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So how does it work, the Quenelle?

January 15, 2014 — David Hirsh | [Edit](#)

[This piece by David Hirsh is on Left Foot Forward.](#)



Nicholas Anelka scored a Premier League goal for West Brom and at that moment, when the cameras were focused on him, he straightened his right arm as if beginning to raise it in a Seig Heil Hitler salute.

However his left arm went over to his right and it appeared to suppress the cheeky and rebellious gesture that his right arm was eager to make. His left arm kept his right arm safely down by his side; his left arm protected him from the punishment that the grown-ups, the establishment, would have meted out in response to an un-suppressed Hitler salute.

But in fact this whole train of thought is itself already captured in the stylised gesture, which is known as ‘la quenelle’. The defenders of the Quenelle say that it is an anti-establishment salute, a shared expression of the impulse to kick back against all the hypocrisies of bourgeois society; like when Sid Vicious wore a Swastika t-shirt.

The Quenelle was invented by the French comedian Dieudonné. He found a sharp and succinct way of expressing the huge, complex and diverse nest of resentments he felt against the existing ‘powers that be’. He made a joke out of the memory of the Holocaust. He put together the Hebrew word, often used in French to refer to the Holocaust, *Shoah*, with *Ananas*, the French word for pineapple and he got ‘Shoananas’. Dance around, sing ‘Shoananas’ to a silly tune, have fun with Zyklon B and with yellow stars, that is all that you need to do.

Why is it that laughing at the idea of the Holocaust works so well as a symbolic of blasphemy against all that the powerful hold dear? The reason is that the notion of Jewish power resonates strongly, in ways of which we are not immediately conscious, and in ways which can be tremendously exciting and rewarding.

After decades of feeling that we are all guilty, somehow, of the *Shoah* – the Jews of France were rounded up mainly by French people – the freedom to disobey the powerful and to release our own pent up fears in satirical laughter is attractive.

Look at Palestine! The Jews are no better than us, they're worse! We in post national Europe have moved on, it is only the Jews who are still racists, who have failed to learn from Auschwitz! Where does the guilt come from? It must be an imposition from the Jews and from the teachers and from the government and from the cultural elite, no? What if we don't feel guilty, but we feel that they insist that we do? Jewish power operates through the requirement that everybody else feels guilty?

Antisemitism is full of potent, half-understood symbolism, half-recognised meanings, half-confronted fears. One of the key lives of antisemitism has been as a radical, anti-hegemonic movement, a fight back of the little people.

Dieudonné is a black man in France, he lives in a world where racism structures people's lives; he lives in a world where Muslims are demonized; he makes sense of this with a radical mix of Islamist and left-wing anti-imperialist and antiracist rhetoric.

One of his starting points, no doubt, is concern for the Palestinians who suffer under occupation and who have been pushed around the Middle East for a century. Sympathy with the oppressed? Yes, but then anger with the oppressors. The Palestinians symbolise victims everywhere? Yes, then the Israelis symbolise the victimisers and Jews get pictured as being central to all that is bad in the world.

It is a strangely smooth and easy journey from concern for Palestinian suffering to anger with Israel, to anger with those Jews 'here' who take Israel's side, to finding out what really works in a fight with those Jews here; to finding out what really baits Jews.

Antisemitism thinks of Jews as cunning, powerful and immoral; being behind the powerful and in control of them.

Antisemitism saw Jews behind revolutions and wars, behind Bolshevism, behind capitalism, behind imperialism, bankers, money lenders, landlords, pornographers, freemasons; today some people see Jews (or Zionists) behind the neocons, behind the Iraq war, as saboteurs of Middle East peace, as over-influential in academia, Hollywood, the media, the professions; Jews are the comfortable, the hypocrites, they have become 'white'.

For some, anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism and antisemitism close in on each other, they share the same resonances, the same feelings, the same enemies, the same images, the same discourses.

All this is complicated, requires subtle arguments, difficult political judgments, historical knowledge, analytical ability. But the *Shoah* as a pineapple and the quenelle – well these are easy.

Today's antisemitisms have to have some way of relating to the Holocaust. Holocaust denial was tempting, but it turned out was both too difficult to achieve (because the evidence was too clear) but also unnecessarily ambitious.

All you need are subtle changes of framing in how we think about the Holocaust.

Perhaps the Holocaust is just one instance of modernity's inhumanity; perhaps Stalin was worse; perhaps the Jews (perhaps the Zionists?) use the memory of the Holocaust for their own purposes. And the second step on these normalization strategies is to turn the anger back on those who try to keep the Holocaust sacred for the Jews.

The cleverest way to deal with the Holocaust is this: focus on how the Holocaust is 'used', not on what the Holocaust actually was. Turn it around. Zvi Rex famously said: "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz". Neither will those who take it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the Palestinians, universal symbols of all those who are suppressed by the global system of America, of Zionism, of Imperialism, of whiteness.

So why are French black men doing the (suppressed) Nazi salute? Because they aren't thinking about the Holocaust; they are thinking about 'The Holocaust'; not about the thing itself but about the discourse which they say has grown around it.

If there was once Holocaust piety, they break it with Holocaust blasphemy.

The Quenelle isn't about Hitler, it doesn't relate directly to the Nazis; rather it is about the way in which 'The Holocaust' is used and policed and owned by the Jews (or by the Zionists, or by the grown ups, or by the Americans or by the Murdoch Press).

The global system, the French bourgeoisie, the Americans – how do we hurt them, how do we puncture their po-faced hypocrisy? We rhyme Shoah with Ananas. That is all. Hurtful resentment and Jew-baiting takes the place of a positive struggle for a better world.

Dieudonné is so far gone down the antisemitism road that he doesn't worry any more. If a French court [outlaws](#) his antisemitic show, he says it is because the judge is a great nephew of Alfred Dreyfuss himself. He is happy, now to key straight into the symbolic heart of the French anti-Semitic tradition.

So how does it work, the Quenelle? One way it works is that it has become cool for people to be photographed doing it [in naughty places](#); like outside the school in Toulouse where three Jews were murdered; like on the railways tracks to Auschwitz; like at the Wailing Wall; like at the Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

There are two key things which link together contemporary forms of antisemitism. One is a focus on fighting for free speech against the Jewish (establishment, Zionist, American etc) impulse to dictate what is allowed to be said. The other is that antisemitism is not frankly admitted. The Quenelle openly refers to Nazism, but its link to Nazism and antisemitism is also vigorously denied.

What will the football authorities do about Nicolas Anelka's antisemitic salute? How can a black man be antisemitic? Well, this is how.

This piece by David Hirsh is on Left Foot Forward.