

## Nicolas Anelka and the Quenelle Gesture

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## **Nicolas Anelka and the *Quenelle* Gesture: a Study of the Complexities of Protest in Contemporary Football**

Key words: Anelka, quenelle, France, racism, anti-Semitism

*Several decades on from Tommie Smith and John Carlos's iconic Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, sociologists such as Douglas Hartmann and Ben Carrington argue that contemporary debates about sport, race and protest are becoming ever more complicated. Within this context, the quenelle salute given by footballer Nicolas Anelka whilst playing for West Bromwich Albion in December 2013 merits analysis. The controversial and complicated gesture led to disciplinary action from the Football Association and his club, and ultimately to the end of his playing career. Due to its association with controversial French comedian Dieudonné the quenelle is widely seen as anti-Semitic, although some argue that it is merely anti-system. Despite this potential ambiguity, it will be shown that the quenelle remains a protest gesture. In order to interpret Anelka's actions, it is important to examine the quenelle's roots and when he performed the gesture. Such analysis needs to be placed within the context of contemporary footballers' engagement (or lack of engagement) with socio-political issues, and provides a means of assessing the relationship between football, politics and protest in contemporary Europe.*

The Black Power salute by American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City is an iconic reference point for sport and protest, a multi-layered gesture that sought to raise awareness about racial inequality in the United States of America. Indeed, it was a gesture made in a year that came to be associated with political protest and social change in a wide range of different locations. Smith and Carlos's protest

actions led to them being ostracized by the American sporting establishment, an institutional response that could be seen as a sign that the white-dominated world of American sports administration in the 1960s felt ill-at-ease about the use of a sporting arena to make a political point about race relations in the United States.

Douglas Hartmann has said that Smith and Carlos's protest came during a 'period of revolt [that] marked the first serious and sustained public challenge to the ideology that sport is an inherently positive and progressive racial force', and also stated that a 'postprotest era' has emerged in sport during the ensuing decades.<sup>1</sup> Hartmann argues that this 'postprotest era' is one during which it 'was not [the case] that struggles over the racial substance and function of sport had disappeared but rather that they had assumed new, subtler, and more institutionalized forms'.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen in sports such as football, as is highlighted by the controversy surrounding the *quenelle* salute given by French player Nicolas Anelka when celebrating a goal for West Bromwich Albion in December 2013. Analysis of Anelka's gesture needs to be situated within the context of contemporary debates about race and racism within football, footballers' engagement (or lack of engagement) with socio-political issues, and also debates about humour, diversity and offensiveness in France.

Anelka's gesture demonstrates how discussion of race and racism on the sports field is becoming ever more complicated, and his controversial goal celebration has led to much debate about what the gesture symbolized and the message(s) that Anelka was seeking to convey. In an article about racism and anti-racism in sport that preceded Anelka's controversial gesture, Ben Carrington argues that recent years have seen English football largely leave behind certain forms of racism associated with the past but also face a new brand of more complicated and 'cosmopolitan' racism. He cites as a prime example the

heated exchange between Luis Suarez and Patrice Evra in a match between Liverpool and Manchester United in 2011, an incident that led to Suarez being suspended for eight matches and fined £40,000 for racially abusing Evra. For Carrington, this event demonstrated:

just how diverse English football has become: it involved a black Frenchman and a (dark skinned) white Uruguayan playing for fierce north west England rivals, supported by proudly partisan (mostly, though not universally, white) fans, that [were at the time] both managed by Scotsmen and owned by Americans (the Glazer family own the controlling share of Manchester United, Fenway Sports Group own Liverpool). The disputed exchange between the players was conducted in Spanish, with a Dutchman (Liverpool's Dirk Kuyt) and a Welshman (Manchester United's Ryan Giggs) being called as key eye witnesses to the subsequent investigation.<sup>3</sup>

The Football Association's investigation into the Suarez-Evra incident involved consulting academic experts on South American Spanish as part in order to contextualize and comprehend the terms used by Suarez when he addressed Evra. Academic experts were again consulted in order to provide cultural context that helped the Football Association's disciplinary committee to interpret Anelka's *quenelle* goal celebration. As with the Suarez-Evra incident, the alleged guilty party was a foreign player from a racial minority, and interpreting the significance of their actions required an understanding of socio-cultural and political issues in the accused's native country.<sup>4</sup>

Not all cases of alleged racism on the football field are as complicated as the Suarez-Evra case that Carrington discusses. Indeed, it could be argued that another controversy

from 2011 involving then Chelsea and England captain John Terry allegedly directing a racial slur towards Queens Park Rangers player Anton Ferdinand provided a reminder that a more old-fashioned form of racism had not disappeared. However, this particular incident was more complex than it initially appears. For example, Terry claimed that he had only used a racial slur during a verbal exchange with Ferdinand to quote what he thought that Ferdinand was accusing him of having said. This defence was rejected by the Football Association, who fined Terry £220,000 and suspended him for four matches. The aftermath of the clash between John Terry and Anton Ferdinand resulted in Rio Ferdinand – Anton Ferdinand’s older brother – facing disciplinary charges himself. Rio Ferdinand had re-tweeted a comment on Twitter in which Ashley Cole was branded a ‘choc ice’ because he was a witness for John Terry in a court case that followed the on-field incident. Ferdinand explained that ‘choc ice’ was a slang term to describe someone seen as being ‘black on the outside but white on the inside’.<sup>5</sup> Rio Ferdinand’s re-tweeting of these comments led to him receiving a £45,000 fine from the Football Association for committing a ‘breach [of disciplinary regulations] that included a reference to ethnic origin, colour or race’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, a clash between a player who is white (Terry) and one who is mixed race (Anton Ferdinand) led to another mixed race player (Rio Ferdinand) being punished for insulting a fellow mixed race player (Cole).

Before delving deeper into the symbolism of Anelka’s controversial goal celebration, it is worth placing it in a wider context by examining the relationship between modern professional footballers and protest. As the sums of money involved in television broadcast deals and players’ contracts grow ever larger, some critics argue that the riches and egotism of many professional footballers make them disinclined to participate in acts of protest that demonstrate an awareness of wider socio-political issues. Magyd Chefi, the lead singer of

politically-engaged French alternative rock group Zebda, evoked his cynicism about such matters in a collection of reflective essays that he published in 2007:

Is football right wing? Or rather, is there such a thing as a left-wing footballer? ... Is it ever the case that a footballer does not sign for the club offering the most money? Is he capable of having a priority other than money? Well maybe something like making do with being a multimillionaire rather than a multimultimillionaire?<sup>7</sup>

What is somewhat paradoxical about Cherfi's criticism is that although his rock group has sought to challenge stereotypical representations of young people from France's *banlieues* (run-down suburbs), his comments cited above are reminiscent of the sort of discourse that has been used by French politicians and intellectuals to dismissively evoke the supposed waywardness of French footballers who have grown up in the *banlieues*.<sup>8</sup> For certain critics, Nicolas Anelka is a prime example of a poorly behaved and largely self-interested French footballer from the *banlieues*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, former French national football coach Raymond Domenech accused Anelka of putting his own concerns above those of the team on several occasions in his 2012 autobiography.<sup>10</sup> However, Cherfi's 2007 criticism of Anelka is more nuanced than that of many French politicians and intellectuals following Anelka's expulsion from France's 2010 World Cup squad. Roselyne Bachelot (then Minister for Health and Sports) and French intellectual and writer Alain Finkielkraut are two examples of figures whose criticism went further and used more inflammatory language.<sup>11</sup> Cherfi's prime criticisms of French footballers who have grown up in far from affluent areas is that their success has led to them forgetting their roots. In particular, he criticizes their failure to involve themselves in the sort of political activism that has characterized Zebda:

Has anyone seen a footballer, during the May 1st Labour Day events, joining the protest marches in the streets of Paris? Has anyone seen a footballer support any sort of protest by the unemployed? Has anyone seen Anelka pay tribute to the Maghrebis from Dammarie who were wrongly killed by police bullets? Has anyone seen Zidane at the Pont du Carrousel to pay tribute to the young Moroccan who drowned after being lynched by several Front National hard men?<sup>12</sup>

Initially, it may appear logical to separate criticisms of French footballers that have portrayed them as bad boys from suburban housing estates from those that have focused on their supposed self-interest and pursuit of wealth. However, criticisms levelled at French footballers by politicians have at times appeared to represent the pursuit of wealth as a symptom of materialistic criminal gang-based culture in suburban housing estates rather than a symbol of the pervasiveness of neo-liberalism.<sup>13</sup>

Although Anelka protested on several notable occasions during a playing career that was punctuated by frequent transfers and arguments with coaches, his shows of dissent have often been motivated by a perceived sense of personal injustice rather than wider socio-political issues. For example, he refused to train in 2000 during his time as a Real Madrid player due to his dissatisfaction at how he felt he had been treated by the club. Three years later, he decided not to join the French national squad for a match against Yugoslavia because national coach Jacques Santini had only deemed him worthy of inclusion following injuries to other players. Perhaps most famously, Anelka's refusal to publicly apologize for insulting French coach Raymond Domenech during a 2010 World Cup match in South Africa led to his expulsion from the squad and subsequently to the French team

refusing to train in protest at Anelka's treatment. However, he more recently provoked controversy in late 2013 after performing what he described as an 'anti-system' gesture after scoring for West Bromwich Albion against West Ham United. In order to properly interpret these actions, it is important to assess the meanings of the controversial *quenelle* gesture that Anelka used to mark his goal as well as the Football Association's interpretation of Anelka's intentions. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine why the *quenelle* can be considered a protest gesture and, crucially, what those who perform it are protesting against.

### **Anelka: Image, Controversy and Protest**

Nicolas Anelka was born in Versailles and grew up in Trappes, which is about 15 miles south west of Paris. He is often heralded as an iconic example of a French footballer from France's *banlieues* and his return to Paris Saint-Germain in 2000 coincided with an attempt by the club to connect with the *banlieues* surrounding Paris.<sup>14</sup> However, there is reason to question Anelka's status as a *banlieue* icon. In Daniel Riolo's *Racaille Football Club*, former professional footballer Mohammed Regragui argues that Anelka did not endure as tough an upbringing as is often imagined:

Anelka comes from Trappes, but not from an underprivileged area. His parents are middle class. He had the best trainers and decent clothes compared to others. He didn't walk around burdened by coming from a housing estate in Trappes. I've always felt it a shame that, since he became successful, people always talk about housing estates in relation to him even though he did not really live in one.<sup>15</sup>



These comments mean that interpreting supposedly rebellious gestures by Anelka as responses to a harsh upbringing is somewhat problematic. However, Stéphane Beaud suggests that cultivating the image of being a rebel provided a means for Anelka to become more accepted by young people from the housing estates of Trappes and also disguise his somewhat middle class roots.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to understanding Anelka's image within the world of football, Olivier Cachin argues that he was one of the first players to have ostentatiously made visible 'the codes of rap' within French football,<sup>17</sup> and Daniel Riolo adds that this was clear from the style of clothes he wore on his return to Paris Saint-Germain in 2000.<sup>18</sup> Anelka's status as a style icon during this period is further demonstrated by Alain Azhar entitling the first chapter of his biography of the player 'Le James Dean des années 2000' ('the James Dean of the 2000s'), and in this book a sports marketing expert argues that Anelka's 'style and aura are more notable than his sporting performances'.<sup>19</sup> Although Cachin argues that rap music is not always as political as some believe,<sup>20</sup> some of Anelka's team mates saw rap culture as a means by which he expressed his identity. Christian Karemebeu, who played with Anelka at Real Madrid and in the French national team, said that Anelka's time at Madrid was one where 'Nico was living in a bubble and at same time I think it was a sort of 'rap culture', an American lifestyle that he adopted as a philosophy as a youngster, an adolescent'.<sup>21</sup> This lifestyle is precisely what Beaud argues Anelka exploited in order to construct a rebellious image.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, one journalist has described rap as a symbol of Anelka's supposed lack of culture by stating that that 'Anelka does not have much to say, apart from about his PlayStation and rap music'.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of a clearly discernible set of beliefs that underpin Anelka's attitude to football and society in general makes it harder to contextualize and assess his behaviour.

Indeed, the journalist Arnaud Ramsay alludes to this in his introduction to Anelka's autobiography by describing the player as a 'former rebel without a cause, at war with the whole world'.<sup>24</sup> This turn of phrase reinforces the aforementioned comparison with James Dean and also the notion that Anelka's motivations for protesting are not always clear. Ramsay asserts that player was 'prematurely categorized as the bad boy of French football due to a form of arrogance that hides his shyness' and adds that Anelka had become 'calmer' by the time of the book's publication in May 2010.<sup>25</sup> However, this suggestion that Anelka's numerous disagreements with clubs, journalists and coaches were by 2010 confined to the past was shown to be premature by Anelka's expulsion from France's 2010 World Cup squad in South Africa after refusing to publicly apologize for insulting French team coach Raymond Domenech. Even by Anelka's standards, this was a particularly spectacular clash and the highly abusive language that he allegedly used to address Domenech was reproduced as the main headline on the front page of sports daily *L'Équipe*.<sup>26</sup> The failure to achieve an amicable solution that would have allowed Anelka to remain part of the squad led to the team refusing to train prior to a crucial match against South Africa. For many politicians and intellectuals, Anelka thus regained his status as a symbol of both what is wrong with the attitudes of modern footballers in France and the behaviour of young people from France's *banlieues*. This latter form of simplistic denunciation was, however, problematic due to Anelka's aforementioned relatively comfortable upbringing. The France players who went on strike were described pejoratively by *L'Équipe* journalist Vincent Duluc as 'grévistes du dimanche' in a book in which he was highly critical of contemporary French footballers.<sup>27</sup> This phrase presents the players as having protested in a manner that was amateurish and demonstrated their inability to express their grievances in an appropriate manner.

However, it is important to understand the environment within which the French team's off-field controversy arose. Damien Degorre and Raphaël Raymond situate *L'Équipe's* criticisms of *Les Bleus* within the context of deteriorating relations between the paper and the French players<sup>28</sup> and indeed Stéphane Beaud characterizes the French squad's actions as part of a 'collective revolt ... against the [French] press'.<sup>29</sup> This interpretation, which provides a degree of balance in the face of often quite one-sided media coverage, significantly characterizes the strike of 'Les Bleus' as a consequence of pent-up frustration rather than merely a single flashpoint. Given Vincent Duluc's status as a journalist frustrated at the conduct of modern footballers and one of those who reported on Anelka's outburst at Domenech in *L'Équipe*, one can question the extent to which he was an impartial observer. Indeed, he acknowledged in an earlier work that leading figures within the French national football team had become frustrated with *L'Équipe* prior to France's 1998 World Cup victory due to the newspaper's criticism of coach Aimé Jacquet's tactics and the team's style of play.<sup>30</sup>

### **Anelka's *Quenelle* Gesture: Another Case of the Storm After the Calm**

Anelka's tendency to provoke controversy after a period of relative calm manifested itself again in late 2013. Following his expulsion from the 2010 French World Cup squad, Anelka played with Chelsea for two more years before joining Chinese Super League team Shanghai Shenhua in January 2012, and was subsequently loaned to Italian side Juventus in January 2013. The fact that Anelka played only three games during his five month spell in Italy suggested that his top level career was winding down and he was released by Shanghai Shenhua in summer 2013 at the age of 34. This led to him joining the far from illustrious

English Premiership team West Bromwich Albion in July 2013. After scoring his first goal for West Bromwich Albion against West Ham United on 28 December 2013, Anelka performed the *quenelle* salute that is associated with the controversial French comedian Dieudonné. The gesture involves maintaining one arm straight and pointing downwards whilst touching the shoulder of this arm with the flat hand of the opposite arm. The *quenelle* is seen by some in France as an anti-Semitic, although others argue that it is merely an 'anti-system' symbol.<sup>31</sup>

The complexities of the gesture and indeed the performer with whom it is associated posed a challenge for the British sporting media. On BBC1's *Match of the Day* on 28 December 2013, presenter Gary Lineker alluded to reports that Anelka had performed an allegedly anti-Semitic gesture after his first goal. However, Lineker added that Anelka had described the gesture as a dedication to a comedian friend. Although this last piece of information could initially be seen as rendering the gesture less controversial, knowing about the career and reputation of the comedian concerned actually makes it more controversial. Despite being closely associated with the anti-racist left in France during the 1990s, Dieudonné underwent a significant transformation after the turn of the millennium. Since then, he has frequently provoked controversy and found himself in court due to on- and off-stage declarations that have led to him being accused of anti-Semitism. Although he argues that he is anti-Zionist or anti-system rather than anti-Semitic, Dieudonné has been found guilty of inciting hatred on several occasions.

Dieudonné has been performing the *quenelle* gesture for over a decade and has provoked much controversy during this period. This is despite having reportedly first exhibited the *quenelle* in a 2005 show during a sketch in which he imagined a dolphin mocking humans. In other words, the gesture appears to have originated in an apparently

innocent and somewhat surreal routine and become a calling card for Dieudonné. Indeed, it is a gesture that he has encouraged his followers to perform and several hundred photos of his fans doing so are displayed on his website. These *quenelle* photos are from a variety of different locations in France and abroad and feature both individuals and groups such as students, wedding guests and work colleagues. However, potentially more troubling aspects of the *quenelle* become apparent when one examines the nature of material performed on stage by Dieudonné.

When seeking to determine whether Dieudonné's *quenelle* gesture is anti-system rather than anti-Semitic, it is important to examine the nature of the comedian's 'anti-system' views. There are numerous ways in which someone could be said to be 'anti-system' and some of these would not necessarily involve being anti-Semitic. However, Dieudonné's anti-system views often feature derogatory references to Jews in general or well-known Jewish figures. In addition, he has appeared to evoke recognizable anti-Semitic stereotypes in several of his performances. In his 2012 show *Rendez-nous Jésus!*, much of the satirical material involved mocking prominent Jewish figures or those with Israeli sympathies. When discussing an earlier stage show, the journalist John Lichfield argued that 'Dieudonné proceeds by the kind of nudge-nudge, coded provocation that has long been the stock in trade of the anti-Semitic far right in France'.<sup>32</sup> In *Rendez-nous Jésus*, Dieudonné followed up a reference to the promiscuity of Dominique Strauss-Kahn by sarcastically observing 'that's not how a Jew behaves'.<sup>33</sup> This interjection can potentially be read as an evocation of an anti-Semitic trope that portrays Jews as being manipulative sexual predators.<sup>34</sup>

Although it has been argued that Dieudonné often seems somewhat obsessed about Jews,<sup>35</sup> the anti-system attitude that comes across in his stage shows (and also off stage) is

not entirely focused on Jews. For example, it is also based upon a more general mistrust of politicians and the media. However, it is hard to argue that there are not anti-Semitic elements evoked within Dieudonné's anti-system approach. Indeed, part of the 'system' that he criticizes is the supposedly controlling influence that Jews and Jewish groups exert on public and political life in France. When one considers the nature of the material performed by Dieudonné, the potential symbolism of the *quenelle* becomes much more troubling, and it is important to consider what those who perform the gesture are seeking to express. Among the photos displayed on Dieudonné's website are several that show the *quenelle* being performed in locations which are significant to Jews. Alain Soral, an ally of Dieudonné and former member of the far-right Front National's national committee, is shown giving the salute at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Furthermore, other fans of the comedian are pictured doing so at locations such as monuments to people who saved Jews from deportation during World War Two, Jewish museums and also Auschwitz. Following controversy sparked by Anelka, Roger Cukierman of CRIF (Representative Council for Jewish Groups in France) stated that the *quenelle* was not in itself anti-Semitic if performed in a location that 'has no significance for Jews'. He added that in such a context it was 'merely an anti-establishment gesture which ... does not warrant any harsh sanction'.<sup>36</sup> However, he later appeared to backtrack by stating that he had not intended to defend Anelka and that the *quenelle* was an inverted Nazi salute performed in solidarity with a comedian who was 'without a doubt anti-Semitic'.<sup>37</sup>

In an interview with the current affairs monthly *Causeur*, Dieudonné was asked if it was possible for Anelka to be considered to be 'anti-system' given that he was a millionaire footballer. Dieudonné responded with comments that seemed to compare Anelka to Martin Luther King:

Anelka is part of the system but he has a dream. He is a descendant of slaves who comes from a large French West Indian family. He tends to be timid and discreet and made the gesture in a situation where you're not supposed to do so: that's what is anti-system.<sup>38</sup>

Although Dieudonné's words provide a partial explanation, a degree of ambiguity remains. For example, what is the system the comedian feels that Anelka is part of and to what extent is it the same as the one that Dieudonné feels Anelka was reacting against? Anelka himself argued that the *quenelle* was anti-system rather than anti-Semitic, but failed to address many significant questions that such a stance raises. In addition to ignoring the possibility that a gesture can be simultaneously anti-system and anti-Semitic, Anelka did not explain what sort of system he was reacting against. Clashes with coaches throughout his career suggest that Anelka is opposed to authority in general, and the way in which he describes his outlook on life in his autobiography adds weight to this idea:

I have my character, my ideas, my hopes, my way of seeing things. No one can dictate to me how I should behave. I am not, however, a rebel. I like being part of a group and have never had a problem blending in as part of a collective. However, I hate when I am told what my place is.<sup>39</sup>

The frequency of the words 'I', 'my' and 'me' in this quotation do little to challenge Magyd Cherfi's views about the supposedly self-absorbed nature of modern footballers mentioned earlier. In addition, Anelka's problematic relationships with several coaches and team mates

suggest that he has not always adapted well to being part of a group and the collective ethos of a team.

Anelka made his *quenelle* gesture at a time when Dieudonné had been attracting much press coverage in France due to the banning of one of his shows following renewed accusations of anti-Semitism. This helps to explain why Anelka's *quenelle* attracted greater coverage than those of other sportspeople and why it ultimately led to a harsher punishment. It is important to remember that although Anelka performed the *quenelle* on a football field in England, the game in question was being broadcast live in France by the cable channel Canal Plus and Anelka explicitly acknowledged that he performed that gesture as a dedication to his friend Dieudonné. The Football Association's judgement in the disciplinary case brought against Anelka stated that it did not feel that the player was, or had sought to be, anti-Semitic but nevertheless found him guilty of an aggravated level of offence. It stated that Anelka's goal celebration was 'abusive and/or indecent and/or insulting and/or improper'. The offence was an 'aggravated breach' due to 'a reference to ethnic origin and/or race and/or religion or belief'. The report mentioned that the disciplinary panel accepted expert testimony that the *quenelle* gesture was 'strongly associated with anti-Semitism' and that 'it is simply not possible to divorce that association from the gesture when Nicolas Anelka performed the *quenelle* on 28 December 2013'. Despite this apparent acknowledgement of the anti-Semitic symbolism of the gesture, the disciplinary commission somewhat confusingly 'did not find that Nicolas Anelka is an anti-Semite or that he intended to express or promote anti-Semitism by his use of the *quenelle*'.<sup>40</sup>

It seems that performing the *quenelle* at a time when Dieudonné's stage shows were provoking considerable debate in France, Anelka exposed himself to greater condemnation



than other sportspeople who have been photographed performing the *quenelle* due to increasing awareness of the gesture's connotations that were a consequence of media coverage of the controversy. Furthermore, the fact that Anelka explicitly dedicated his salute to Dieudonné and described the performer as a friend also made it harder for Anelka to claim he was not aware of the gesture's significance. However, other sports people and public figures have previously used such a defence when photos of them performing the gesture have emerged. Fellow footballers Samir Nasri and Mamadou Sakho claimed to have been tricked into performing the gesture.<sup>41</sup> Both had been photographed performing the sign with fans and Sakho has also been pictured giving the salute whilst standing next to Dieudonné at what appears to be the Théâtre de la Main d'Or, a venue where the performer regularly staged his one-man shows. Nasri apologized for making the *quenelle* gesture and promised not to do so again,<sup>42</sup> whilst Sakho stated that he would not have performed a *quenelle* if he had been aware of its connotations.<sup>43</sup> Sakho's explanation appears potentially questionable given that he appears to be making the gesture both standing next to Dieudonné and at a location where the comedian performed his stage shows, which suggests that Sakho may well have been familiar with both the performer and the nature of his material. Both Nasri and Sakho were reminded of their responsibilities by the Football Association but not punished. The fact that Nasri, Sakho and Anelka are all French Muslims has not been widely discussed in press coverage of the players' *quenelle* gestures, nor has the extent to which the players may or may not endorse Dieudonné's attempts to engage in memory battles in which he has made polemical statements comparing the Holocaust and the slavery of black people from France's former colonies. What is somewhat clearer is that Nasri, Sakho and Anelka appear not to have sought to intervene in the aforementioned political debates.

Nevertheless, *L'Équipe* stated that the timing of his *quenelle* gesture meant that he had 'spectacularly entered the debate started by [French Prime Minister] Manuel Valls the day before'.<sup>44</sup> Valls had been a virulent critic of Dieudonné's performances following renewed allegations that the comedian was performing anti-Semitic material. Nevertheless, the relative lack of prominence and column inches devoted to Anelka's goal celebration compared to his insults directed at Domenech in 2010 suggests that *L'Équipe* saw the *quenelle* controversy as being less newsworthy; this is probably due to Anelka having ceased to be as high profile a figure by 2013 due to his career starting to wind down and the fact that he was not playing for a major club at the time. The front page of their 29 December 2013 edition featured a relatively mundane phrase in a small box in the top right hand corner: 'Anelka marque et dérape' (Anelka scores and goes off the rails). Furthermore, the articles about the incident began on page nine of the newspaper after five pages of reports on domestic rugby in France, two pages on French basketball and a full page about an Alpine skiing event in Italy. The Football Association ultimately fined Anelka £80,000 and banned him for five games for performing the *quenelle* gesture before West Bromwich Albion imposed a series of conditions that he needed to meet in order for them to lift a separate suspension that it had imposed as part of its own internal enquiry. Anelka refused to meet these conditions, which stipulated that he needed to pay a sizeable fine and make a public apology. He was dismissed by West Bromwich Albion for gross misconduct due to both his *quenelle* goal celebration and declaring on Twitter that he was terminating his contract in a manner that breached club regulations.<sup>45</sup> Anelka's dismissal for announcing his departure added another paradoxical layer to a complex saga.

### **What Anelka's Career Demonstrates about Football and Protest**

Since Anelka admitted that he performed the *quenelle* as a dedication to Dieudonné and described it as an anti-system gesture, it is appropriate to categorize this goal celebration as a form of protest. However, it remains an ambiguous act as Anelka has not explained what 'system' he was opposing. As the previously cited criticism from Magyd Cherfi cited suggests, Anelka had not been noted for his prior political engagement. Like legendary French footballer Zinedine Zidane, he appears reluctant to speak out in favour of any specific cause and has had a somewhat uneasy relationship with the media. Anelka's approach to socio-political issues is very different to that of his former international teammate Lilian Thuram. Grant Farred argues that Thuram's political engagement means that he constitutes 'a political figure' rather than merely 'an athlete' as he is someone who 'employs a political discourse that is distinctly philosophical in tone'.<sup>46</sup> Farred's description of Thuram's connection with his roots and intervention in socio-political debates makes clear that he does not share Anelka and Zidane's the reluctance to become political:

Because of his intense identification with the political experience of the *jeunes des quartiers* (young people from the estates), Thuram was among the most vocal and articulate defenders of the black, Berber and Arab youth who took to the streets of France in the wake of the Clichy-sous-Bois incident in 2005.<sup>47</sup>

In autumn 2005, the deaths of two ethnic minority youths following a police chase in Clichy-sous-Bois led to a period of suburban unrest in France during which Thuram was a vocal critic of the French government. Farred argues that Thuram's public declarations at this time demonstrated broad social concerns:

Thuram has used – and still uses – his visible, articulate black Frenchness to draw attention to the condition of other blacks, especially those who struggle in the *banlieues*. He does so by representing the condition of black and Maghrebi life, a condition to which he both has, and does not have a claim.<sup>48</sup>

Thuram stands out as one of the most articulate French footballers of recent decades and one of the most willing to participate in socio-political debates. His eloquence and erudition help to explain why he appears a lot more at ease with media interviews than footballers such as Anelka and Zidane.

Despite Anelka's reluctance to intervene in socio-political debates, he has occasionally expressed solidarity with residents of France's *banlieues*. During his second spell with Paris Saint-Germain (2000-2002), he once celebrated a goal at the Parc des Princes by revealing a t-shirt featuring the slogan '*pour le 93*'. The slogan literally means 'for the 93', and the '93' in question refers to the often-stigmatized Seine-Saint-Denis *département* that is located on the north eastern suburban fringes of Paris and which is home to a highly diverse population. The *département*, and indeed the number 93, instantly evokes thoughts of suburban unrest in the minds of many French people. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the '*pour le 93*' slogan was quite vague and more of a 'shout out' or informal dedication than an articulate political declaration of the sort with which Thuram has come to be associated. This gesture towards Seine-Saint-Denis could also be interpreted as an attempt by Anelka to connect (or re-connect) with the Parisian *banlieues* at a time when Paris Saint-Germain were seeking to engage more actively with supporters (and potential supporters) on the suburban fringes of the French capital.

In more general terms, it is worth asking what Anelka's *quenelle* goal celebration tells us about the wider theme of sport and protest that we are discussing in this volume. Although French footballers often appear reluctant to involve themselves in social protests, there have been several occasions when they have done so when their own earning potential has been under threat. Autumn 2013 provided one such example when leading footballers in France threatened strike action following President François Hollande's proposal to impose a tax of 75% on income over one million euros per year. Almost a decade earlier while leader of the French Socialist Party in 2004, François Hollande had been critical of Robert Pires's comments about not wanting to return to play football in France after a successful spell in England due to tax reasons. Hollande stated that 'it would really be a paradox if those in the stands pay tax to watch players on the pitch who no longer pay any' and added that 'if we allowed that, football would become the worst possible symbol of future society'.<sup>49</sup> These comments were made during an interview that was printed in the December 2004-January 2005 edition of the French football magazine *So Foot* that featured a dossier that asked 'is football left wing or right wing?'. This question is one that has been posed by others at different times, as is demonstrated by the comments of Zebda lead singer Magyd Cherfi that were cited near the start of this article. French sociologist Stéphane Beaud stated in 2014 that individuals who are 'politically engaged and left-wing ... are a rarity in professional football [in France]'.<sup>50</sup> Fabien Cool, a former Auxerre goalkeeper turned centre right politician with *Nouveau Centre*, had gone further than Beaud by in 2010 by suggesting that being a wealthy footballer and politically left wing is a contradictory stance that stems from a 'sense of guilt'. Furthermore, he argued that 'footballers who earn money are going to search for any fiscal loophole in order to pay less tax' and that such a strategy 'is not left wing behaviour'.<sup>51</sup>

Although Anelka appears not to have sought to define himself politically as being either right or left wing, the controversy surrounding his *quenelle* goal celebration did nevertheless see him challenging the political elite in France. He was dismissive of criticism from French government ministers who he felt did not understand the *quenelle*,<sup>52</sup> but did not explain in any great detail why he felt the gesture was ‘anti-system’ rather than ‘anti-Semitic’, or indeed spell out what he meant by ‘anti-system’. The lack of clarity as to why Anelka saw the *quenelle* as an ‘anti-system’ gesture, and the sort of ‘system’ to which he sees the *quenelle* as a reaction, does not facilitate analysis of the political implications of his goal celebration. As previously discussed, Anelka’s relatively middle class background suggests that his *banlieue* upbringing does not necessarily provide reason to believe that he was let down by the ‘system’. Nicolas Vilas argues that it is problematic for successful footballers from France’s *banlieues* to describe themselves as ‘anti-system’. For Vilas, ‘these footballers may have known ghettoization, or even exclusion or rejection, but their success shows that they were able to prevent this from holding them back’.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the successes of footballers whose lives have followed such a trajectory could be considered the exception to the rule when it comes to life opportunities for young people who have grown up in the *banlieues*.

However, the ambiguous and complex nature of Anelka’s *quenelle* gesture appears consistent with the way in which protest and debates about race and racism have evolved in recent decades. Near the start of this article, I outlined how Ben Carrington characterizes racism on the football field as having recently become increasingly ‘cosmopolitan’ and complex. Anelka’s *quenelle* gesture was certainly complex and necessitated a great deal of dialogue and research before it could be interpreted by the English footballing authorities who ultimately found Anelka guilty of misconduct. Anelka’s failure to clearly situate the

*quenelle* gesture within a wider political discourse also appears to mirror the evolution of protest in the UK and France. It is now over thirty years since the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky wrote *The Era of the Void: Essays on Contemporary Individualism*, a book in which he discussed the decline of politics based on the concept of social good.<sup>54</sup> The ambiguity concerning the cause(s) Anelka was seeking to defend by performing the *quenelle* highlights a major difference between his gesture and Smith and Carlos's Black Power salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics. This sets Anelka apart from not just the likes of Smith and Carlos, but also from contemporary footballers – such as Lillian Thuram – who have shown much greater willingness to explicitly articulate a vision of French society and how it needs to change. Anelka's lack of clarity concerning the *quenelle* gesture and what supposed anti-establishment message(s) he believes it represents is perhaps also symptomatic of the vacuity of much of modern celebrity culture. Indeed, it is important to remember that Anelka made the *quenelle* at a time when he possessed a great deal more wealth and celebrity than Smith and Carlos did at the 1968 Olympics. Anelka's gesture nevertheless demonstrates the willingness of some sporting celebrities to express themselves in a manner that demonstrates little concern about the sporting or commercial impact of polemical statements. It thus illustrates the way in which Anelka's turbulent career has been characterized by a degree of volatility when it comes to how he has expressed himself both and on and off the field of play.

Sport and politics have changed significantly since the era in which Smith and Carlos made their iconic protest gesture at the Mexico Olympics but, as Mark Perryman observes, this was not a swift process; Perryman has argued that 'the sixties saw the emergence of social movements centred on gender, race and sexuality, each posing new challenges for the Olympic organizers, which they met painfully slowly'.<sup>55</sup> We may be in a 'postprotest era', to

return to Hartmann's terminology, but sport arguably still struggles to accept the extent to which it is shaped by politics and can be deeply political in its nature. In football stadiums, players risk being fined for political actions associated with socially progressive causes as well as more divisive and potentially inflammatory actions. This was demonstrated by the fine that Liverpool's Robbie Fowler received from European football's governing body UEFA in 1997 after revealing a T-shirt expressing solidarity with striking Merseyside dockworkers. In 2014, UEFA fined several Scottish and Irish teams after their fans displayed Palestinian flags at matches in European club competitions. In 2016, debate about what actually constitutes a political symbol was provoked by FIFA's decision to take action against the national football associations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for displaying poppies to commemorate victims of war to mark Remembrance Sunday. These disciplinary procedures treat perceived political gestures by players and fans as behaviour that does not have a place in sports stadiums, potentially creating a justification for sportspeople to not intervene in political debates. They also come at a time when there has been much debate in both the United Kingdom and France about whether criticism of state of Israel and its policies is necessarily anti-Semitic, and in particular the extent to which anti-Semitism is an issue that needs to be addressed by the political left in these countries.<sup>56</sup>

In the years following Anelka's quelled gesture, there have been several somewhat paradoxical events in France, the United Kingdom and elsewhere that have demonstrated a degree of political volatility during a time when supposedly anti-establishment figures have prospered. At the time of writing, anti-European parties from the United Kingdom and France occupy a significant number of their countries' seats in the European Parliament. Indeed, the influence of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) played a major role in creating the conditions that led to the so-called Brexit vote in which the UK elected to



leave the European Union following a referendum in 2016. UKIP's emblematic leader Nigel Farage has paradoxically presented himself as a voice of the people and an anti-establishment figure despite being a privately educated former investment banker whose party reportedly receives a significant amount of its funding from rich former Conservative party donors. The year 2016 also saw the United States of America elect Donald Trump as president; a multi-millionaire businessman whose wealth and privileged upbringing do not prevent him from also claiming to be an anti-establishment figure.

Anelka's *quenelle* gesture involved him appearing to make a somewhat ambiguous comment about the French establishment that led to him receiving a financial punishment from the English footballing establishment. Many of his most high-profile disagreements during his career have been with key figures within the French footballing establishment, such as national team coaches, yet it was ultimately a refusal to accept punishment from a relatively modest top division team in England – West Bromwich Albion – that ultimately hastened the end of his top-level professional career. Anelka's *quenelle* gesture, allied to his career as a whole, provide a prime example of the complexities of protest and race within contemporary professional football as well as the difficulties of situating actions that cannot easily be interpreted as symbolizing a clear and coherent discourse. The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as American president in 2016 have been characterized not just by a lack of coherent discourses in which politicians' claims are grounded, but also by appeals to emotions and personal beliefs rather than what can easily be described as objectively verifiable facts. Indeed, some have described this as symbolizing a 'post-truth' era.<sup>57</sup> Due to the paradoxes and complexities of his anti-establishment approach, the years following Anelka's *quenelle* gesture demonstrate firstly that his tribulations are symptomatic of the complexities of debates about sport and protest, and

secondly that he is also a complicated and at times confusing figure whose actions may actually be more in phase with the times in which we live than they initially appear.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Hartmann, *Race Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2003), xiii, 252–268.

<sup>2</sup> Hartmann, *Race Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 254.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Carrington, 'Sport Matters', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35, no. 6 (2012), 963–4.

<sup>4</sup> Luis Suarez is mixed race and a statement from Liverpool following his ban mentioned that he had a black grandfather. See: *BBC News website*, 'Liverpool statement on Luis Suarez ban in full', 20 December 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/16277126> (accessed 7 February 2017). Nicolas Anelka is black and both his parents moved to France from the French overseas region of Martinique, which is located in the Caribbean.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Redhead, 'Soccer and Social Media: Sport media in the city of the instant', in Andrew C. Billings and Marie Hardin (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 72.

<sup>6</sup> *BBC Sport*, 'Rio Ferdinand fined for Ashley Cole 'choc ice' tweet', 17 August 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/18847477> (accessed 25 November 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Magyd Cherfi, *Livret de famille* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2007), 25.

<sup>8</sup> See: Jonathan Ervine, 'Les Banlieues and Les Bleus: Political and media discourse about sport and society in France', *French Cultural Studies*, 25, no. 1 (2014), 70–81.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Azhar, *Nicolas Anelka: une énigme* (Solar: Paris, 2002), 98, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Domenech, *Tout Seul* (Flammarion: Paris, 2012), 267, 279, 283–4.

<sup>11</sup> See: Jonathan Ervine, 'Les banlieues and Les Bleus: Political and media discourse about sport and society in France', *French Cultural Studies*, 25, no. 1 (2014), 76–7.

<sup>12</sup> Cherfi, *Livret de Famille*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> See : Ervine, 'Les Banlieues et Les Bleus', 76.

<sup>14</sup> Azhar, *Nicolas Anelka*, 118; *Anelka: Inclassable*, Directed by Bruno Skopetra. Paris: TF1 Vidéo, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Riolo. *Racaille Football Club: Fantômes et Réalités du Foot Français* (Paris: Hugo et Compagnie, 2013), 85. See also: Stéphane Beaud, *Affreux, riches et méchants? Un autre regard sur les Bleus* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), 196.

<sup>16</sup> Beaud, *Affreux, riches et méchants?*, 197–8.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in: Riolo, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Riolo, *Racaille Football Club*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Azhar, *Nicolas Anelka*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Riolo, *Racaille Football Club*, 102.

<sup>21</sup> *Anelka: Inclassable*.

<sup>22</sup> Beaud, *Affreux, riches et méchants?*, 197–8.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in: Azhar, *Nicolas Anelka*, 31. Former Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique de Marseille player Édouard Cissé has argued that contemporary footballers' interest in computer games has been used by journalists as part of attempts to portray such players as being out of touch compared to past generations. See: Édouard Cissé. 'Nous, footballeurs, on adore les jeux vidéo. Et ce n'est pas un problème', *Rue89*, 10 December 2012, <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/blog/edouard-cisse/2012/02/10/nous-les-footballeurs-adore-les-jeux-video-cest-un-probleme-226560> (accessed 24 November 2016).

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- <sup>24</sup> Arnaud Ramsay, *Anelka par Anelka* (Paris: Hugo et Compagnie, 2010), 5.
- <sup>25</sup> Ramsay, *Anelka par Anelka* (Paris: Hugo et Compagnie, 2010), 5.
- <sup>26</sup> The phrase in French that appeared on the front page of *L'Équipe* was 'Va te faire enculer, sale fils de pute', which can be literally translated as 'go fuck yourself, you dirty son of a whore'.
- <sup>27</sup> Vincent Duluc, *Le Livre noir des bleus: chronique d'un désastre annoncé* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2010).
- <sup>28</sup> Damien Degorre and Raphaël Raymond, *L'Équipe: histoire d'un scoop* (Paris: Éditions L'Équipe, 2010), 14–15.
- <sup>29</sup> See: Stéphane Beaud, *Traîtres à la nation? Un autre regard sur la grève des Bleus en Afrique du Sud* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), 278.
- <sup>30</sup> Vincent Duluc, *L'Affaire Jacquet* (Paris: Éditions Prolongations, 2008). See also: Geoff Hare, *Football in France: a cultural history* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 115-6, 139; Lucy McKeever, 'Reporting the World Cup: Old and New Media', in Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare (ed.), *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a Global Sporting Event* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 164-5, 192-3, 210-11.
- <sup>31</sup> Nicolas Vilas, *Dieu Football Club* (Paris: Hugo Sport), 195.
- <sup>32</sup> John Lichfield, 'Heard the one about the racist black comedian?', *Independent*, 22 March 2006, <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article352748.ece> (accessed 30 April 2012). For broader discussion of the links between anti-Semitism and anti-zionism in France, see: Michel Wieviorka, *L'Antisémitisme est-il de retour?* (Paris: Larousse, 2008): 56-68.
- <sup>33</sup> Comments made in *Rendez-vous Jésus!* show at the Théâtre de la Main d'Or in Paris on 9 February 2012.
- <sup>34</sup> For discussion of this stereotype, see: Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 68.
- <sup>35</sup> Lichfield, 'Heard the one about the racist black comedian?'.
- <sup>36</sup> BBC News, 'Nicolas Anelka: West Brom striker defends "quenelle" gesture', 21 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/25837998> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>37</sup> The Guardian, 'Nicolas Anelka receives blow to defence of quenelle salute', 23 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/jan/23/nicolas-anelka-jewish-quenelle> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>38</sup> Élisabeth Lévy and Gil Mihaely, 'Dieudonné: je n'ai absolument aucun remords', *Causeur*, 10 February 2014, 49.
- <sup>39</sup> Ramsay, *Anelka par Anelka*, 24.
- <sup>40</sup> The Football Association, 'Nicolas Anelka suspended for five matches and fined', 27 February 2014, <http://www.thefa.com/news/governance/2014/feb/nicolas-anelka-west-brom-five-match-suspension> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>41</sup> *Telegraph*, 'Samir Nasri and Mamadou Sakho pictured performing same controversial 'quenelle' gesture as Nicolas Anelka', 30 December 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/manchester-city/10542383/Samir-Nasri-and-Mamadou-Sakho-pictured-performing-same-controversial-quenelle-gesture-as-Nicolas-Anelka.html> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>42</sup> Mike Keegan, 'Samir Nasri quenelle picture emerges as Nicolas Anelka says he won't perform gesture again', *Mirror*, 30 December 2013, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/samir-nasri-quenelle-picture-emerges-2973479> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>43</sup> *Le Parisien*, '«Quenelle» avec Dieudonné: Sakho dit avoir été piégé', 28 November 2013, <http://www.leparisien.fr/sports/football/quenelle-avec-dieudonne-sakho-dit-avoir-ete-piege-28-11-2013-3358215.php#xtref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.co.uk%2F> (accessed 13 March 2016).
- <sup>44</sup> Jean-Michel Rouet and Bruno Constant, 'Anelka, deux buts et un polémique', *L'Équipe*, 29 December 2013, 9.
- <sup>45</sup> *West Bromwich Albion official website*, 'Albion update on Anelka contract', 14 March 2014 <http://www.wba.co.uk/news/article/albion-update-on-anelka-contract-march-2014-1421762.aspx> (accessed 23 October 2014).
- <sup>46</sup> Grant Farred, 'Keeping silent: the problem of citizenship for Lilian Thuram', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35, no. 6 (2012), 1040-1.
- <sup>47</sup> Farred, 'Keeping silent', 1042.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1049.
- <sup>49</sup> Renaud Dely and Franck Annese. 'Le Diablotin Rouge', *So Foot*, 18 (December 2004-January 2005), 63.
- <sup>50</sup> Beaud, *Affreux, riches et méchants ?*, 64.

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<sup>51</sup> In: Antoine Grynbaum and Romain Scheider, *Foot et politique: les liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Jean-Claude Gassewitch, 2010), 233.

<sup>52</sup> Vilas, *Dieu Football Club*, 195

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide : Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

<sup>55</sup> Mark Perryman, *Why the Olympics aren't good for us, and how they can be* (London: OR Books, 2012), 25.

<sup>56</sup> See: Wieviorka, *L'Antisémitisme est-il de retour?*, 56–68, 69–80; Dave Rich, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> Alison Flood, "'Post-truth' named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries", *The Guardian*, 15 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries> (accessed 21 November 2016).