

The Move to Muzzle Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala: The Bête Noire of the French Establishment

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French mainstream media and politicians are starting off the New Year with a shared resolution for 2014: permanently muzzle a Franco-African comedian who is getting to be too popular among young people. In between Christmas and New Year's Eve, no less than the President of the Republic, François Hollande, while visiting Saudi Arabia on (very big) business, said his government must find a way to ban performances by the comedian Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, as called for by French Interior Minister, Manuel Valls.

The leader of the conservative opposition party, UMP, Jean-François Copé, immediately chimed in with his "total support" for silencing the unmanageable entertainer. In the unanimous media chorus, the weekly *Nouvel Observateur* editorialized that Dieudonné is "already dead", washed up, finished. Editors publicly disputed whether it was a better tactic to try to jail him for "incitement to racial hatred", close his shows on grounds of a potential "threat to public order", or put pressure on municipalities by threatening cultural subsidies with cuts if they allow him to perform.

The goal of national police boss Manuel Valls is clear, but the powers that be are groping for the method. The dismissive cliché heard repeatedly is that "nobody laughs at Dieudonné any more". In reality, the opposite is true. And that is the problem. On his recent tour of French cities, videos show large, packed theaters roaring with laughter at their favorite humorist. He has popularized a simple gesture, which he calls the "quenelle".

It is being imitated by young people all over France. It simply and obviously means, we are fed up. To invent a pretext for destroying Dieudonné, the leading Jewish organizations CRIF (*Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France*, the French AIPAC) and LICRA (*Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme*, which enjoys special privileges under French law) have come up with a fantasy to brand Dieudonné and his followers as "Nazis".

The quenelle is all too obviously a vulgar gesture roughly meaning "up yours", with one hand placed at the top of the other arm pointing down to signify "how far up" this is to be. But for the CRIF and LICRA, the quenelle is "a Nazi salute in reverse". (You can never be too "vigilant" when looking for the hidden Hitler.) As someone has remarked, a "Nazi salute in reverse" might as well be considered anti-Nazi. If indeed it had anything to do with Heil Hitler. Which it clearly does not. But world media are taking up this claim, at least pointing out that "some consider the quenelle to be a Nazi salute in reverse".

Never mind that those who use it have no doubt about what it means: F— the system! But to what extent are the CRIF and LICRA "the system"? France needs all the laughter it can get French industry is vanishing, with factory shutdowns week after week. Taxes on low

income citizens are going up, to save the banks and the euro. Disillusion with the European Union is growing. EU rules exclude any serious effort to improve the French economy. Meanwhile, politicians on the left and the right continue their empty speeches, full of clichés about “human rights” – largely as an excuse to go to war in the Middle East or rant against China and Russia. The approval rating of President Hollande has sunk to 15%.

However people vote, they get the same policies, made in EU. Why then are the ruling politicians focusing their wrath on “the most talented humorist of his generation” (as his colleagues acknowledge, even when denouncing him)? The short answer is probably that Dieudonné’s surging popularity among young people illustrates a growing generation gap. Dieudonné has turned laughter against the entire political establishment.

This has led to a torrent of abuse and vows to shut down his shows, ruin him financially and even put him in jail. The abuse also provides a setting for physical attacks against him. A few days ago, his assistant Jacky Sigaux was physically attacked in broad daylight by several masked men in front of the city hall of the 19th arrondissement – just opposite the Buttes Chaumont Park. He has lodged a complaint. But how much protection is to be expected from a government whose Interior Minister, Manuel Valls – in charge of police – has vowed to seek ways to silence Dieudonné? The story is significant but is almost certain to be badly reported outside France – just as it is badly reported inside France, the source of almost all foreign reports. In translation, a bit of garbling and falsehoods add to the confusion.

Why Do They Hate Him?

Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala was born in a Paris suburb nearly 48 years ago. His mother was white, from Brittany, his father was African, from Cameroun. This should make him a poster child for the “multiculturalism” the ideologically dominant left claims to promote. And during the first part of his career, teaming up with his Jewish friend, Elie Simoun, he was just that: campaigning against racism, focusing his criticism on the National Front and even running for office against an NF candidate in the dormitory town of Dreux, some sixty miles West of Paris, where he lives. Like the best humorists, Dieudonné always targeted current events, with a warmth and dignity unusual in the profession.

His career flourished, he played in movies, was a guest on television, branched out on his own. A great observer, he excels at relatively subtle imitations of various personality types and ethnic groups from Africans to Chinese. Ten years ago, on December 1, 2003, as guest on a TV show appropriately called “You Can’t Please Everybody”, dedicated to current events, Dieudonné came on stage roughly disguised as “a convert to Zionist extremism” advising others to get ahead by “joining the American-Israeli Axis of Good”. This was in the first year of the US assault on Iraq, which France’s refusal to join had led Washington to rechristen what it calls “French fries” (Belgian, actually) as “Freedom fries”.

A relatively mild attack on George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” seemed totally in the mood of the times. The sketch ended with a brief salute, “Isra-heil”. This was far from being vintage Dieudonné, but nevertheless, the popular humorist was at the time enthusiastically embraced by other performers while the studio audience gave him a standing ovation. Then the protests started coming in, especially concerning the final gesture seen as likening Israel to Nazi Germany. “Anti-Semitism!” was the cry, although the target was Israel (and the United States as allies in the Middle East). Calls multiplied to ban his shows, to sue him, to

destroy his career. Dieudonné attempted to justify his sketch as not targeting Jews as such, but, unlike others before him, would not apologize for an offense he did not believe he had committed. Why no protests from Africans he had made fun of? Or Muslims? Or Chinese? Why should a single community react with such fury? Thus began a decade of escalation. LICRA began a long series of lawsuits against him ("incitement to racial hatred"), at first losing, but keeping up the pressure. Instead of backing down, Dieudonné went farther in his criticism of "Zionism" after each attack.

Meanwhile, Dieudonné was gradually excluded from television appearances and treated as a pariah by mainstream media. It is only the recent internet profusion of images showing young people making the quenelle sign that has moved the establishment to conclude that a direct attack would be more effective than trying to ignore him.

The Ideological Background

To begin to understand the meaning of the Dieudonné affair, it is necessary to grasp the ideological context. For reasons too complex to review here, the French left – the left that once was primarily concerned with the welfare of the working class, with social equality, opposition to aggressive war, freedom of speech – has virtually collapsed. The right has won the decisive economic battle, with the triumph of policies favoring monetary stability and the interests of international investment capital ("neo-liberalism").

As a consolation prize, the left enjoys a certain ideological dominance, based on anti-racism, anti-nationalism and devotion to the European Union – even to the hypothetical "social Europe" that daily recedes into the cemetery of lost dreams. In fact, this ideology fits perfectly with a globalization geared to the requirements of international finance capital. In the absence of any serious socio-economic left, France has sunk into a sort of "Identity Politics", which both praises multiculturalism and reacts vehemently against "communitarianism", that is, the assertion of any unwelcome ethnic particularisms. But some ethnic particularisms are less welcome than others.

The Muslim veil was first banned in schools, and demands to ban it in adult society grow. The naqib and burka, while rare, have been legally banned. Disputes erupt over Halal foods in cafeterias, prayers in the street, while cartoons regularly lampoon Islam. Whatever one may think of this, the fight against communitarianism can be seen by some as directed against one particular community. Meanwhile, French leaders have been leading the cry for wars in Muslim countries from Libya to Syria, while insisting on devotion to Israel.

Meanwhile, another community is the object of constant solicitude. In the last twenty years, while religious faith and political commitment have declined drastically, the Holocaust, called the Shoah in France, has gradually become a sort of State Religion. Schools commemorate the Shoah annually, it increasingly dominates historical consciousness, which in other areas is declining along with many humanistic studies.

In particular, of all the events in France's long history, the only one protected by law is the Shoah. The so-called Gayssot Law bans any questioning of the history of the Shoah, an altogether unprecedented interference with freedom of speech. Moreover, certain organizations, such as LICRA, have been granted the privilege of suing individuals on the basis of "incitement to racial hatred" (very broadly and unevenly interpreted) with the possibility of collecting damages on behalf of the "injured community". In practice, these laws are used primarily to prosecute alleged "anti-Semitism" or "negationism" concerning

the Shoah. Even though they frequently are thrown out of court, such lawsuits constitute harassment and intimidation.

France is the rare country where the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement against Israeli settlement practices can also be attacked as “incitement to racial hatred”. The violence-prone Jewish Defense League, outlawed in the United States and even in Israel, is known for smashing book shops or beating up isolated, even elderly, individuals. When identified, flight to Israel is a good way out. The victims of the JDL fail to inspire anything close to the massive public indignation aroused when a Jewish person falls victim to wanton violence. Meanwhile, politicians flock to the annual dinner of the CRIF with the same zeal that in the United States they flock to the dinner of AIPAC – not so much for campaign funds as to demonstrate their correct sentiments.

France has the largest Jewish population in Western Europe, which actually largely escaped the deportation during German occupation that expelled Jewish immigrants to concentration camps. In addition to an old, established Jewish population, there are many newcomers from North Africa. All this adds up to a very dynamic, successful population, numerous in the more visible and popular professions (journalism, show business, as well as science and medicine, among others). Of all French parties, the Socialist Party (especially via the Israeli Labor Party of Shimon Peres in the Socialist International) has the closest historic ties with Israel. In the 1950s, when France was fighting against the Algerian national liberation movement, the French government (via Peres) contributed to the Israeli project of building nuclear weapons.

Today it is not the Labor Party that rules Israel, but the far right. Hollande’s recent cozy trip to Benjamin Netanyahu showed that the rightward drift of policy in Israel has done nothing to strain relations – which seem closer than ever. Yet this Jewish community is very small compared to the large number of Arab immigrants from North Africa or black immigrants from France’s former colonies in Africa. Several years ago, a leading Socialist Party intellectual, Pascal Boniface, cautiously warned party leaders that their heavy bias in favor of the Jewish community could eventually cause electoral problems. This statement in a political assessment document caused an uproar which nearly cost him his career. But the fact remains: it is not hard for French people of Arab or African background to feel that the “communitarianism” that really has clout is the Jewish community.

The Political Uses of the Holocaust

Norman Finkelstein showed some time ago that the Holocaust can be exploited for less than noble purposes: such as extorting funds from Swiss banks. However, in France the situation is very different. No doubt, constant reminders of the Shoah serve as a sort of protection for Israel from the hostility aroused by its treatment of the Palestinians. But the religion of the Holocaust has another, deeper political impact with no direct relation to the fate of the Jews.

More than anything else, Auschwitz has been interpreted as the symbol of what nationalism leads to. Reference to Auschwitz has served to give a bad conscience to Europe, and notably to the French, considering that their relatively small role in the matter was the result of military defeat and occupation by Nazi Germany. Bernard-Henri Lévy, the writer whose influence has grown to grotesque proportions in recent years (he led President Sarkozy into war against Libya), began his career as ideologue by claiming that “fascism” is the genuine “French ideology”. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

By placing Auschwitz as the most significant event of recent history, various writers and speakers justify by default the growing power of the European Union as necessary replacement for Europe's inherently "bad" nations. Never again Auschwitz! Dissolve the nation-states into a technical bureaucracy, free of the emotional influence of citizens who might vote incorrectly. Do you feel French? Or German? You should feel guilty about it – because of Auschwitz. Europeans are less and less enthusiastic about the EU as it ruins their economies and robs them of all democratic power over the economy.

They can vote for gay marriage, but not for the slightest Keynesian measure, much less socialism. Nevertheless, guilt about the past is supposed to keep them loyal to the European dream. Dieudonné's fans, judging from photographs, appear to be predominantly young men, fewer women, mostly between the ages of twenty and thirty. They were born two full generations after the end of World War II. They have spent their lives hearing about the Shoah. Over 300 Paris schools bear a plaque commemorating the tragic fate of Jewish children deported to Nazi concentration camps.

What can be the effect of all this? For many who were born long after these terrible events, it seems that everyone is supposed to feel guilty – if not for what they didn't do, for what they supposedly *might* do if they had a chance. When Dieudonné transformed an old semi-racist "tropical" song, Chaud Cacao, into Shoah Ananas, the tune is taken up en masse by Dieudonné fans. I venture to think that they are not making fun of the *real* Shoah, but rather of the constant reminders of events that are supposed to make them feel guilty, insignificant and powerless. Much of this generation is sick of hearing about the period 1933-1945, while their own future is dim.

Nobody Knows When to Stop

Last Sunday, a famous football player of Afro-Belgian origin, Nicolas Anelka, who plays in the UK, made a quenelle sign after scoring a goal – in solidarity with this friend Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala. With this simple and basically insignificant gesture, the uproar soared to new heights. In the French parliament, Meyer Habib represents "overseas French" – some 4,000 Israelis of French origin. On Monday he twittered: "Anelka's quenelle is intolerable! I will introduce a bill to punish this new Nazi salute practiced by anti-Semites." France has adopted laws to "punish anti-Semitism".

The result is the opposite. Such measures simply tend to confirm the old notion that "the Jews run the country" and contribute to growing anti-Semitism. When French youth see a Franco-Israeli attempt to outlaw a simple gesture, when the Jewish community moves to ban their favorite humorist, anti-Semitism can only grow even more rapidly. Yet in this escalation, the relationship of forces is very uneven. A humorist has words as his weapons, and fans who may disperse when the going gets rough. On the other side is the dominant ideology, and the power of the State. In this sort of clash, civic peace depends on the wisdom of those with most power to show restraint. If they fail to do so, this can be a game with no winners.

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