re-birth of a far-right movement on the sole basis of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. Since the mid 2000s, Dieudonné has closely collaborated with the essayist Alain Soral, an influential Internet propagandist struggling against "Judeo-Zionist communitarianism" and a "Judeo-Protestant alliance" (or "Wall Street – Jerusalem alliance") that allegedly rules the world.¹⁷

¹⁴ John Lichtfield (2014), "An act of cruelty: An audience with Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, the man behind the 'quenelle' salute." *Independent*, January 27, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2016.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/dieudonn-mbala-mbala-an-act-of-cruelty-9089178.html>.

See also Michel Briganti, André Déchet, and Jean-Paul Gautier (2011).

¹⁵ Friedman, S., 1998. François, Guillaume, Kreis 2008.

¹⁶ Henry Rousso (2011), Valérie Igounet (2000), pp. 472-483, pp. 576-584.

¹⁷ Alain Soral (2011).

These new alliances are certainly not anecdotal. Under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the Front National has tried to change its profile to a classical anti-European conservative party and to depart from its radical positions, especially on Jews and the Holocaust. The Front National's *Aggiornamento* let space empty in the far-right of the political spectrum, where overt anti-Semitism and support for overtly anti-American political regimes (from Iran and Syria to Russia) are supported. Dieudonné's sketches share most of these positions. They also insist on the alleged falsifications of news and historical reports by mainstream institutions, specifically as soon as Jews or Israel's government are at stake. As a result, Dieudonné succeeds in attracting a very diverse network of young men from ethnic minority groups, extreme-right activists, Black supremacists, anti-gay activists, anti-globalization activists, esotericism fans, and Islamic and Christian fundamentalists.

Dieudonné and the Holocaust: Ambiguity and success of “doubts”

Dieudonné's reputation and talent as a humorist resonated with positions of Holocaust denial that had never received such relatively mainstream attention. Interestingly enough, Dieudonné's position on the Holocaust is a clear example of the ways contemporary Holocaust denial is formulated in France. I will develop this point under two main aspects. The first deals with the culture of skepticism that has emerged in France over the last decades. The second focuses on the role of Holocaust denial in the contemporary political atmosphere in France, particularly regarding its relationship to France's historically symbolic acceptance of multiculturalism.

Dieudonné's position is, strictly speaking, neither a blatant denial of the Holocaust nor of the existence of gas chambers in Nazi extermination camps, but rather a doubtful “questioning” of the knowledge collected on the destruction of European Jewry. As such, Dieudonné continues in the classical French “revisionist” tradition, which Paul Rassinier first formulated at the end of

the 1940s as he returned from the Buchenwald camp.¹⁸ Contrary to explicit deniers like Robert Faurisson who point to the “the alleged extermination of the Jews,” Dieudonné restricts himself to expressing “doubts” about the genocide without going into much detail about what exactly should be questioned. His “doubt” almost plays the same semiotic role as using the word “Zionist” when naming Jews; such tricks are used to avoid explicit Holocaust denial, which would expose him to criminal charges (Holocaust denial has been classified as a crime since 1990). Expressing doubts, rather than stating that Jews were never systematically exterminated, helps to maintain an ambiguity. In turn, this ambiguity helps him maintain a diverse audience of supporters. “Doubt”, like “Zionist”, is a word used for its semiotic value. Using the word “doubt” allows the speaker to hint at denial while avoiding the term itself, since denial itself is a criminalized act.

Dieudonné’s “doubt” fits a specific kind of Holocaust denial based on a hypertrophic form of rationality that develops but misinterprets Cartesian skepticism, a cornerstone of French academic and intellectual criticism. This criticism’s hypertrophy has been enjoying a long-standing influence on small circles of Left-wing intellectuals and has unwillingly (sometimes willingly) led to legitimizing Holocaust denial even in Left milieus¹⁹. As an example, in his act “Mahmud” (for Ahmadinedjad), Dieudonné stages an encounter between him and his “old pal” Robert Faurisson. The aim of his visit is to challenge Faurisson and to make him drop all these stories about Jews, Auschwitz, and the like. Faurisson protests and pleads the indispensable defense of the truth. Dieudonné replies: “The truth? Truth is only for dummies. Lies lead the world! Wake up! ... Truth: Just take it, eat it, and shut your mouth.”²⁰ Dieudonné, acting as himself, then lists some examples of truths – trusts he says he is forced to say in order to comply with societal expectations: the gas chambers, “the 9/11 official version (‘true, I did my best’”, the news on the main French TV channel TF1, and the swine flu epidemic.

¹⁸ Florent Brayard (1996).

¹⁹ Philippe Corcuff (2000).

²⁰ See: M'bala M'bala, Dieudonné. “Le copain Robert.” Accessed June 18, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bgbd4ewP76s>.

As noted before, Dieudonné originally comes from the left of the political spectrum in France. He mainly locates his political criticisms in the usual areas of left-wing criticism, such as his doubts on US American foreign policy, his criticism against TF1 (which is owned by a close friend of former president Nicolas Sarkozy), and his attacks against the pharmaceutical industry. But the most important point here is the association he sketches between undeniable facts (such as the gas chambers or 9/11), his characterization of the sometimes erratic news industry, and the erroneous dramatization of events profiting big industry, such as the swine flu epidemic. France's Health Minister had indeed urged for mass vaccination against the swine flu epidemic – a supposed crisis that shortly proved to have been largely over-estimated. By invoking French vaccination policies Dieudonné was also cleverly referring to post-colonialism, particularly the role played by vaccination as an issue in post-colonial politics²¹.

More than denying anything, Dieudonné attempts to erase the line between what is, what could have been, and what has not been. In the end, nothing any longer is. If Descartes promoted “hyperbolic doubt” as a method for accessing the lights of reason, Dieudonné shows himself a true follower of numerous French Holocaust deniers in subverting Descartes' claim into a hyperbolic relativism. Where Descartes' hyperbolic doubt was thought of as a “methodological doubt”, Dieudonné's hyperbolic relativism abolishes the borders between truth and fable.

This hyperbolic relativism resonates with some radical forms of social constructivism, an unwitting legacy of Pierre Bourdieu's overwhelming success in the French social sciences. Followers of Bourdieu have certainly played an important role in sustaining the view that social reality is a sole matter of social classification so as to define social facts like the mere products of contingent social forces²². As such, words like “insecurity”, “violence”, or “riots” are, for instance, put between quotation marks in order to signify doubt. But the reader alone usually has to figure out what to be doubtful about. It is a common experience in today's France for

²¹ Frédéric Keck (2014).

²² Cyril Lemieux (2012).

professors and teachers to face a radical skepticism and a hyperbolic relativism in their classrooms. Many teachers and professors feel unprepared for such a “return to sender” reaction from their students. Further, personal experiences suggests that students overwhelmingly rely on the Internet in order to formulate their criticisms but are not skilled at differentiating between the different kinds of criticisms and doubts available on the Web.

Denial and anti-Semitism in a context of Holocaust’s sacralisation

Dieudonné and other marginal far-right activists are not solely responsible for fostering radical forms of skepticism and an inclination to doubt historical facts as they have been presented since the end of World War II. Dieudonné’s positions are articulated in an overall climate emerged at the end of the 1990s, some years before Dieudonné’s first outcry about Jews.

First, Dieudonné’s career consists of appropriating and then reformulating academic theses to his specific audience. For example, Dieudonné borrowed a position first articulated by the political scientist Norman Finkelstein in his book *The Holocaust Industry*. Finkelstein opened a public discussions about Jews, Israelis, and those who ultimately benefit from Holocaust memory.²³ As we will see later on, Dieudonné translated the controversies raised in the book into an over-simplified and classically anti-Semitic characterization of Jews as obsessed with making money out of any and all opportunities, the Holocaust being the most profitable. A second book, the Belgian historian Jean-Michel Chaumont’s *La concurrence des victimes*, published in the early 2000s, reignited this discussion by focusing on the “victims’ competition” for recognition and support.²⁴ The argument of a “victim’s competition” became used as a kind of backlash against the criminalization of Holocaust denial. Dieudonné’s positions reflect this wider socio-political context.

²³ Norman Finkelstein (2000).

²⁴ Jean-Michel Chaumont (1997).

In 1990 France passed the Loi Gayssot – a bill criminalizing any denial of the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. The legislation came after a number of public proclamations of Holocaust denial in France, including the aftermath of Faurisson’s public positions (the end of the 1970s) and Jean-Marie Le Pen’s 1987 proclamation that gas chambers “are a detail in the Second World war.”²⁵ This move to criminalize denial not only contributed to a change in the rhetoric of denial, but it also changed the way Dieudonné used the term “doubt”. Further, the bill helped to establish Jewish organizations seen as a model for successful memory entrepreneurs – efforts that even lead to the creation of a specific criminal charge. In 1995 President Jacques Chirac admitted French responsibility for the deportation and assassination of French Jews from 1942-44, breaking a 50-year myth that held that France’s government was in London during the time. Both events, Gayssot bill and Chirac’s recognition, were seen as clear signs that Jews were successful political entrepreneurs in France.

As a consequence, Black activists tried to replicate the successes of Jewish associations in achieving Holocaust commemoration in their own efforts toward public recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. Black French activists used the example of a number of Jewish institutions in their efforts at group organization. The “Sons and Daughters of African Deportees” (Coffad) was founded at the end of the 1990s and modeled after the “Sons and Daughters of Jewish Deportees from France” (which was itself founded in 1979 under the umbrella organization “The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation”); and in 2015 the “Representative Council of Black Institutions (Cran) was founded after the example of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (Crif) and the affiliated “World Jewish Council”.²⁶ Indeed, many of the organizations’ founding texts clearly reference Jewish efforts. For instance, Coffad’s first statement in its first article reads: “Jews’ compensation paves the way for Blacks’ efforts.”²⁷ The emergence of Black consciousness developed in the context of French history and politics,

²⁵ Henry Rousso (2006).

²⁶ Jean-Yves Camus (2006).

²⁷ Coffad (2000), <http://www.coffad.net/francais/reparation.htm>.

particularly regarding the development of Jewish interests in French society²⁸. On May 23 1998, a 40,000 participant demonstration took place in Paris, aiming at the recognition of slavery as a part of France's history. Finally, a bill was adopted in 2001, stating "slave trade and slavery ... are crimes against humanity."²⁹ During the same time, French Armenian organizations intensified their efforts in achieving recognition for the 1915' massacres; they succeeded in having a law passed in 2001 stating in its sole article that "France publicly recognizes the 1915 Armenian genocide."³⁰

The issue of decolonization emerged alongside these aforementioned battles for recognition, particularly the war in Algeria (1954-1962) and the atrocities committed by French soldiers. Algerian migration accounted for the largest segment of extra-European migration in the thirty years following the war. It was not until 1999 that the term "war" was officially used to describe the Algerian war for independence (the former term was "events"), and in 2002 the French Parliament passed a law commemorating the cease-fire agreement in 1962. However, the conservatives were back in power in 2002, and they bitterly fought against both of these parliamentary initiatives. Conservative leader Nicolas Sarkozy raged against the alleged so-called "cult of repentance". Accordingly, in 2005 the conservative MPs passed a bill that stipulated: "the history textbooks should particularly take into consideration the positive contribution of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa." The government's apologist approach to colonialism resonated crudely in the hearts of the Muslim community in France, even after the constitutional court dismissed the bill for technical reasons.

Finally, such struggles for recognition occurred in a context where Israeli politics and the Holocaust are constantly present at all levels of French politics. Since the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, the Israeli and Palestinian conflict has played a growing role in the political socialization of large segments of the French youth, mainly Arab French youths; in the summer

²⁸ Nicole Lapierre (2009) and (2011).

²⁹ Act 2001-434, 21st May 2001.

³⁰ Act 2001-70, 29th January 2001.

of 2014, for example, they organized large street protests against the Israel government.³¹ In response to this, the French government has offered more sustained support to Israel, either in forbidding demonstrations in support of Palestine (as occurred in the summer of 2014)³² or in stating, as Premier Minister Manuel Valls did in February 2014, that “assaults on Muslims and Catholics have not as much value as the ones suffered by the Jews.”³³ Valls further justified this position in the same interview, including a clear reference to the Holocaust: “I am telling the people sharing this opinion that Holocaust (*Shoah*), the extermination of Jews, the genocide, have to be sacralised and sacred.” As a result of these decisions, sociologist Michel Wieviorka has reached the following conclusion: “In France today ... a genuine irritation is perceptible at the realisation of a disproportion between the exaggerated sensitivity of the political class, of opinion or the media to any manifestation of anti-Semitism and the much greater indifference towards other racist excesses ... even as victims, the Jews fare better because they have a term to describe their misfortunes.”³⁴

It is within this context of memory struggles and inclinations to sacralize Holocaust memory that Dieudonné attempts to de-sacralize the symbolic force of the Holocaust and to balance Jewish sufferings and the sufferings of other victim groups, particularly Black and Arab suffering. His spectacle *Le Mur* (*The Wall*, 2013) displays Dieudonné’s political stances. On different occasions, Dieudonné compares the Jewish compensation for the Holocaust (“we all spared no expense”) and the failed attempts of “the Negroes” to receive similar compensation for past suffering. In another scene, he is peeing on a wall he after realizes it is the Wailing Wall. He also sings a popular Belgian song of the 1970s, “Cho-Cho-Cacao”, a song mocking African kids and alleged sub-Saharan indolence. However, Dieudonné transforms “Cho-cho-cacao” into

³¹ Ariane Chemin and Faïza Zerouala (2014), Chemin, Ariane and Faïza Zerouala. “Une nouvelle génération. #Gaza naît dans les rues de France.” *Le Monde*, July 28-29, 2014, 6-7.

³² On these events and the controversial influence of Dieudonné and Soral, see : Marine Turchi (2014), “Comment la galaxie Dieudonné squatte les manifestations pour Gaza.” *Reperes Antiracistes*, July 30, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2016. <http://www.reperes-antiracistes.org/article-comment-la-galaxie-dieudonne-squatte-les-manifs-propalestiniennes-marine-turchi-124258929.html..>

³³ *Canal Plus* Broadcast (2014).

³⁴ Michel Wieviorka, et al. (2007), p. 67.

“Sho-Sho-Shoananas” and inserts a strong reference to the thesis of *The Holocaust Industry*: “You have me by the Holocaust, I have you by the pineapple / one must not forget, always a mean to make money.” As suggested by the reference to a pineapple, here a symbol for the triangular trade, most of the references to the Holocaust are linked to Jewish financial claims and to the memory of slavery and the slave trade.

In 2014 *Le Mur* was banned in many cities (the bans were confirmed by the highest administrative court),³⁵ and a criminal appeal court banned the show’s DVD for hate speech and Holocaust denial.³⁶ Dieudonné was sentenced to a €20,000 fine for the parody. Despite these financial and legal troubles, Dieudonné’s anti-Semitic enterprise carefully aims at two different audiences: academics and a general audience. Indeed, his sketches involve multiple historical references and address similar points – and open up similar points of debate – as *The Holocaust Industry*. To the most popular or uneducated portion of his audience, Dieudonné devotes some grass-root anti-Semitism, as embodied in the pineapple parody or in peeing against the Wailing Wall. Dieudonné seems to be fully aware of both constituencies. In an earlier show called *1905* (an allusion to the 1905 Bill on the separation of church and state) he embodies two young Arabs from deprived suburbs who are frightened by the rather elaborated aspect of the show’s title, as well as a bourgeois Frenchman who explains what is meant by such a title. This dual audience is Dieudonné’s core contribution in the long-lasting history of Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in France. He succeeds in resuscitating a tradition of the pro-Arab extreme right, which was already active in the 1930s. Indeed, far-right leaders tried to gain the support of Arab leaders in North Africa and encourage black activists to join the far-right by refusing the Crémieux decree – a 1970 decree which granted full citizenship to the Jews of North-Africa but not the Muslims.³⁷

³⁵ John Lichfield (2014).

³⁶ Lemonde.fr, Reuters, AFP (2015), “La justice interdit la commercialisation du DVD de Dieudonné Le Mur.” *Le Monde*, March 4, 2015. Accessed June 18, 2016. http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/03/04/la-justice-interdit-la-commercialisation-du-dvd-de-dieudonne-le-mur_4587319_3224.html.

³⁷ Jean-Yves Camus (2004), p. 177.

Conclusion

That a stand-up comedian with sub-Saharan origins who is an anti-racist activist can gather millions of Internet viewers and thousands of live spectators for his sketches on Holocaust denial is something of an enigma to observers of French society. For social scientists, his career took a deviant path in which the deviant and the society both contribute to make him an outcast. Originally an anti-racist activist, in the early 2000s Dieudonné turned to focus on perceived Jewish and US-American interests as the main forces contributing to the despair of French minorities, including young Blacks and Arabs. His support of the Second Intifada promptly raised huge criticism from the mainstream media, famous intellectual, and the large portions of the political establishment. Michel Wievorka described Dieudonné's skits in the following manner: "they are evidence of the tremendous capacity of the intelligentsia to react to the slightest suspicion of anti-Semitism or, on the contrary, to the slightest attempt to restrict any criticism of Israeli policy (leading to) an ideological struggle where two camps constantly exchange blunders and exaggerations, possibly even degenerating into a form of anti-Semitism."³⁸

In such deviant careers, outcasts survive in a hostile society by rejoining sub-groups that welcome them and reinforce their deviant orientations. Dieudonné was indeed welcomed by the most heteroclit grouping of Holocaust deniers, anti-Semitic activists, radical Muslims, left-oriented anti-globalization activists, and extreme-right supporters. Among this diverse group of supporters is Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was in the audience when Dieudonné welcomed Faurisson on stage. Yet Dieudonné's radicalization and deviancy did not make him lose the majority of his first followers. Dieudonné is now at the center of a curious constellation gathering people who were once foes. Dieudonné illustrates how in today's France the syncretism of anti-Semitism is able to unite both some extreme-rightists, for whom Jews incarnate Bolshevists or the Anti-Christ, and some extreme-leftists, for whom Jews incarnate Capitalists.

³⁸ Michel Wievorka, et al. (2007), p. 34.

There are different reasons for the formation of a publicly organized culture of Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in France. The first is the reformulation of denial into a rhetoric of hyperbolic skepticism. This has been largely encouraged by the way social critique has been formulated in France over the course of the last two or three decades. The second is the effect of the “sacralization” of the Holocaust in France, a process in which the Gayssot Act (1990), which prohibited any denial of the so-called Final Solution, plays a central role. Added to this, the Israel-Palestine conflict has a large resonance in France due to the large presence of both Jews and Muslims. These three aspects of contemporary French culture make Dieudonné’s positions not that much out of tune.

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