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The Case of Dieudonné: A French Comedian's Hate

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It's still early January, but 2014 is shaping up to be a big year for the French comedian Dieudonné. The mayors of three French cities have moved to cancel his upcoming shows, insisting that he has repeatedly violated French laws against inciting racial and religious hatred and denial of the Holocaust. The French-American basketball player Tony Parker apologized for, he said, inadvertently offending people by posing with Dieudonné while making a gesture called the “*quenelle*,” which was invented by the French comic. Many people insist that it is a kind of inverted Nazi salute, but Dieudonné claims that it is simply a defiant “up yours” to the establishment. (Never mind the little joke he made about the gas chambers at a recent performance.)

After ten years of legal cat-and-mouse games, in which Dieudonné—originally Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, the son of a man from Cameroon and a white French woman—has been convicted several times for inciting racial hate, the government of François Hollande appears to have decided that enough is enough.

Whether this will just provide more grist (and publicity) for Dieudonné's mill is very much an open question. The Cannes Film Festival banned his movie “L'Antisemite,” (“The Antisemite”), in 2012, but by all accounts his career has thrived, financially and otherwise, in an atmosphere of controversy. According to *Libération*, the Paris daily, Dieudonné generated revenues of 1.8 million euros through his performances and the sale of merchandise in 2012, for a profit of 230,000 euros. (*Le Monde* reports that the government has opened an investigation into whether Dieudonné may have transferred money from France to Cameroon in order to hide his assets.) His YouTube videos—some of which solicit donations from viewers—have registered hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of viewers.

For many young people—especially those who are descendants of North African and African immigrants and who may feel like second-class citizens in French society—the attempts to silence Dieudonné have made him a hero. Efforts in the past to prevent him from performing, invoking the potential danger of public disorder, have not been very successful. The fear is that this latest effort to close down his act will backfire and increase his following.

So, how does one explain the Dieudonné phenomenon? In many ways, he resembles Italy's Beppe Grillo, another unfunny and angry comedian, who has used his own “*va fan cullo*” (up yours!) gesture to channel widespread anger at Italy's politicians. Both men use the mask of “comedy” to say things that would never be tolerated in other fora.

Dieudonné has made a career out of walking (and often crossing) a fine line between mocking racial stereotypes and using them. He got his start in the nineteen-nineties, working with a Jewish comedian named Élie Semoun. The two formed an odd couple of French comedy—the funny-looking, little Jewish kid and the big black man. Their act consisted mostly of reciprocal insults, with some gay-bashing mixed in. After watching many Élie and Dieudonné

videos, I have to confess that I found nothing witty or funny in them. In one, Dieudonné says to his Jewish partner, “The Germans should have finished the job in 1945.”

Some of this clearly anticipates Dieudonné’s recent round of Holocaust jokes and crude anti-Semitism. But it did not engender controversy in the nineties—in part because Dieudonné had a Jewish sidekick returning insult for insult. In the context of a society struggling to deal with multiculturalism—careening between deeply-held racist impulses and new forms of political correctness—their routine seemed to offer the possibility of dealing more freely with cultural and ethnic difference, in the manner of Lenny Bruce. Dieudonné ran for Parliament, in 1997, in open opposition to the far-right and anti-immigrant National Front—making it more difficult, at that point, to see his spoofing as racist. But after 1997 he stopped performing with his Jewish partner, and during the aughts, his increasingly tasteless anti-Semitic routines, without any counterbalancing, appeared more and more single-mindedly hateful. ([Tom Reiss profiled Dieudonné for *The New Yorker*, in 2007.](#))

In 2003, Dieudonné appeared on French TV dressed as an orthodox Jew and performed the Nazi salute while crying, “Israeheil.” In 2006, he invited Robert Faurisson, a French historian who has repeatedly denied the existence of the Holocaust, onstage. In the same year, he began appearing in public with Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the National Front, who has made immigrant bashing his political stock-in-trade—and who once referred to the Holocaust as “a detail of history.”

Dieudonné’s recent appearances and videos are often long, rambling rants in which the “Jewish lobby” and “Israel lobby” are portrayed as pulling the strings above everything. He posted a video reply to French President François Hollande which begins with a long riff on what Dieudonné calls “Shoananas”—which combines Shoah, the Hebrew word for the Holocaust, with the French word for pineapples (*ananas*). The video goes on for several minutes about how singing Shoananas will cure a variety of ills, including migraines and sexual dysfunction. At another point, without connecting it directly to the Jews, Dieudonné portrays himself as a victim. “The slave masters, the master-bankers say ‘Work,’ and if you say, ‘no,’ you’re a bad slave, you’re a racist.”

In a performance at his Paris club (it is not clear who actually owns it), he said, referring to a prominent French journalist, “When I hear him speak, Patrick Cohen, I say to myself, you see, the gas chambers ... too bad.” And at another point, “You see, he, if the direction of the wind changes, I am not sure he will have time to pack his suitcase.” This is classic Dieudonné. He doesn’t actually say that he hopes to send Cohen to the gas chambers; the sentence is grammatically disconnected and then followed by the word “*dommage*,” meaning “too bad,” which gives him some plausible deniability.

“Dieudonné plays a game of deliberate ambiguity,” says Damien Glez, a writer and cartoonist from Burkina Faso who has written about Dieudonné for *Jeune Afrique*, a francophone magazine published in Paris. “He is using a lot of the language and metaphors of old-fashioned French anti-Semitism before a young audience that does not have a very developed idea of anti-Semitism. They don’t know who Robert Faurisson is. And then you take this into the *banlieue*, where many young people feel oppressed by Islamophobia and angry and frustrated about the Palestinians. And everything is ambiguous and mixed together: anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, and anti-system anger. Humor and hatred. The resentment of the Le Pen right and the anger of the recent immigrants of the *banlieue*. Even the gesture of the *quenelle* is ambiguous.”

This gesture, which Dieudonné began using a few years ago, is not, strictly speaking, a Nazi salute—rather than raising a stiff right arm up in the air, he points his arm down, and then places his left hand on his right shoulder. In his video “Hollande” he calls the *quenelle* a signal of “faith and courage,” and attributes its meaning to his encounter with a young, white seventeen-year-old cancer victim, who performed the *quenelle* in front of an M.R.I. machine and onstage with Dieudonné.

“It’s a gesture of the free man in front of the system of his jailers,” Dieudonné said in a video made last September after the minister of defense, Jean-Yves Le Drian, disciplined two French soldiers for doing the *quenelle*. “We piss on

your institutions, Monsieur Le Drian, we shit on your government and on your Republic and on your shitty democracy. We are for a coup d'état, done by farce, by non-violence, by the *quenelle*," Dieudonné said. What he didn't explain is that the soldiers had been photographed while making the gesture in front of a synagogue. Many of Dieudonné's followers have connected the *quenelle* to his anti-Semitic rants: several have posted pictures of themselves doing it in front of Holocaust monuments and even in front of the entrance to Auschwitz.

"The phenomenon is growing, partly because of the symbolic power of the gesture," says Rabbi Rivon Krygier, who heads a conservative Jewish congregation in Paris, and who is active in interfaith dialogue. "It is a very cleverly constructed symbol that is disguised but breaks a taboo." It is the kind of thing that travels well through social media—kids posting pictures of themselves doing the *quenelle* as a way of expressing defiance, often unaware of its implications. And so Tony Parker (point guard for the San Antonio Spurs) did the gesture with Dieudonné in a photograph taken three years ago. And just the other week, the French soccer star Nicolas Anelka, who plays in Great Britain, did it after scoring a goal, exporting the controversy to the U.K. Both athletes insisted that they simply considered it to be a symbol of defiance and solidarity with Dieudonné.

"Dieudonné has created a very clever system," says Rabbi Krygier, "He has singled out the Jews and made them a scapegoat. The Jewish Lobby that dominates the world, that controls everything that is pulling the strings—all the old anti-Semitic rhetoric." Inciting racial hatred is a crime in France, and Dieudonné has been convicted under the law nine times. But the state has failed, so far, to extract fines from him or to stop his performances. "So, now, he is the scapegoat, the victim," Krygier says.

On the *Jeune Afrique* Web site, which has criticized Dieudonné, some readers wrote that he was being singled out for his Jewish jokes while blacks and Arabs are the object of insults or prejudice on a regular basis. "Why is publishing the caricatures of the prophet Muhammad a question of free expression and Dieudonné's act is incitement of racial hatred?" one asked. "I don't think that's a fair criticism," says Rabbi Krygier, "When Christiane Taubira [the minister of justice, who is black] was the object of racist remarks, these were universally, and justly, condemned. There should not be a competition between persecutions: it's just a way of pitting one group against the other."

On Thursday, the French Conseil d'Etat backed the decision of the mayor of Nantes to cancel Dieudonné's performance there. "The Republic has won," said Manuel Valls, the minister of the interior, on hearing the news. "One cannot tolerate preaching of hate of the other, racism, anti-Semitism, or Holocaust denial. That is not France."

Yet this may prove a temporary and even Pyrrhic victory. The performance in Nantes was cancelled, but some six thousand people still showed up to buy tickets. And more challenges await in other cities on his planned tour. The matter may eventually come up before the European Court of Human Rights, as a question of right of assembly and expression. "Dieudonné's performances do not advertise themselves as anti-Semitic—even if they end up being so in fact," said Danièle Lochak, a professor of public law at the Paris West University Nanterre La Défense, who was interviewed in *Le Monde*. "And so banning them before they take place is a delicate matter."

And with each controversy comes more and more publicity for Dieudonné—a mediocre comedian who has gotten a lot of mileage out of very little talent and a good deal of hate.

Folks: racists come in many colors. Here is an example of one: a black French anti-semite aligning himself with the French far-right whose target of their racial hatred include blacks too! (Hate can sometimes create strange bedfellows.)

