

# Some Epistemological Issues in the Public Debate on Contemporary Antisemitism in France

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**Abstract** During the last 15 years, the phenomenon of an increase in antisemitic acts in France has led to numerous commentaries, to people taking public stances, and to some preliminary university-based research studies. In this article, we formulate certain epistemological and moral issues that we always encounter sooner or later when we study antisemitism. By starting with certain elements of the public discussion in which a number of academics have participated, we wanted to raise awareness of the reasoning and logic of ideas connected to sociological practice. Among the number of entangled questions that the public debates let us glimpse, at least two of these call into question the practice of sociology. The first has to do with the negation of the reality of contemporary antisemitism. The second touches on a problem that is both moral and epistemological, and has to do with the problem of causal determinism. An individual is only responsible if he is free. If we think that individuals are determined by causes, we must accept to think them as not responsible. We think that it is by taking into account these two questions that a non-deterministic sociology could be developed. This article is dedicated to providing a brief answer to these questions.

**Keywords** Antisemitism · Sociology · Studies on forces against antisemitism · Violence · Epistemology · Negationism

In a recent text, published in the journal *Le Débat*, the historian François Pierre Nora (2015, 7) argues that we are seeing a “return to the Jewish question” in France. (See

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also Brenner et al. 2004) It is very impressive to see the number and especially the increase in the number of anti-Jewish acts in France since the beginning of the century.<sup>1</sup> As evidence for this, we cite numbers provided by the Ministry of the Interior drawn from annual reports of the French Advisory Commission on Human Rights (*La Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme* — CNCDH). These reports demonstrate that there has been a significant increase in the number of these kinds of acts since the early 2000s. The number of violent acts and threats grew from 81 in 1998 to 82 in 1999 to 936 in 2002. Such incidents numbered 389 in 2011, 615 in 2012, 423 in 2013, and 851 in 2014. Even though polls have not shown a significant increase in anti-Jewish sentiment in France,<sup>2</sup> anti-Jewish acts have reached a level that has not been seen since World War II. In 2014, they numbered 1,662, constituting more than half of the total number of racist acts and threats in the nation that year. As the whole history of antisemitism shows, including cases of antisemitism without Jews (in England after 1290, and in Poland after 1967), anti-Jewish hatred is not directly correlated to the presence or number of Jews in a given place. However, today, Jewish people represent less than 1% of the national population of France.

During the last 15 years, this phenomenon of an increase in antisemitic acts has led to numerous commentaries, to people taking public stances, and to some preliminary university-based research studies.<sup>3</sup> In a context marked by an increase in aggression and attacks, many voices have also expressed their unease with certain analyses about antisemitism published by the media.

Within the confines of this article, we will neither evaluate the breadth of, nor provide details about the different expressions of this palpable unease felt not only by the Jews in France, but also by a certain number of intellectuals. What needs to be highlighted is that sociology itself — in particular, the sociology of the lower classes, or urban sociology — has often felt itself challenged, sometimes by some of its most respected representatives<sup>4</sup> (Lemieux 2005, 27). Sociology has been challenged not only on the cognitive level, because of its difficulties in recognizing and providing a satisfactory account of the violence,<sup>5</sup> but also on a moral level, because, according to its harshest critics, sociology leads to the dissolution of the

<sup>1</sup> A synthesized and detailed presentation can be found in Pierre-André Taguieff 2008, 375–384 and in Taguieff 2015, 139–155.

<sup>2</sup> Nonna Mayer, a political scientist, provides further evidence for this in her research findings, especially in the annuals of *Rapport d'Activités Annuelles de la Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme*, published under the title “*La lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme, et la xénophobie*” (which can be found at [www.cncdh.fr](http://www.cncdh.fr)).

<sup>3</sup> See the works of Mayer and Taguieff previously mentioned. See also Lapeyronnie 2005; Wiewiorka et al. 2005; Birnbaum 2015b. For a long-term view, see Dreyfus 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Among the critics to recognize, in particular, consider the work of the former director of *Charlie Hebdo*, Philippe Val (2015, 214–276).

<sup>5</sup> In a review of the voluminous 2005 work written by approximately a dozen sociologists under the lead of Michel Wiewiorka, Eric Conan states, for example, that “from the work supported by public funds, this collective text is fairly revealing about the current state of the most established French sociologists. Four years after the sudden uprising of anti-Semitism, this ‘on-the-ground research’ based on interviews teaches us less than what the press had already presented, and they were already slow to react to this troubling resurgence” (Conan 2005). See also Barrot 2007, 66–71.

sense of social responsibility that was supposed to have produced the violence. Recently, former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls made a statement that has significantly contributed to politicizing the debate on the role of sociology. He declared, with regard to the jihadist violence, “I have had enough of those who permanently search for excuses and cultural or sociological explanations for what has happened.” While sociology has aimed to study social phenomena in a non-normative way, paradoxically, it may have contributed to masking part of the reality of contemporary antisemitism.

In good logical form, those who criticize the field take aim not so much at sociology per se, but rather at a more tempting pitfall, “sociologism,”<sup>6</sup> to which it would obviously be abusive to reduce sociology (Bourricaud 1975). What remains is that above and beyond the ideological issues, which are not the focus of our attention in this article, we would like to show that one dimension of these public discussions should interest all researchers who seek to develop a non-deterministic sociology of antisemitism.

Our path is also most definitely perilous, for, starting from the fragile intuitions that emerge from the unease that we have just evoked, we will try to formulate certain epistemological and moral issues that we always encounter sooner or later when we study antisemitism. Yet, in fact, antisemitism is part of these “hot” objects of research that are characterized by a more or less conflicted tangle of cognitive and moral dimensions. By starting with certain elements of the public discussion in which a number of academics have participated, we wanted to raise an awareness of the reasoning and logic of ideas connected to sociological practice.

Among the number of entangled questions that the public debates allow us to glimpse, at least two of these call into question the practice of sociology. The first has to do with the negation of the reality of contemporary antisemitism. The second touches on a problem that is both moral and epistemological. We think that by taking into account these two questions, another sociology could be developed. This article is dedicated to providing a brief answer to these questions.

## Consent to the Real

It is true that during the first two years of the 21st century, at least until the attacks on the French synagogues during Easter weekend in 2002, the intellectual and political reactions were surprisingly limited. We still often thought that these acts of violence were isolated, whether they involved school-based aggressions or ones where the victims were children leaving Jewish schools at the end of the day, or simply violence in the street.<sup>7</sup> Certain intellectuals indicated that they were troubled

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<sup>6</sup> In a more concise manner, according to Bernard Valade, this pejorative term labels “a mode of sociological interpretation that attributes to society a total explanatory power in the analysis of human behavior.” Valade identifies the criticism “of the excesses of a methodological position that systematically aims at explaining elements by taking the group as a whole” (Valade 1989).

<sup>7</sup> An interview with philosopher Luc Ferry, the former minister of youth, national education and research, in *Le Monde* on February 6, 2003 on the community conflict and the upsurge of antisemitism in schools indicates the beginning of governmental awareness of the issue. He also recalled this in a book of

by the “disconcerting silence,” particularly by those on the left (Kandel 2002, and Ghiles-Meilhac 2015, 204–206). At the same time, in 2002, the anti-racist organization SOS Racisme and the *Union des Étudiants Juifs de France* (Union of Jewish French Students) came together to co-author *Le Livre Blanc des Violences Antisémites en France depuis Septembre 2000* (*The White Book of Antisemitic Violence in France since September of 2000*) that drew up a first list, 75 pages long, of acts (attacks, arson, assaults, and insults) all the while noting this: “It’s a strange thing, that the question being asked is not how to fight evil, but if evil exists.”<sup>8</sup>

It remains today, that even while antisemitic violence has gotten to the point of murder, no serious observer denies that these crimes have taken place. If there is any denial, it is not about either the violence or the murder, as the “historic” deniers would have said (Igounet 2000). Rather, the denial is more a subtle questioning about whether an antisemitic will is at the heart of these actions. In other words, it is only when the interpretation of the events begins to happen that the anti-Jewish dimension disappears. For example, we can cite immediate reactions after the kidnapping, torture, and assassination of Ilan Halimi, a young French Jew, sequestered and tortured for three weeks in 2006. “That Ilan’s Jewishness may have played a role in the delinquents’ violence,” wrote the historian Esther Benbassa, “is not impossible. But to believe that they were driven by an articulated antisemitic ideology would be without a doubt excessive. . . . It is a Jew who is dead. But anyone among us, Jewish or not, could have been in his place. It would be wise to avoid the trap of ‘communitarism’ of Ilan Halimi’s suffering” (Benbassa 2006). In the same way, several observers have developed opinions that are based on a supposed opposition between two forces — antisemitic violence that is supported by an extreme right-wing ideology, and the gangster behavior of a group of juvenile delinquents from the suburbs, as if one could not be both antisemitic and a gang member.<sup>9</sup> We should also note that the first Youssouf Fofana trial, Fofana being the name of the head of the *Barbares* gang (Gang of Barbarians), took place behind closed doors, incorporating a “total omission of the antisemitic act” (Adler 2009).

It is true that anti-Jewish violence, at its core, poses a daunting challenge for any sociologist who worries about avoiding an essentialist trap and single-cause explanations. Without even speaking about the intrinsic problem caused by the enigma of the move to action that baffles any explanation, how can one articulate the antisemitic dimension of these acts when there are other possible reasons for the violence that contribute to the explanation of these acts? That is to say, there is a real challenge of knowledge here.

What remains striking — when one dives retrospectively into a reading of the analysis and immediate responses that these violent acts aroused in academics — is

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Footnote 7 continued

interviews: “The recent increase in anti-Jewish violence represents a first in France since the Second World War. I was almost the only one who spoke about this among the political class when I was the minister, which led to my being copiously insulted by the left in the *Assemblée*” (Ferry 2011, 299).

<sup>8</sup> Union des Étudiants Juifs de France, SOS Racisme, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Adrien Barrot spends significant time on this opposition, notably recalling that “Nazism was also a gangster enterprise on a large scale, a measly delinquency become political gangsterism” (Barrot 2007, 28).

the persistent tendency to cover up the antisemitism under social and political factors that deconstruct it to the point of almost making it disappear. By an astonishing deviation from the critical spirit a number of academics tried at times to deconstruct the idea of the growth of antisemitism in France in order to affirm their conviction that antisemitism remains an artificially exaggerated phenomenon. Who would have an interest in exaggerating in this way? According to texts, the interest comes from various sources. Without any particular order, the following list of reasons comes to mind: particularism, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant racism, or simply Zionism. Recently, French philosopher Alain Badiou included all of these ideas in his thesis that the increase in antisemitism in France is only an invention of right-wing Zionist groups. Badiou asks certain questions: Who are those who are stigmatizing Arab youth in low-income neighborhoods? Who are those who are leading the campaign against the “wave” of antisemitism? Where do they come from? What is their rhetoric? What interests do they defend? He asks these questions in a work that, while reflecting on the rise of antisemitism, never refers to the assassination of Ilan Halimi.<sup>10</sup> Offering a comparative perspective, a collective work edited by a group led by Étienne Balibar, brings together authors such as Balibar, Judith Butler, Eric Hazan, and Daniel Lindenberg<sup>11</sup> to give their observations about antisemitism in France. The work expresses a genuine “fear in the face of the increasingly systematic use of ... the theme of the ‘rise of antisemitism’ or the ‘new Judeophobia’ to disqualify all critiques of the colonial and military policies led by the government of Ariel Sharon since the end of 2000” (Balibar et al. 2013, 7). Following this same philosophy of suspicion, some are asking themselves if there is a distinction between racism and antisemitism “serving if not to establish a hierarchy between the two?” (Marelli 2006, 136). According to French sociologist Laurent Mucchielli, the increase in the number of identified antisemitic acts “is not a translation of some ‘return to antisemitism’ but rather it is simply correlated with the Second Intifada and the Israeli policies with regard to the Middle East (the Gaza war)” (Mucchielli 2009). This suggests that violence and aggression against the Jews serve only to provide a simple critique of Israeli policies.

On the one hand, it goes without saying that one can discuss the interpretations, forms, and meaning of the rise of antisemitism in France. On the other hand, even though political sociologist Raphael Liogier very surprisingly tried,<sup>12</sup> it is impossible to ignore the rise in antisemitic acts in France since the start of the early 2000s without purely and simply negating reality. The fact that these contortions of reality are so frequent with academics committed to the left is troubling. In any case, it reminds one that part of the revolutionary ultra-left led the

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou and Eric Hazan 2011. For more on Alain Badiou, see Eric Marty’s article, “*Alain Badiou: l’Avenir d’une négation*,” reprinted in Marty 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Lindenberg criticized those who “made themselves the representatives of the Jewish “community,”” denouncing ... a ‘wave of antisemitism’ of which the reality is not proved yet” (Lindenberg 2002, 61–62).

<sup>12</sup> “According to the *Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l’Homme*, antisemitic acts [have been] in a state of constant decrease for the past ten years... while anti-Muslim acts are on the increase” (Liogier 2012, 136).

denial of the gas chambers in France during World War II. Their perspective was that events had to be submitted to a theory of history in which antisemitism had to be subsumed under a social-economic explanation.<sup>13</sup> How, in effect, can one explain the destruction of the Jews by an exploitative theory of racism? When the reality of the extermination could not be deduced from a concept or from the theory, it could be tempting to conclude that it was a fiction with political goals: that of Zionism. As French historian Pierre Vidal Naquet pointed out, “All the revisionists were committed anti-Zionists.”<sup>14</sup> On an epistemological level, the example of the old revisionist negators shows the curious turn of the theoretical spirit, perhaps one that is anti-sociological, which consists in deducing the “real” on the basis of a concept. This logic brings to mind the “ontological” argument of Saint Anselm in favor of the existence of God. God cannot not exist because, without existence, he would not be perfect. Any correct understanding of the conception of God must consider him in this way, such that there is nothing greater. It is therefore, properly speaking, inconceivable that God could not exist. This kind of deduction of reality, starting with a concept or a theory, is not relevant for a sociology that remains tied to the empirical.

On the research level, the problem is actually more subtle. It is not enough to simply oppose the idea that all historical and sociological research must start from the real. In fact, one does not reach reality without intermediaries. In regard to these concepts, the majority of historians and sociologists have long criticized the naivety of 19th-century positivists. They realize that their objects of research are built by analyses that frequently rely on a conceptual or theoretical framework. That this analysis is situated, engaged with, and based upon what Prussian/German sociologist Max Weber calls a “relationship with values” does not in any way preclude the fact that the findings are rigorous, coherent, and verifiable as true or false.

In this sense, it is inevitable that theoretical choices — for example, choosing a particular concept of racism or antisemitism — can have an effect on one’s knowledge. To illustrate this, consider the recent political debate involving the question of racism, inspired by the article “‘White Anti-racism’: No to an Imposture” authored by the sociologist Stéphane Beaud and the historian Gérard Noiriel (Beaud and Noiriel 2012). In October of 2012, a 28-year-old man was supposed to be tried for violence against another youth in the Paris Métro. Given that the suspect was also accused of insulting the victim by yelling “dirty white, dirty French” the *Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l’Antisémitisme* (the International League Against Racism and Antisemitism — LICRA) joined the suit as a civil party. However, the two researchers found the fact that LICRA had joined the case “astounding.” They used as evidence the facts that the extreme right-wing party (*Front National*) had claimed the phrase “anti-white racism,” and that all of the logic of French journalist Édouard Drumont in *La France Juive* (*Jewish France*,

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “*Un Eichmann de papier*” (1980), reprinted in Vidal-Naquet 1987, 23 and, more broadly, in Igounet 2000.

<sup>14</sup> “Thèses sur le révisionnisme” (1985), reprinted in Vidal-Naquet 1987; also see the more recent Yakira 2010.

1886) was based upon “the inversion of relations between the majority (‘We, French’) and the minority (‘You, Jews’).” The critical position of Beaud and Noiriel would be incomprehensible if one did not specify their implicit theoretical choice, conceiving of racism as a relation of domination, as does French sociologist Colette Guillaumin, among others.<sup>15</sup> The effect of this kind of choice (which may well be legitimate, but not the only choice) is to exclude as racist any act committed by someone who is “dominated.” Along with this conception, racist acts committed by those who are dominated by minorities are inconceivable and, therefore, theoretically impossible. Analyzing the racism of the dominated, or the “wretched of the earth” therefore becomes the blind task of sociologists who study domination. This has the problematic effect that expressions of the same type, such as “dirty black,” “dirty white,” or “dirty Jew,” etc., would be considered racist when said by dominant (or oppressive) whites and not racist when said by dominated (oppressed) blacks. Fortunately, sociological concepts do not work in the same way as legal ones. Otherwise, we would be living with the logic of apartheid.

If we have spent much time analyzing this brief text by Beaud and Noiriel, it is because it allows us to understand, at least in part, the challenge for academic “critics” of recognizing the reality of antisemitic phenomena in the first years of the 21st century. How does one comprehend hatred that has neither the same form nor the same meaning as classical antisemitism? The categories of antisemitism have been scrambled, whether they were originally drawn from the model of the Dreyfuss affair or from an anti-fascist one. It seems as though this metamorphosis has left a goodly number of enlightened opinions without a voice, even as, historically, anti-Jewish passions always find the very classically historical problems of “ruptures” and “continuities.” What is the new and unprecedented part of each anti-Semitic phenomenon? What, on the contrary, is only the permanence of an ancient form?

This is not to say that the national catholic antisemitism that was classically upheld by the extreme right has disappeared.<sup>16</sup> But, as the report by the CNCDDH from 2000 has already demonstrated, most of the authors of the stream of aggression against the members and the property of the Jewish community do not belong to the traditional extreme right-wing movement. Perhaps they share the same hatred of the republican political elites, with whom they associate the Jews, but they no longer act in the name of the nation, or in the name of a French identity consubstantiated with Catholicism. These authors or actors have also not formed into a structure offering a political alternative in the national political space, like those who, in the Third Republic, paraded in the streets crying out “France to the French” (“*La France aux Français*”). The fact that antisemitism is over-represented among young French people of African, Maghrebin (Moorish), and Turkish origins — in other words,

<sup>15</sup> Racism is a “relationship of domination that claims to be ‘natural,’” writes Colette Guillaumin 1982, 31.

<sup>16</sup> As French historian and sociologist Pierre Birnbaum notes, with regard to the “day of anger” protests (January 26, 2014), “We remain struck by the resurgence of the most violent people claiming identity rights, in their black uniforms, who do not hesitate to shout the worst antisemitic slogans in the streets of Paris. To hear in the streets of the capital in 2014, ‘Jews, Jews, Jews, France is not your France,’ as well as the old slogan coined by Édouard Drumont, ‘France to the French’ allows one to realize how much the most classical forms of the French antisemitism have returned” (Birnbaum 2015a, 238).

categories that are conceived of as dominated — seems to have created a certain cognitive dissonance in the antiracist sensibilities of the left (Brouard and Tiberj 2005, 99–108. See also *Fondation pour l’Innovation Politique* 2014, 21). In reality, nothing is more commonplace in the modern history of antisemitism than the denial of these manifestations. As French philosopher Robert Misrahi wrote 30 years ago about the progressive intelligentsia, “The Jewish question is not only the strange question that others ask the Jews about their identity and their freedom, but it is also the negation that there has ever been such a question” (Misrahi 1972, 13).

## The Problem of Causality

Anti-Jewish violence, as we could already read in the 2001 report from the CNCDDH, was “essentially acts committed by people from immigrant environments who found therein an outlet for their feelings of exclusion and ill-being.” This sociological finding represents unease that is called out at higher levels. Sociologism, so often criticized today, was already palpable in the first years of the 2000s. Without prejudging the degree to which it has been diffused or how far its social contagion has spread (Sperber 1996), a pessimistic paradigm seems to have imposed itself through a number of analyses published by the news media: Antisemitism appears to be an expression of social suffering as well as a symptom of a social crisis that strikes certain segments of society.

We find here a tangle of political, moral, and epistemological questions that are no less challenging to untangle for being classic. Following the logic of a critical analysis of domination — which often, in France, leans upon a holistic tradition in the works of such writers as French sociologists Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu — the condition of the dominated is characterized by a form of alienation. Its heteronomy would dispose it to turn its resentment toward the first scapegoat that appears.<sup>17</sup> Sociologism, as based upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy that the society or system is responsible rather than individuals (Cassirer 1984, 51), leads one to no longer take humans seriously. Sociologism then becomes degraded by a post-colonial compassion, which could be considered a backward form of racism, when the aggressors are young *Maghrébins*.

Critical sociology often claims that the boundaries between knowledge and politics, or between science and ideology, are being erased.<sup>18</sup> Here, the holistic next step permits one, *in fine*, to blame the political and social system for the violent acts. By calling out the racist behaviors of some young people born of immigrants, Stéphane Beaud and Gérard Noiriel observe that it is “the racialization of public discourse [that] contributes thusly to the sealing off of the identity of a disenfranchised portion of low-income youth. Deprived of all possibilities to

<sup>17</sup> Durkheim was one of the first to introduce the scapegoat model in the sociological tradition, in “*Antisémitisme et Crise Sociale*,” a response to Henri Dagan, *Enquête sur l’Antisémitisme*, Paris: Stock 1889, 59–63 (see Durkheim 1975, 252–254).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Federico Tarragoni 2015, in his article “Charlie Hebdo: *Les responsabilités intellectuelles de la sociologie*,” writes on the day following the assassinations in January of 2015, that “the task” of the sociologist is, “properly speaking, the political.”

diversify where they belong and with whom they associate, these young people internalize a racial vocabulary that they have not invented, but in which they recognize themselves, which explains why and how they can represent themselves to the broader society in such a binary fashion — the ‘us’ (of the “*cit *” of young blacks or Arabs, and of the excluded, but also, more and more it seems, the ‘us, the Muslims’) vs. the ‘them’ (the *bourgeois*, the *C frans*, the *Gaulois*, the whites, or the atheists, etc.)” (Beaud and Noiriel 2012). With a resolutely ideological framing this time, on the day after the assassinations of Jewish civilians and French Muslim soldiers committed by Mohamed Merah in March of 2012 (first in Montauban and then in the Jewish School in Toulouse), the preacher Tariq Ramadan published his “Teachings from Toulouse.” (He uploaded this to his online blog dated March 22, 2012). In it, he describes Merah as “a poor boy, guilty and to be condemned, without any shadow of a doubt, even as he himself was the victim of a social order that had already condemned him, him and millions of others, to marginality, to the lack of recognition as a citizen with equal rights and equal opportunity. Mohamed, with a name so stereotypical, was a French citizen born of immigration, before becoming a terrorist of immigrant origin.” Ramadan attributes Merah’s transition to jihadist terrorist to anti-Muslim racism, since, he writes, “The real social and economic problems are not being addressed and... some French citizens are treated as second class citizens.”

On a strictly cognitive level, the question regarding the logic of explanation is very classical. A long-standing controversy in the humanities opposes explanation and comprehension, ever since J. G. Droysen and W. Dilthey debated this logic in Germany in the 19th century (Aron 1989; Appel 2000; Zaccai-Reyners 2003). In the explanatory model that puts the natural and the social sciences under the same epistemological logic, there is only a scientific explanation to the degree that the connection between singular events can be deduced from laws, or from a general proposition. If we hold in a strict manner to this deductive method of explanation, in order to explain what a historic actor has done, we should be able to identify the causes that determined his or her actions, using the following model: Every time that there is an A, it results in B. These causes (social, economic, or psychological) are generally considered to be outside the conscience of the individual. Similarly, in the Durkheimian explanation, the “social fact” is imposed upon the individual and constrains him or her from the outside. It is true that in the contemporary practice of the social sciences, this model of rigid causal explanation is modified in many ways. In the place of explanatory laws, generalities are introduced. Instead of general propositions, we are satisfied by probable or dispositional propositions. It still remains, though, that if we approach the study of human events as we do the study of the natural world, we aim to prove causal links that determine these phenomena rather than subjective intentions. Nothing should surprise us, then, when explanatory efforts based on holistic and explanatory sociology have serious problems in trying to explain the violence more generally of “abhorrent objects” — something that I have written about elsewhere (Zawadzki 2002). First, we risk causal regression to infinity. Then we can add on as many causes as we want, but we can never achieve an explanation of the move to a violent act. For example, with regard to the controversy surrounding the drawings of the Prophet Mohamed, in the Danish

daily Jyllands-Posten, then to Charlie Hebdo, French historian Marcel Gauchet pointed to “the disproportion between the caricatures and the indignation.”<sup>19</sup> *A fortiori*, the enigma of a murder goes beyond any combination of causes to which the social and historical sciences might try at times to reduce it. The move to action always challenges any explanation that does not illuminate the “mystery of the decision of the person” (Aron 1989, 155). Similarly, Hannah Arendt wrote this: “In the domain of historical sciences, causality is only a completely displaced category that serves as a source of distortion. Not only does the true meaning of any event always exceed all the past ‘causes’ that one could assign it (one only has to contemplate the absurd disparity between the ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ of World War I) but the past itself occurs only with the event in question. ... An event illuminates its own past, it could not know how to be deduced” (Arendt 1953). In the same way, Arendt asked herself this about antisemitism: “How can you deduce the unprecedented from precedents?” (Arendt 1951, Part One).

Finally, on the moral level, the consequences are unavoidable: If one considers that individuals are rendered mute by the forces that make them act, they are not subjects, but rather objects, and in that way, are not responsible. As such, one could not reproach a particular individual — heteronomous, acted upon more than acting — for having committed the acts that he or she did. In sum, the resulting causalism opens the opportunity for the dissolution of responsibility in its causes. The French philosopher Monique Canto-Sperber dedicated a brief article on the day after the attacks of September 11 to this “perversion of the intellect,” which consists of dissolving the terrorist act in its context. In particular, she insisted upon the fact that “any explanation using social or psychological causes, or any explanation using its goal, cannot modify the moral definition of what is the act of lynching or of killing” (Canto-Sperber 2001).

In contrast, despite the fact that sometimes one considers, wrongly, that understanding is justifying, the comprehensive explanation is never deterministic. Without involving any causal necessity, comprehension preserves the freedom of the actor and therefore the possibility of judging him or her. Therefore, comprehension seems more compatible with the moral concerns of the individuals who study abhorrent objects, because their epistemology spares a place for freedom.

## **Towards a Comprehensive and Non-deterministic Sociology of Antisemitism**

Must one draw epistemological conclusions from these debates? We believe so, just as it seems to us that the choice of methods often commits one to a philosophy. Several common sense propositions follow from this choice. To start, all sociology must consent to the real and analyze antisemitic events, even when the perpetrators are not connected with either the dominators or the extreme right nationalists. Then, it seems important to us to pursue a sociology of antisemitism which does not abolish the responsibility of antisemitic actors. This implies studying human acts in

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Marcel Gauchet 2006, 18.

society in a different way than one studies things in nature.<sup>20</sup> That is to say that such a sociology would be comprehensive and that it would place an intentional structure of action at the heart of its concerns. Indeed, following the model of a comprehensive explanation, an event is explained when it is rendered comprehensible with regard to the intentionality and subjective meaning of the actor. In other words, rather than consider from a pessimistic, condescending, or neocolonial perspective that racist or antisemitic individuals are acted upon rather than acting, the sociology of antisemitism would gain its place under the auspices of a sociology of intentional action that would take seriously into consideration the meanings and beliefs of individuals, even when these beliefs might seem dangerous, immoral, or crazy. Frequently, the primary material for all research on antisemitism rests on systems of belief, myth, or the imaginary. What does it mean to take beliefs seriously when these seem to us to be so irrational?

In *L'art de se Persuader des Idées Fausses, Fragiles ou Douteuses (The Art of Self-persuasion of Fake, Fragile or Questionable Ideas)*, Raymond Boudon argues, “[C]ommon sense tends to give a rational explanation of the behaviors where the meaning seems evident, and an irrational explanation of the behaviors where the meaning is not clear” (Boudon 1990, 378). Antisemitic beliefs and myths, such as the diverse conspiracy theories that seem to be proliferating at the moment, appear in general to be delirious, hateful, and dangerous. That is why we have a tendency to consider them as pathological, within the realms of delirium, madness, or “illusion,” so criticized even by Durkheim<sup>21</sup> who — we often forget this — had a conception of human beings as never being totally devoid of “free thinking” and a critical spirit.<sup>22</sup> It would most assuredly be calming to think of the actors who commit antisemitic acts as crazy, as if they didn’t know what they were doing, or as if their actions were determined by broader systems. Let’s avoid these misunderstandings. It is clearly not because illusion is not a satisfactory explanation that these social actors are right when they say that they believe in the Jewish conspiracy. But once their beliefs are shown to be false, one still has to try to understand why these delusions make sense for some of them. In other words, what is the social meaning of the false beliefs? In a completely different context, in Eastern Europe, the delirious concept of “antisemitism without Jews” has often been pointed out. This concept frequently rests upon the generally false but widespread belief that the adversary or political enemy is the Jew. Above and beyond the insane delusional nature of these beliefs and the rumors that support them, it is easy to show that, in reality, these rumors are communicating something: They express a theory about political legitimacy and, more broadly, a grammar of

<sup>20</sup> We are reminded of the famous phrase by Émile Durkheim with which he opened Chapter 2 of *The Rules of the Sociological Method*: “The first rule, and the most fundamental, is to consider that social facts are like things.” To consider another foundation of the human sciences, see the presentation by Alain Renaut (2000, 68) and the following pages.

<sup>21</sup> Durkheim, in 1994, observed that the explanations of beliefs by illusion were simply without value. “It is an essential postulate of sociology that a human institution would not rest on errors and lies” (3). He comes back to this idea in his conclusion: “All of our study rests upon this postulate, that this unanimous sentiment of believers from all times cannot be purely illusory” (596).

<sup>22</sup> This is highlighted, for example, by Boudon 2012, 119.

political relations constituting a durable element of a very old political culture that was put in place within a framework of imperial domination (Zawadzki 1998). The various orientations with regard to matters of political culture are always conflictual in modern societies and must be taken seriously, all while avoiding the pitfalls of culturalism. It is interesting, for example, to consider that the Jewish antisemitic crimes that took place in France in January of 2015 are more demonstrative of the Islamization of radical positions than of the radicalization of Islam. However, such an interpretation risks undoing the link between action and meaning, considering, *in fine*, individuals as irrational toys of unconscious forces, while forgetting to take into account the blocks of meanings (jihadist antisemitism), as if social actors would grab at any meaning that lies within reach, and as if Islam were only accessory or incidental.<sup>23</sup> Even if the pathway of modern fanatic beliefs often goes from empty to full, and even if in the social trajectories of the young antisemites from the suburbs, faith is found at the end and not at the beginning, it is impossible to produce any sociological insights about this phenomenon without taking these beliefs into account.

In a way, we could say that we find again here the searing question raised by Raymond Aron about Nazism and Stalinism: “the difficulty of explanation, for each of these monstrous episodes of our times, which has to do with the unique cause that we could call epistemological or philosophical. Up to what point can we render intelligible a behavior that we judge to be irrational?” (Aron 1979, 348).

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the article by the writer on politics, Roy 2015 and the critical note, Zawadzki 2016.

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