

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Return to Orléans: Racism, Rumor, and Social Scientists in 1960s France

Arthur Asseraf

Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK  
Email: aa504@cam.ac.uk

## Abstract

How did it become possible to think of a racism without racists? This article tackles this question by looking at the contested interpretation of a racist incident in France. In 1969, Jewish shop owners in Orléans were baselessly accused of kidnapping women in fitting rooms and trafficking them into sexual slavery. This antisemitic agitation rapidly attracted the attention of local authorities, national media, and social scientists, led by sociologist Edgar Morin. Morin's study made these events into a famous case-study in disinformation, the "rumor of Orléans." But Morin was only one of several actors who attributed different causes to racism in Orléans. All of them agreed that racism was a serious problem, but they could not agree on its causes. Compared to other incidents at the time which grabbed media attention, the uncertainty of events in Orléans allowed people to debate this. Morin's contribution was to turn to communications and social psychology to deploy the concept of "rumor." He dissolved the problem of racism into a problem of communication. This suggests that in order to understand the emergence of "racism without racists," we have to pay close attention to the context in which theories emerged to make it thinkable, and to the relationship between analyses of racism and communication.

**Keywords:** racism; rumor; antisemitism; sociology; Edgar Morin; white slavery

Social scientists played an important role in defining racism in the years after 1945. As the international scientific community disavowed biological racism, social scientists stepped in to explain that race was a socially constructed phenomenon. Rather than a new consensus, new conflicts of interpretation emerged as different actors competed to define how race operated and what constituted racism.

This article looks at one such conflict of interpretation over a racist incident in 1960s France. It shows how anonymous citizens, state actors, and social scientists analyzed an ambiguous series of events to coproduce a new understanding of racism as fundamentally diffuse. By examining how people attributed different causes to racism, we can better grasp how new paradigms emerged and how social

scientists intervened amidst alternative explanations. In the case addressed here, they explained racism by resorting to theories of communication and social psychology.

The location of this flashpoint was unexpected: Orléans, an unremarkable city of roughly one hundred thousand inhabitants some 130 kilometers south of Paris. Orléans was, by most accounts, quite boring. In the spring of 1969, the most exciting news in the local newspapers was about a parade in honor of Joan of Arc and an academic congress on monasteries.<sup>1</sup> Then suddenly, in late May, the city was wracked by events that would make it infamous for years to come. A story spread that young women were being abducted in clothing shops. The unsuspecting victims, the story went, were drugged in the fitting rooms, and then smuggled out of France and trafficked into prostitution. Despite the absence of any documented cases of missing women, hostile crowds gathered in front of these stores, and the situation grew volatile. Crucially, the only stores targeted were those thought to be owned by Jews.

This was only the first phase. Quickly, the rumor came to national attention. In this second phase anti-racist organizations, local authorities, and media intervened to quash it. They expressed bafflement that over twenty years after the end of the Second World War, antisemitism had not been wiped out. The location of the rumor generated special anxiety—as one television report put it, “a classic and tranquil French city, with no drama, no scandals, no adventures.”<sup>2</sup> Why, in this cloudless sky, had racism reared its ugly head for no apparent reason?

What happened in Orléans became a focal point for discussions about racism. In reality, the town was not unique. Versions of the story of the dangerous fitting rooms had blossomed and faded in many other places in France before and would continue to do so. More broadly, it was not the first time that the myth of “white slavery”—the international sexual trafficking of white women—provoked panic. As the name itself suggests, such stories tended to express racial anxieties about the purity of white women being preyed upon by racialized men.

But these events in 1969 would acquire an iconic status as *la rumeur d’Orléans*. This enduring fame comes out of an influential sociological study led by Edgar Morin and published almost immediately by Seuil in Paris in 1969: *La rumeur d’Orléans*, later translated in English as *Rumor in Orléans* (1971).<sup>3</sup> Among social scientists, the study has become a classic in the study of rumors and urban legends.<sup>4</sup> It has also had a cultural impact well beyond the academic world and beyond France.<sup>5</sup> It has been the subject of several documentaries, and the fiftieth anniversary in 2019 saw a series of

<sup>1</sup> *La République du Centre*, 8 and 9 May 1969, n. 7184-5.

<sup>2</sup> Office de Radio-Télévision Française, Régie 4, *Affaire classée*, “La rumeur d’Orléans,” 5 Aug. 1969, 26 mins., Institut National Audiovisuel (INA).

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Morin et al., *La rumeur d’Orléans* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); Edgar Morin, *Rumor in Orléans* (London: Blond, 1971); Edgar Morin, *Ryktet i Orléans* (Stockholm: Nordstedt, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumeurs* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Pascal Froissart, *La rumeur: histoire et fantasmes* (Paris: Belin, 2002); Paul Watzlawick, *How Real Is Real? Confusion, Disinformation, Communication* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Romain Gary (Emile Ajar), *La vie devant soi* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1975); Pierre Desproges, “La Rumeur,” *Chroniques De La Haine Ordinaire*, France Inter, 10 Feb. 1986, 3 mins; Richard Schmid, “Die Jungfrauen von Orleans,” *Die Zeit*, 5 June 1970; Miguel Gaspar, “O boato de Orleães e outras escutas,” *Publico*, 8 Dec. 2009.

retrospectives by different media, driven by a contemporary interest in fake news.<sup>6</sup> Orléans has become a touchstone for the place of the irrational in modern society.

Morin's study has also been the subject of several critical analyses.<sup>7</sup> The aim here is not to repeat these, but to place his study in its context of production alongside other interpretations of Orléans, in order to understand how studies of rumor and racism converged at that time.

Several scholars have drawn our attention to a certain contemporary form of racism in which it is denied by those perpetrating it: a "racism without racists," or "colorblind racism" as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls it in the United States context, or what Howard Winant describes globally as a racism "detached from its perpetrators."<sup>8</sup> David Theo Goldberg notes that in Europe people reject "race" as something that only occurs in a distant place or past, thereby removing Europeans from any involvement in racial structures. He calls this belief that race imploded during World War II "racial Europeanization."<sup>9</sup> Many scholars have shown the disjuncture between this shift in words and the persistence of practices of racism. As the authors of an edited volume on Germany put it, "The term *Rasse* has virtually disappeared from the German lexicon and public discourse since 1945 despite the persistence of social ideologies and behaviors that look an awful lot like racism."<sup>10</sup>

France has been a fertile terrain for this line of work. Since well before World War II the French state has tended to describe itself as an exception in a racist world even while implementing racial policies.<sup>11</sup> This existing discourse was reinforced by

<sup>6</sup>For audiovisual production in France, see Pierre Müller, *Une vieille histoire*, 52 mins., Maison de la Culture d'Orléans, 1982; Stéphane Granzotto, *La rumeur d'Orléans*, 52 mins., Treize Productions/France Télévision, 2019; and TF1 Info, "Faux enlèvements: il y a cinquante ans, la rumeur d'Orléans avait déjà fait des ravages," 27 Mar. 2019, <https://www.tf1info.fr/societe/faux-enlevements-il-y-a-cinquante-ans-la-rumeur-d-orleans-avait-deja-fait-des-ravages-2116668.html>. For examples in print, see Lourdes Morales Canales, "El Fantasma de Orleans," *El Universal*, 7 Feb. 2019; Marion Bonnet, "Revivez, au jour le jour, l'incroyable propagation de la rumeur d'Orléans, en 1969," *La république du centre*, 3 June 2019; Baudoin Eschappasse, "Il y a 50 ans, la rumeur d'Orléans," *Le Point*; Cathy Macherel, "Il y a cinquante ans, la rumeur d'Orléans," *La tribune de Genève*, 6 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup>Jean-Michel Chaumont, "Des paniques morales spontanées? Le cas de la 'rumeur d'Orléans,'" *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques*, 43, 1 (2012): 119–37; Philippe Aldrin, *Sociologie politique des rumeurs* (Paris: PUF, 2005), 236–39; David Mélo, "Retour sur la rumeur d'Orléans," in Pierre Allorant et al., eds., *Lieux de mémoires en Centre-Val de Loire* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2021), 273–83.

<sup>8</sup>Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 307; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Hoboken: Wiley & Blackwell, 2008), 151–98.

<sup>10</sup>Rita Chin and Heide Fehrenbach, "Introduction: What's Race Got to Do with It? Postwar German History in Context," in Rita Chin et al., eds., *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Beyond* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>This assertion has become too widespread to cite all of the relevant work, much of which has dealt with the history of either immigration or colonialism, or both. One of the more influential studies in English is Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). On this period in particular, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French West Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). In French, see Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale 1860–1930: Paradigme racial et idéologie républicaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006); Didier Fassin and Eric Fassin, *De la question sociale à la question raciale? Représenter la société française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006); Pap Ndiaye, *La condition noire: essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

international changes after 1945. In the metropole, the overtly racial policies of the Vichy regime toward Jews were denounced as an aberration, and thus as anti-French. In the empire, anti-colonial insurgencies in Madagascar, Cameroon, Vietnam, and Algeria forced successive governments to try to prove that France was not racist in order for its empire to survive. Several scholars have noted a more specific shift in postwar France that differed from this longstanding tradition of denying racism: an increasing focus on whether to *say* the word race. For Emily Marker, this was a specific “speech regime” of “colorblindness” that emerged in the postwar era and continues today.<sup>12</sup> In a crucial study of racist crimes from the 1970s to the 2000s, Rachida Brahim has shown how making race unsayable rendered action against racism impossible and condemned victims of racism to madness.<sup>13</sup> English-language scholarship has often tended to characterize this as a specifically French mode of talking about race, at times overstating national differences.<sup>14</sup>

My aim is not to add to the many existing descriptions of this paradox. But all of these studies point to a larger but less obvious change. People in France, like others in Europe and around the world, came to believe that the crucial problem was whether or not racism was expressed, and how. How did this seemingly obvious conjunction, that racism fundamentally resides in language and communication, emerge? Here, I use a specific case study to show how a new mode of analysis of racism developed.

Social scientists played a key role in developing this as they took on the mantle of explaining racism after World War II. In those years, wrote Howard Winant, “a break from the long-established verities of race occurred.”<sup>15</sup> After the downfall of the Nazi regime, the newly founded UNESCO gathered scientists to issue a declaration that there was no biological basis for racial difference.<sup>16</sup> The denunciation of racism as a dangerous ideology did not mean that racism disappeared, as contemporaries recognized. Instead, they called for new definitions and explanations of racism.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Emily Marker, “Obscuring Race: Franco-African Conversations about Colonial Reform and Racism after World War II and the Making of Colorblind France, 1945–1960,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, 3 (2015): 1–23.

<sup>13</sup>Rachida Brahim, *La race tue deux fois: une histoire des crimes racistes en France (1970–2000)* (Paris: Syllepse, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>On these differential modes of analysis in French and English, see, for instance, Herrick Chapman and Laura Frader, *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 3; Erik Bleich, *Race Politics in Britain and France: Ideas and Policymaking since the 1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017). See also Audrey Brunetaux and Lam-Thao Nguyen, “Post-Racial Paradox?,” *Contemporary France and Francophone Studies* 26 (2022): 351–60.

<sup>15</sup>Winant, *World Is a Ghetto*, 20.

<sup>16</sup>Michelle Brattain, “Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public,” *American Historical Review* 112, 5 (2007): 1386–413; Perrin Selcer, “Beyond the Cephalic Index: Negotiating Politics to Produce UNESCO’s Scientific Statements on Race,” *Current Anthropology* 53, 5 (2012): 173–84. On prewar developments, see Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>On historicizing this form of antiracism see Alana Lentini, *Racism and Antiracism in Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

In Orléans, the concept of “rumor,” increasingly prominent in the sociology of that period, provided new resources for thinking about racism.

To understand the effects of this intervention, we must return to Orléans by following a range of actors through different types of sources. The local police and their superiors at the *préfecture* produced an investigation of the rumor, which can be found in the state archives of the Loiret, and in the municipal archives of Orléans. These state archives also contain, via depositions, the voices of victims of racism. Here I combine these with coverage of the rumor in written media both locally and nationally, and with audiovisual media, since the rumor was the object of television documentaries. Audiovisual archives are especially rich in showing how people talked about racism, as well as silences, hesitations, and laughter, all of which are invisible in written sources. Finally, a close reading of Morin’s sociological study allows us to locate the specificity of social scientists’ intervention amid state actors, victims, and media.

People at the time used both the words *racisme* and *antisémitisme* to describe what happened in Orléans. Though the relationship between the two terms has been the subject of much academic and popular debate, most of that came after 1969. As we will see, it was unclear at the time whether the rumors in Orléans targeted only Jews. I use both terms depending on whether actors believed that they did specifically target Jews (antisemitism), or that a wider form of racism was in play, in order to preserve the ambiguity of contemporary analysis.

I will begin by looking chronologically at how the “rumor of Orléans” developed, from its beginnings there in 1969 to its social scientific canonization. Then, by comparing these events with other incidents of racism around that time, I will show how what occurred in Orléans stood out amid broader discussions about racism in France. The final section turns to the different explanations for racism that revolved around Orléans, and how Morin’s use of the concept of “rumor” introduced a new frame of analysis.

### The Birth of an Affair

On 30 May 1969, a deeply concerned Henri Licht went to the central police station in Orléans to file a complaint. Aged thirty-five and born in Paris, he was the owner of a clothing store called *Dorphé* in the city’s commercial center. Licht was worried about growing rumors that his shop was being used for sexual trafficking. When he initially heard about these on 24 May he had paid them no mind. As far as he knew, the rumor came from female students at the local secondary school, the lycée Jean Zay, named after a Jewish minister and *résistant* murdered in 1944. Wild schoolgirl gossip about sexual danger could be easily dismissed.

But the rumors were starting to have serious consequences: his employees had been harassed on the street and customers were fleeing his store. Crucially, Licht had discussed this with other shop owners and realized that six stores were being targeted. These discussions had changed his assessment of the situation. “Since several of the colleagues that I have just mentioned to you are of Israelite origin like me, I have come to wonder if there is not an orchestrated cabal under all this.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Archives départementales du Loiret (Orléans) (hereafter “Loiret”), “Plainte de LICHT Henri devant la sûreté urbaine,” 31 May 1969, 1019W 77923 A.

It was thus a Jewish man, Licht, who first brought the rumor to the attention of police authorities. From the start he accused those spreading the rumor of antisemitism. Moreover, the racist nature of the rumor, to Licht, meant it could not be spontaneous, but only the result of an “orchestrated cabal.”

Clearly, something was afoot among the students. The next day, the 31st, the police received a letter from parents, organized in the *Association des parents d'élèves du lycée de jeunes filles*, asking for an investigation into these abductions so as to “reassure the students and their parents.”<sup>19</sup> This letter did not mention Jews. Was that because the parents were unaware that Jews were being targeted by the accusations, or because they could not say so for fear of appearing racist?

That same day, a crowd assembled in front of Licht's store shouting threats, and the situation grew volatile. Six more business owners visited the police to file complaints, all of them with clothing stores in the center of Orléans. All said that they had been targeted by the rumor, all specified in their depositions that they were Jewish, and all suggested that the rumor had originated in a racist plot (*menées racistes*). The one exception was Marie-Hélène Lemsén, born into a Christian family in Algeria, whose store had until recently had Jewish owners. She noted this in her deposition: “I care to indicate that unlike the other stores that are targeted with me, I am not of Israelite origin (*d'origine israélite*), nor is the owner.” Thus, all the complainants mentioned within their deposition whether they were Jewish or not. To do so, they used the more polite and formal term “*israélite*,” rather than “*juif*” (Jewish). An “*Israélite*,” a term developed in the assimilationist nineteenth century, was an equal member of a community of national citizens who was only distinguished by religious beliefs. “*Juif*” was far more loaded with connotations and evoked a belonging to a different people, or, under the Vichy regime, a different race.<sup>20</sup>

Faced with multiple demands, from those defamed and from those concerned their daughters might get abducted, the police began to investigate. It became immediately clear that the allegations were not based on any actual recent events in Orléans, even grossly distorted ones. There had been no recent cases of abductions or missing women. One version of the story alleged that the police had found five women tied up and drugged in the backroom at *Dorphé*. As the *commissaire* noted, one would expect the police themselves to know about such a dramatic find.

The policemen in charge of the investigation largely agreed with the complainants' interpretation of the rumors. This was a “more or less orchestrated campaign that aimed to target the honor and reputation of Jewish shopkeepers.” For the police, then, the rumor was racist, intentional, and malevolent.<sup>21</sup>

Yet no culprits could be found. The rumor could be heard in different social environments. Maids, bourgeois families, workers at the Renault factory were all aware of it, and it was difficult to connect it to a specific person or group of people. The investigation went back in time to try and detect if there was an antisemitic conspiracy at work in Orléans. They noted, for instance, that a few months earlier the student union at the university had organized a reunion on the “Palestinian

<sup>19</sup>Loiret, Rebaudet to commissaire, 31 May 1969, 1019W 77923 A.

<sup>20</sup>Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Du juif à l'israélite, histoire d'une mutation* (Paris: Fayard, 1989); Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Laurent Joly, *L'Etat contre les juifs* (Paris: Grasset, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>Loiret, Commissaire principal de brigade urbaine au commissaire central, 2 June 1969, 1019W 77923 A.



problem.”<sup>22</sup> Could recent events in the Middle East following the Six Day War in 1967 be at the root of this? But the police found nothing suspicious about that February reunion. Investigations of the far-right did not yield any further insights. There had been some far-right activity in Orléans a year earlier during May 1968, in which a “commando” had raided the university campus and specifically targeted African students.<sup>23</sup> Any evidence of racist activity, whichever the community targeted, was potentially relevant in the investigation since the police did not know if only Jews were being targeted. But the far-right did not appear to profit from the rumor in Orléans and seemed as surprised by it as everyone else. There was no evidence of any “cabal” on any political side.

So, where had this racism come from? The only material evidence that the police investigation found was an article from the magazine *Noir et Blanc* from the week 8–14 May 1969. Published roughly a week before the first traces of the rumor appeared in secondary schools, the magazine’s headline described, “The New Traps of Sexual Slavery.” The article told of an innocent woman who had entered a clothing store only to be found later by the police bound and drugged in the backroom. Yet this whole affair was set not in Orléans, but in Grenoble, a city roughly the same size but about 400 kilometers away.<sup>24</sup> The *Noir et blanc* article did not mention Jews.

Chasing the lead, the Orléans police contacted their colleagues. The Grenoble police explained that there had been a similar defamation case against one clothing store in 1963 and that it, too, was found to have no basis in reality. Evidence accumulated that similar stories about women being abducted in fitting rooms had circulated in many French cities. The police report named Tours, Le Mans, Lille, and Limoges, and subsequent research would find many more. Yet it was unclear if those rumors also targeted Jews. The police said that these stores in other towns were “likely (*vraisemblablement*) owned by Israelites” but did not say how they had come by this knowledge. The story in the magazine article turned out to have been lifted from a book entitled *Sex Slavery*, written in English by a Hungarian Jew, Stephen Barlay. He was not suspected of antisemitism.<sup>25</sup>

The mystery at the center of the affair was gradually being narrowed down. Initially, the police wondered where the story of abductions had come from, but now they concentrated on when it had become antisemitic. There had been widespread discussion for some time of the dangers of “white slavery” (*traite des blanches*), which frequently led to moral panics about the sexuality and behavior of young women, especially in the years of the sexual revolution. One year earlier, the revolt of May 1968 had focused discussion on the role of youth and differences between generations.<sup>26</sup>

Amid these other discussions of youth and sex, it was the antisemitic nature of events in Orléans that gave them national importance. Why had the rumor in Orléans

<sup>22</sup>Loiret, Renseignements Généraux, 19 and 22 Feb. 1969, 1019W 77923 A.

<sup>23</sup>See *La république du centre*, 17 June 1968.

<sup>24</sup>*Noir et Blanc*, 8–14 May 1969, no. 1258.

<sup>25</sup>This emerged in the interrogation of journalist Francis Attard: Audition de M. ATTARD Francis, 11 June 1969, Loiret, 1019 W 77923a; Stephen Barlay, *Sex Slavery: A Documentary Report on the International Scene Today* (London: Coronet, 1968), translated in French as *L’esclavage sexuel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1969); Nick Barlay, “Stephen Barlay Obituary,” *Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2011.

<sup>26</sup>On representations of 1968, see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

targeted Jews? There was nothing especially remarkable about Orléans' Jewish community: it was very small at an estimated one hundred families, perhaps four hundred people in a city of a hundred thousand. Around half of them had recently arrived from North Africa.<sup>27</sup>

Around the same time as the police started investigating, a young Jewish teacher named Eliane Klein heard about the rumor through her family and decided to alert as many journalists and institutions in Paris as possible. She wrote to several newspapers and community organizations. In a parallel movement, local authorities at the *préfecture*, concerned by the spread of allegations, encouraged the two local newspapers, *La République du Centre* and *La nouvelle République*, to actively combat the rumor by talking about it.<sup>28</sup> On Monday, 2 June, both newspapers published articles denouncing this “odious cabal,” which was now too important to keep silent about. Much like the police, the journalists explicitly named the “antisemitism, that we could have hoped had disappeared forever with the agony of the Third Reich.”<sup>29</sup>

It was this apparent resurgence of Nazism that would get most actors outraged. The response escalated quickly. A meeting on 4 June drew together representatives of several political parties (from centrists to communists), of the Jewish community, of former deportees to German camps, and of national antiracist organizations like the International League Against Antisemitism (LICA) and the Movement Against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples (MRAP). That Sunday, 8 June, the writer Louis Guilloux organized a meeting at the cultural center in Orléans which over three hundred people attended to hear a discussion about antisemitism, including a speaker from the World Jewish Congress.

Alerted by Klein, the reaction spread from Orléans to Paris. Vidal Modiano, the head of the national representative council for French Jews (CRIF), wrote to the *préfet* to take direct action to identify and punish the culprits. By the end of the week, national newspapers were taking up coverage: *Le Monde* on 7 June, followed quickly by *L'observateur*, *L'Humanité*, *Le Figaro*, and *L'Aurore*, to mention but a few.<sup>30</sup> All articles denounced the rumor and expressed bafflement that “medieval” antisemitism could rear its ugly head in a “modern” city.

A broad set of actors were invested in expressing their disapproval of antisemitism, and in being publicly seen to do this. Local authorities found this response excessive: “the protest campaign now appears disproportionate with the rumors that started it.” The intelligence service reported that “every newspaper, every organization thinks they should have their say.”<sup>31</sup> The mayor was quite dismissive of the agitation. He was

<sup>27</sup>Edgar Morin, *Rumeur* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 117. The edition used here throughout is the 1970 *poche* edition, which includes the subsequent *Rumeur d'Amiens*.

<sup>28</sup>Klein's version of what happened can be found in the Office de Radio-Télévision Française television report in 1969, and later in Zoé Falliero, “50 ans après, le CERCIL raconte la rumeur d'Orléans,” *Magcentre*, <https://www.magcentre.fr/179922-50-ans-apres-le-cercil-raconte-la-rumeur-dorleans/>, 12 June 2019; and Nicolas Tavarès, “La guerre des Six-Jours et la rumeur d'Orléans l'ont incitée à s'engager contre l'obscurantisme,” *La République du Centre*, 27 Jan. 2013.

<sup>29</sup>*La nouvelle république*, 2 June 1969.

<sup>30</sup>JP Q, *Le Monde*, “Des femmes ‘disparaissent’ à Orléans,” 7 June 1969; Katia Kaupp, “Une histoire de sorcières,” *L'observateur*, 9 June 1969; “A dix ans je portais l'étoile jaune, à aucun prix nos enfants ne doivent revoir cela,” *L'humanité*, 9 June 1969; *L'Aurore*, 10 June; *Le Figaro*, 11 June.

<sup>31</sup>Renseignements Généraux, 9 June and 12 June 1969, Loiret, 1019W 77923 A.



not pleased that he had to buy raffle tickets to show his support for antiracist organizations, lest he risk being accused of not supporting the local Jewish community: “antiracists are sometimes also beggars! ... but we cannot escape this.”<sup>32</sup> To him, antiracists had to be indulged but their performance could not be taken seriously.

By the second week of June, this reaction had caused the rumor to cease to be audible in public in Orléans. The incriminated stores returned to a normal business pattern throughout that month, and the agitation, threats, and mobs ended. But the media remained fascinated and magazine articles about the rumors continued to trickle through in June. If things had ended there the rumor of Orléans might have remained one of many such “*faits divers*,” newsworthy incidents, that shocked the nation and then faded into obscurity.<sup>33</sup>

It took something else for Orléans to become a lasting reference point: the publication of a book. In early July, a Jewish community organization, the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU), commissioned a sociological study. The FSJU was an umbrella organization founded in 1950 to rebuild Jewish life in France, which sponsored a wide range of activities, from welfare services to academic journals. Pierre Kaufmann, former *résistant* and prominent member of the FSJU, wanted to understand the resurgence of antisemitism in Orléans. A fellow Jewish *résistant*, Gérard Rosenthal, and a noted historian of antisemitism, Léon Poliakov, convinced him that a sociological study would be the best way to do this.<sup>34</sup> Sociology was having its heyday as a discipline in 1960s France, and took on an increasingly public role boosted by the influence of bestsellers such as Bourdieu and Passeron’s 1964 *Les Héritiers*. Sociology offered the promise to uncover society’s superficial order to reveal the hidden logics beneath.<sup>35</sup>

The FSJU contacted a man who was in many ways the poster boy of this new public role of the social sciences in postwar France, Edgar Morin. Born Edgar Nahoum in 1921 to a Jewish family, he had adopted the name Morin while in the Resistance. By 1969, Morin was already an important media personality, interpreting the changes of the time for a society thirsty for new theories. In 1960 he had collaborated with the filmmaker Jean Rouch to make *Chronique d’un été*, a resoundingly successful documentary in which Parisians were interviewed for their opinions.<sup>36</sup> He was also well-known for his interest in modernization and how it affected provincial French society.<sup>37</sup> Rather than carrying out protracted academic studies, Morin produced essays at a lightning-fast pace, and he dominated both newspapers and television screens.

In July 1969, armed with a small budget of 5,000 francs given by the FSJU, Morin quickly assembled a team of five. He and Bernard Paillard, Evelyne Burguière, Claude

<sup>32</sup>Archives municipales d’Orléans (Orléans), Cabinet du maire Roger Secrétain, Affaires Politiques, 8167, 11 July 1969.

<sup>33</sup>On the construction of the *fait divers*, see Dominique Kalifa, *L’encre et le sang* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

<sup>34</sup>Morin, *Rumeur*, 154–58.

<sup>35</sup>Jean-Michel Chapoulie, ed., *Sociologues et sociologies: La France des années 60* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005).

<sup>36</sup>Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, *Chronique d’un été*, Argos, 1961, 90 mins.

<sup>37</sup>Edgar Morin, *Commune en France: La métamorphose de Plodémet* (Paris: Fayard, 1967). On the subsequent controversy, see Bernard Paillard, “À propos de Plozévet: retour sur une polémique académique,” *Hermès*, 60, 2 (2011): 176–81.

Capelier, Julia Vérone, and Suzanne de Lusignan visited Orléans for three days, applying a method “close to journalistic reporting” that he would come to call “event-based sociology” (*sociologie événementielle*).<sup>38</sup> By the autumn, Morin had drawn from this investigation a book which became a success: *La rumeur d’Orléans*, published by Seuil. Morin had done this kind of quick editorial turnaround before: his essay on May 1968 published with two other authors had come out in July 1968.<sup>39</sup>

In the meantime, two journalists from national television, Pierre Andro and Maurice Dugowson, also descended upon Orléans in the summer of 1969. They subsequently aired a long-form half-hour documentary about the rumor on 5 August, which also interviewed Morin.<sup>40</sup> In November, Morin returned to Orléans to present his study’s findings at the Maison de la culture, and about 150 people attended.<sup>41</sup> By this time, he had become the respectable authority in charge of explaining the rumor, and from now on the rumor would be closely associated with his study of it, even when it cropped up somewhere else.

A few months later, a closely related rumor of fitting room abductions organized by Jews took over Amiens, a city of similar size and distance from Paris as Orléans. Claude Fischler, a young journalist who had devoured Morin’s book, traveled to Amiens to study it. He noted the same ballet of actors as in Orléans: schoolgirls gossiping about abductions in shops owned primarily by Jews, a rumor which rapidly moved between social classes, a strong reaction by local media and political authorities, and the frenzied arrival of national and international press to study this bizarre town. Incidents in a different city came to be understood as a pure repetition of those of Orléans. Fischler’s study of the *rumeur d’Amiens* was published as an appendix to later editions of Morin’s study. After training as a sociologist, Fischler would become one of Morin’s chief disciples.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the success of Morin’s analysis can obscure many other actors that were trying to understand what happened. As we have seen, discussions involved the townspeople of Orléans, divided into several groups, including schoolgirls; Jewish whistleblowers like Licht and Klein; local authorities, including the police and the *préfet*; groups such as political parties and antiracist and Jewish community organizations; and local and national media in both print and television. Everyone agreed that what had happened in Orléans was both important and mysterious, and everyone was trying to understand where racism came from.

### Orléans in Its Context: Racism as Crime

Why did Orléans generate so much interest for so many people? In order to understand this, it must be compared to other incidents around the same time which did not attain such enduring fame. The initial, perhaps most obvious reason is that events in Orléans involved antisemitism at a time of increased national discussion of the Second World

<sup>38</sup>Morin, *La rumeur*, 17–18; Edgar Morin, “Le retour de l’événement,” *Communications* 18 (1972): 6–20.

<sup>39</sup>Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, and Jean-Marc Coudray, *Mai 1968: La brèche, premières réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Fayard, 1968); Margaret Attack, “Edgar Morin and the Sociology of May 1968,” *French Cultural Studies* 8, 24 (1997): 295–307.

<sup>40</sup>Maurice Dugowson and Jacques Dugowson, *Affaire classée*, 5 Aug. 1969, Office de Radio-Télévision Française, 26 mins.

<sup>41</sup>Renseignements Généraux, 18 Nov. 1969, Loiret, 1019 W 77923a.

<sup>42</sup>“La rumeur d’Amiens,” added as an appendix to editions of Morin’s *Rumeur* after 1970, 287–315.

War. More or less at the same time, director Marcel Ophüls was filming *Le chagrin et la pitié* in the spring of 1969. This documentary about everyday French people's involvement in the Vichy regime would become a landmark in the way French people thought of their responsibility in the Holocaust. While in the immediate afterwar years of the 1940s and 1950s antisemitism was denounced as but one of the many crimes of the Nazi regime, in the 1960s genocide against Jews was increasingly being discussed on its own. Annette Wievorka has pointed to the Eichmann Trial in 1961 as an important turning point in this respect since it foregrounded the extermination of the Holocaust as an experience distinct from political deportation.<sup>43</sup> Shortly before Orléans, the Six-Day War in 1967 further transformed the discussion. When President Charles de Gaulle after the conflict described Israel as a dominant power, some Jewish community organizations were concerned that France might alter its support for Zionism. This brought a great deal of political and intellectual attention to the position of the French Jewish community, and whether a “new” antisemitism was emerging twenty-five years after the war's end.<sup>44</sup>

Certainly, Orléans attracted a great deal of notice because it was a case of antisemitism. Jewish victims like Licht, and families like Klein's, felt that the rumor's antisemitic nature demanded an immediate and strong national reaction. They played a crucial role in bringing it to light by calling in the police and getting national Jewish community organizations involved. As Maud Mandel has observed in a book comparing Muslims and Jews in France during this period, Jewish community organizations were much stronger and had better connections with the state than did other victims of racism like Muslims.<sup>45</sup> Organizations fighting antisemitism tended to be better-organized and of longer-standing compared to those battling other forms of racism. The LICRA, for instance, which intervened in Orléans, had been founded in the interwar years with a primary purpose of fighting antisemitism.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, a changing understanding of the Holocaust by the late 1960s may explain the willingness of local authorities and national media to immediately take Jewish victims' voices seriously, as part of what Wievorka has described as the “era of the witness.”<sup>47</sup>

To people trying to understand shifts in antisemitism at the time, the baseless accusations against Jews in Orléans were of special interest because they were so reminiscent of a much older history of blood libels. Poliakov, who commissioned Morin to go investigate Orléans, had just published the third volume of his monumental history of antisemitism the year before. He was increasingly interested in psychological explanations for antisemitism, especially the concept of collective psychology.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Annette Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>44</sup>Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, M. B. DeBevoise, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Denis Siefert, *Israël Palestine: une passion française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

<sup>45</sup>Maud Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>46</sup>Emmanuel Debono, *Aux origines de l'antiracisme: La LICRA 1927–1940* (Paris: CNRS, 2012); Lentin, *Racism and Antiracism*, 111–22.

<sup>47</sup>Wievorka, *Era of the Witness*.

<sup>48</sup>Léon Poliakov, *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1955, 1961, and 1968). See also the review by Seymour Drescher, “Histoire de l'antisémitisme,” *Annales* 28, 5 (1973): 1153–57;

This led some commentators at the time to argue that Orléans only attracted national attention because it was about Jews. Yves Florenne, writing in *Le Monde diplomatique* in 1970, pointed out that a similar affair involving a clothing store had occurred in Rouen in 1966, but that because it did not target Jews, “there was no antiracist nor political reaction; no further action of simple humanity of solidarity.” Florenne pushed this thinking to an extreme conclusion: “There would have been no Dreyfus Affair without Dreyfus.” That is, the discrimination would not have been made into an affair unless it concerned Jews. One might counter that had Dreyfus not been Jewish the discrimination would never have happened in the first place. But let us remain with Florenne’s argument, that Orléans’ rumor went national because it was about Jews.<sup>49</sup>

Yvan Gastaut has noted that cases of racism involving antisemitism attracted attention relatively early on, from the 1950s, since they tended to be identified with the Second World War.<sup>50</sup> To take one example, in 1958 a Jewish child by the name of Henri Jacobot was harassed by a young butcher who covered his face in blood, locked him in a cold chamber, and called him a “dirty Jew.”<sup>51</sup> When a national organization, the MRAP, sued the butcher, and the press covered the trial extensively, this became the “affaire Jacobot.” Was this an individual act of madness or a sign of a wider disease in society? How widespread was racism in society?

This approach to the Jacobot case was an early example of a trend that picked up during the 1960s. As Dominique Chathuant has written, from around 1965 social scientists started taking racism as an object of study, and coverage of specific racist incidents was increasing rapidly in the media, whether the victims were Jewish or not.<sup>52</sup>

Media coverage of Orléans used *antisémitisme* and *racisme* interchangeably. I have not found, in the debates over this affair, anything like the furious later discussions about the relationship between racism and antisemitism. Several townspeople in Orléans as well as journalists speculated as to whether antisemitism might be connected to other forms of racism. They connected it to violence in Orléans against Algerians during the Algerian Independence War (1954–1962), or to a May 1968 far-right raid against African students at the local university.<sup>53</sup> Colette Gouvion’s article in *L’Express* connected Orléans to wider social scientific studies on the problem of racism.<sup>54</sup>

The incident in Orléans differed from others that took place elsewhere around this time, not because it involved Jews, but because it was a case of racism without known

---

Perrine Simon-Nahum, “Le ‘moment Poliakov’ entre Sartre et Aron,” in Dominique Schnapper, Paul Salmona, and Perrine Simon-Nahum, eds., *Réflexions sur l’antisémitisme* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2016). On the longer history of blood libels and the investigations they led to, see Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020). On changes in modes of investigation of blood libels, see Eugene Avrutin, *The Velizh Affair: Blood Libel in a Russian Town* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>49</sup>Yves Florenne, “La rumeur d’Orléans,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1970: 19.

<sup>50</sup>Yvan Gastaut, “L’immigration et les faits divers,” *Migrations Société* 111–12, 3–4 (2007): 175–80.

<sup>51</sup>Jean-Marc Théolleyre, “Le commis boucher Théroouane se défend d’avoir agi par racisme,” *Le Monde*, 10 Mar. 1960.

<sup>52</sup>Dominique Chathuant, *Nous qui ne cultivons pas le préjugé de race: histoires(s) d’un siècle de doute sur le racisme en France* (Paris: Félin, 2021), 282–308.

<sup>53</sup>Office de Radio-Télévision Française, *Affaire classée*. This is around the 13-minute mark.

<sup>54</sup>Colette Gouvion, “Orléans n’est pas antisémite, mais...” *L’Express*, 16–22 June 1969.

criminals. Coverage of racism tended to highlight violent crimes and to ask whether the culprits were motivated by racism. This was the case whichever community was targeted.

A few years later, in 1971, an Algerian boy of fifteen, Djellali ben Ali, was murdered in Paris. Through consistent pressure from activists, this developed into a major affair involving demonstrations by several thousands of people. The debate focused on whether the murderer, who had known the victim personally, had been racially motivated. In court, the murderer's defense argued that the conflict was purely personal. Antiracist activists and political commentators insisted that racism was involved. As Abdellali Hajjat had indicated, Djellali's family was more uncertain about the exact role of racist motivations in the murder.<sup>55</sup>

Cases like Henri Jacobot's or Djellali ben Ali's, though they took place in different communities, became part of an emerging political discussion. In those years, as Brahim tells us, France debated implementing a new law to criminalize racist speech, which would ultimately take the form of the 1972 Loi Pléven, passed under pressure from international UN resolutions. Thus, the dominant paradigm for discussion in the period around 1969 was racism-as-crime.<sup>56</sup> By contrast, the Orléans affair yielded no criminals and the police investigation failed to identify any culprits. If an improbable neo-Nazi agitating against shop-owners had been found in Orléans the affair might not have remained so famous. It was its seemingly spontaneous and inexplicable nature that proved so fascinating.

Furthermore, events in Orléans could generate so much discussion because they were depoliticized. The rumormongers included people of all social classes and political backgrounds, making it pleasingly neutral. While there was initial suspicion of far-right or far-left involvement, the police eliminated those political hypotheses.

Other *faits divers* at the time seemed to involve a clearer political angle. In 1964, for instance, the mayor of Saint-Claude in Eastern France, Louis Jaillon, banned Algerians from the town's new public pool unless they could provide a medical certificate guaranteeing their good health. Media and political reaction was swift, comparing this to treatment of Jews in Germany in 1934. The case received international coverage in the United States and United Kingdom since it resonated with cases of segregation there. What occurred in Saint-Claude fit into existing political polarizations over the Algerian War of Independence, which had ended in 1962. Jaillon had vocally opposed independence and was firmly on the right, while those outraged at his behavior were mostly on the left. Jaillon denied that his actions were racist. He claimed to have helped "good" North Africans—that is, the harkis who had been loyal to France during the Algerian War—and the measure only targeted immigrants whose hygiene could not be ascertained.<sup>57</sup> His behavior was controversial, but not mysterious. Depending on one's political position, Algerian men were either dangerous threats or victims of racism.

<sup>55</sup> Abdellali Hajjat, "Alliances inattendues à la Goutte d'Or," in Michelle Zancarini-Fournel and Philippe Artières, eds., 68: *Une histoire collective (1962–1981)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 521–27.

<sup>56</sup> Brahim, *La race tue*; Chathuant, *Nous qui ne cultivons pas*, 307–71.

<sup>57</sup> Chathuant, *Nous qui ne cultivons pas*, 268–83; Yvan Gastaut, "L'affaire des Algériens du Jura," *L'Histoire* 283 (2004), 29. Yvan Gastaut and Renaud Delmar, "St Claude 1964 : le racisme's invite au bord de la piscine," radio documentary for *La Fabrique de l'Histoire*, France Culture, 53 mins. 15 Nov. 2011.

Additionally, in Orléans, the state was not blamed for racism. Racism involving state violence was much more difficult to discuss, as it was in Guadeloupe around the same time. In March 1967, two years before the Orléans case, a crowd assembled angrily in front of a shoe-store in a different region of France, in the Caribbean. Raphaël Balzince, an elderly Black shoe repairman, went to the police to complain of a racist incident. Vladimir Srnsky, the white owner of *Le Sans-Pareil* in Basse-Terre, had set his German shepherd on him while telling his dog to “say hello to the negro” (*dis bonjour au nègre*). Outraged, the Black townspeople surrounded the store while the police helped Srnsky escape. When local authorities saved Srnsky people became further enraged. The situation would remain tense in Guadeloupe, leading to a wave of political action. A few months later the police violently repressed a strike, killing at least seven men.<sup>58</sup>

What happened in Guadeloupe bore little resemblance to Orléans: the history of racial plantation slavery (until 1848) and colonial administration (until 1945) in the Caribbean followed different patterns from that of metropolitan antisemitism. But this difference also had to do with the configuration of both events. In Orléans, the police appeared largely as innocent bystanders (which was not always the case in accusations of antisemitic violence). In Guadeloupe, *mé 67*, as the episode came to be known in *kréyòl*, directly implicated the state. *Mé 67* became a lasting basis for political claims, but not a subject of sociological controversy.

Orléans may have proved of interest not just because what happened there involved Jews, but because it was less clear-cut than other affairs. When it came to Jacoubot, Djellali, the swimming pool in Saint-Claude, or the police killings in Guadeloupe, the culprits of racism were clear. There was some debate over exactly how racist their actions were, but racism could still be framed as a kind of crime that carried either individual or political responsibility. These other cases generated media coverage, but no sociological study.

Orléans was productive for two contradictory reasons. On one hand, it reflected a wider 1960s interrogation about the origins of racism, which was generating increasing media coverage. And yet, it offered a unique set of parameters because no perpetrators could be identified. This made it ideal for the intervention of social scientists.

In the late 1960s, social scientists were increasingly analyzing racism by using empirical methods. In the immediate postwar period of the late 1940s and 1950s, essays on racism had been much wider in scope and political in ambition. In some of the most influential essays in French on racism that blossomed after 1945—works like Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), Frantz Fanon’s *Peaux noires masques blancs* (1952), or Albert Memmi’s *Portrait du colonisé* (1957)—the analysis was both deeply political and based on personal experience, philosophical consideration, or clinical cases.<sup>59</sup> When social scientists (as opposed to other kinds of intellectuals) intervened to describe

<sup>58</sup>Raymond Gama and Jean-Pierre Sainton, *Mé 1967 ... mémoire d'un événement* (Port-Louis: Lespwisavann, 2011).

<sup>59</sup>Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972[1955]); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Antisemitism and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1948[1944]); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967[1952]); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965 [1957]). On the connections between these and how they related different forms of racism, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford:



racism, they did so on general terms. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was deeply involved in UNESCO's new research agenda on racism, wrote about racism in *Race et histoire* in 1952, but mostly as a critique of racist ideas and not as an analysis of a concrete social phenomenon.<sup>60</sup>

By the second half of the 1960s the context had shifted, and racism became the object of more empirical studies. The end of the Algerian War in 1962 made understanding the connection between racism and state violence less urgent. Increasingly, racism attracted attention less as a large-scale political problem and more as a problem of individual behavior, and there was a growing interest in social scientific methods of surveys and fieldwork investigation. The publication in 1965 of *Les français et le racisme* was an important turning point in this direction. As a reviewer of the book in *Le monde diplomatique* wrote, "not only ... have neither the horror that Nazi atrocities nor decolonization managed to abolish racism, but, more or less, we are all racists."<sup>61</sup> Racism was understood to be both persistent and diffuse. For the first time, words like *racisé* (racialized) and *privilège* were used to describe the dynamics of racism throughout society, and quantitative methods were deployed to analyze racism.

These new social scientific studies were not separate from wider media interest. Journalist Colette Gouvion, when writing about Orléans in the magazine *L'Express*, quoted the 1969 academic volume *Racisme et société* (Racism and society).<sup>62</sup> And social scientists, as is clear with Morin, drew on media coverage for their studies. Together, popular and academic interest raised the question of where racism was located. How could racism persist despite recent historical developments?

Orléans was an ideal location for exploring this question. What occurred there was unusual in that nobody had to take responsibility for racism. Orléans would probably not have become a sociological case study if it had descended into physical violence, as it almost did on 30 May when the mob assembled in front of Licht's store. There was a threat of something dangerous, a whiff of genocide, but the media saw few lasting consequences in Orléans itself, and the shop-owners' business returned to normal throughout the month of June.

### Toward a Racism without Racists

With these comparisons in mind, we can now return to Orléans to see how productive this absence of responsibility proved to be in generating new analyses of racism. How did different people understand racism in Orléans, and how did social scientists' interventions change that? While attention has focused on Morin's study, David Mélo has shown that the rumor generated much local discussion and debate, and Morin's analyses were quite close to those of other actors.<sup>63</sup>

Most people in Orléans tried to solve the problem of racism by looking for culprits. For the police, this meant looking for criminals. For antiracist organizations, it meant

Stanford University Press, 2009). Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Semitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

<sup>60</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire* (Unesco: Paris, 1952); Lentin, *Racism and Antiracism*, 79–85.

<sup>61</sup>Chathuant, *Nous qui ne cultivons pas*, 282–308; Renseignements Généraux, *Le monde diplomatique*, Feb. 1966: 12.

<sup>62</sup>Claude Duchet and Patrice Comarmond, eds., *Racisme et société* (Maspero: Paris, 1969).

<sup>63</sup>David Mélo, "Retour sur la rumeur d'Orléans."

looking for political enemies. Yet it proved impossible to find people in Orléans who ideologically supported the rumor, and even those who spread it located racism elsewhere. Most of the sources we have were left behind by people who described themselves as external to the rumor, and who blamed the racism on others. But journalist Colette Gouvion from *L'Express* did manage to find one seventeen-year-old woman in front of the *lycée* who explicitly said “these Jews are guilty.” The same woman denied being racist and claimed that, unlike her boyfriend, she had nothing against colored people. Nobody wanted to be seen as racist in public.

Conversely, some people interviewed disbelieved the rumor but expressed antisemitic feelings. Gouvion interviewed one couple who claimed that there had been no abductions, but that “the Jews are very clever” and had probably invented the whole business to gain publicity.<sup>64</sup> Thus, some people with racist beliefs disbelieved the rumor. Its format was flexible enough to absorb these contradictions, rendering any simple reading impossible.<sup>65</sup>

This ambiguity generated uncertainty about the nature of racism itself. Did there need to be ideology for there to be racist activity? Did it need to be organized or could it be unconscious or accidental? Investigators, whether judicial or scientific, were concerned with establishing whether the rumor was *really* racist.

For some, the lack of an explicit antisemitic agenda meant that it could not be racist. The *préfet* Francis Graëve, the central government’s representative in Orléans, was keen to quash the rumor and minimize its racist aspects. He claimed that Jews had “self-intoxicated” (*auto-intoxication*) themselves into thinking they were victims of persecution. When the head of the national Representative Council of French Jews (CRIF), Vidal Modiano, wrote urging him to take direct action, Graëve went public to note his disapproval. In a letter published in the press, he stressed the importance of authorities not getting “intoxicated by the rumors themselves,” and described the affair as circumscribed. He cast doubt on the antisemitic nature of the rumor: “The shop owner victims of imaginary accusations were not, originally, designated as Jews, in such a way that one might doubt that this affair was originally of antisemitic character.” Antisemitic motivation was a “simple hypothesis” that he credited to the police, which had emerged only *after* noticing that the incriminated shop owners were all Jewish.

By claiming that he acted rationally and “kept cool,” Graëve’s logic obscured the racist nature of what had taken place. He claimed that there was no proof of an organized, Nazi-adjacent antisemitic movement in Orléans, which was correct. But he presented this as evidence that there was no racism afoot at all. It seems in his writing almost a coincidence that all the targeted shop owners were Jewish, or, in Lemsen’s case, thought to be. Instead, he thought some people were trying to “take advantage of a nasty affair by maintaining an unhealthy agitation.”<sup>66</sup> In Graëve’s mind, protesting antisemitism was itself a kind of disinformation.

For Graëve, if no organization or ideology could be discerned behind the actions, then there was no racism to be found. Born on the Caribbean island of Martinique to

<sup>64</sup>Colette Gouvion, *L'Express*, “Orléans n’est pas antisémite, mais...,” 16–22 June 1969.

<sup>65</sup>Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). On contradictions within rumors, see also Julien Bonhomme, *Les voleurs de sexe: anthropologie d’une rumeur africaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

<sup>66</sup>*La République du Centre*, “Le préfet rend publique sa réponse au Conseil des Juifs de France,” 10 June 1969.

a white family, and formerly in the service of the colonial administration of Algeria, Graëve seems to have had a rather high threshold for determining culpability in racist activity. Though he himself had been deported to Germany in 1943, he would testify in 1998 in favor of his close friend and fellow *préfet* Maurice Papon when the latter was tried for having organized the mass deportation of Jews in the southwest of France under the Vichy régime.<sup>67</sup>

By contrast, the Orléans head of police expressed much more sympathy than the *préfet* did with the Jewish claim that the rumor was fundamentally antisemitic. The same day Graëve wrote his letter, the *commissaire* wrote in his report, “The victims, traumatized by the heavy tribute paid to Racism during the occupation, immediately came up with the hypothesis of an organized antisemitic campaign ... and we are not far from sharing their opinion.”<sup>68</sup>

Was the rumor really about Jews? This was extremely difficult to establish because everyone involved recognized that mentioning Jews was highly sensitive and that using certain words in itself would produce effects. As Colette Guillaumin would underscore in a study a few years later, the term “Jew” (*juif*) was almost never used in French media at the time because it was too racially loaded.<sup>69</sup> The police depositions carefully skirted around designating people as Jews (*juif*). As noted earlier, they used the more polite and official term “*israélite*,” which had been developed in the nineteenth century. Using “*israélite*” avoided giving the impression that the state itself was engaging in racial categorization as it had under Vichy’s “Statut des Juifs,” and indeed this information was being volunteered by the complainants themselves.

Saying that “the Jews” (*les Juifs*) were up to something was enough to make one look racist and therefore wrong. Everyone, whether or not they believed the rumor, recognized that talking explicitly about Jews changed its nature. In the TV documentary made in August 1969, one woman interviewed describes how she found out about the rumor: a colleague approached her and voiced concerns about certain stores that were dangerous for women.<sup>70</sup> She tried to get more information from her younger colleague, but the colleague was cagy. Finally, the younger woman admitted that they were all stores owned by Jews. The woman was triumphant at having extracted this admission, which to her proved the nature of the rumor: “I wanted to make you say it” (*Je voulais vous le faire dire*). Saying it, in her opinion, made it clear that this rumor was merely an “antisemitic cabal.” Once one designated the targets as Jews, the rumor lost all power because it appeared manifestly irrational.

But this created problems. Paradoxically, in order to establish whether the rumor was antisemitic it was essential to know who was Jewish. The police found themselves speculating whether the parallel case in Grenoble similarly had involved Jews, or whether that was an invention of the *Orléanais*. According to their colleagues in Grenoble, the store owner who had been accused there back in 1963 had an ambiguous surname. It was unclear if Mrs. Eknark née Keck was Jewish since, the

<sup>67</sup>Papon was famously not put on trial for his involvement in the counter-insurrection in Algeria as *préfet* of Constantine 1956–1958, or for his role in organizing the massacre of Algerians in Paris as *préfet de police* in 1961. *Le Monde*, “Un mouvement préfectoral,” 20 Feb. 1969; Bernadette Dubourg, “Victime d’un stress émotionnel,” *Sud Ouest*, 22 Oct. 1997; “La compagnie des compagnons,” *L’Humanité*, 26 Feb. 1998.

<sup>68</sup>Loiret, *Commissaire central to préfet*, 10 June 1969, 1019W 77923 A.

<sup>69</sup>Guillaumin, *L’idéologie raciste*, 234–35.

<sup>70</sup>Office de Radio-Télévision Française, *Affaire classée*, 5 Aug. 1969, INA. This is around the 3-minute mark.

report noted, “The name of Alsatian origin could be confusing.” The Germanic sound of a Christian surname from Alsace could be confused with Ashkenazi Jewish surnames, rendering the religious identity of the owner unclear. Thus, Mrs. Eknark’s unfortunate surname could not help the police determine the origin of the rumor’s antisemitic aspects.<sup>71</sup>

It was tricky to investigate the rumor without falling into it. All those investigating it, whether policemen, journalists, or sociologists, tried to distance themselves from its irrationality. The police report read: “It seems stupefying (*ahurissant*) that in the twentieth century, such balderdash (*sornettes*) could have found credibility in a large modern city.”<sup>72</sup> The rumor was most often described as either belonging to a distant past (“it seems like we have returned to the Middle Ages,” wrote *Le Monde*) or as superstitious (*L’observateur* called it a “tale of witches” [*une histoire de sorcières*]), and the two were often conflated.<sup>73</sup>

All observers accentuated the irrationality of antisemitism by focusing on the rumor’s most baroque aspects. One detail that appeared in nearly every account of the rumor, from the police report to the newspapers to the sociological study, was the submarine. The abducted women were allegedly taken into submarines under the Loire river to avoid detection, and from there sold to South America or the Middle East. The same happened with another especially lurid version in which the high heels in certain stores were literally “spiked” with drugs and customers who tried them on were pricked, and collapsed unconscious.<sup>74</sup>

Morin’s sociological study did not depart from these forms of analysis. Social scientists only got involved once it was clear there were no culprits. On 17 July the police told journalists that the investigation was effectively over, and there would be no prosecutions.<sup>75</sup> Morin contacted the journalist Gouvion before beginning his research, since he had initially gotten interested in Orléans from reading coverage in the newspapers.<sup>76</sup> The sociological study was thus deeply intertwined with previous forms of investigations by policemen and journalists, and in turn fed back into them, as Morin appeared on television to explain the rumor. Compared to these other investigations, the contribution of sociologists was to provide a collective explanation for the rumor that did not rely on individual racists.

*La rumeur d’Orléans* in its original edition runs at about 264 pages, most of them by Morin himself. At the end, however, we find the field notes and reflections of the whole investigation team. Much like in his film, *Chronique d’un été*, which featured scenes of participants discussing the direction the film should take, Morin was interested in experimenting with form to explode conventions and get closer to the “truth.”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Loiret, Commissaire central to préfet, 10 Jun. 1969, 1019W 77923 A, *L’observateur*, *L’Express*.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Katia Kaupp, “Une histoire de sorcières,” *L’observateur*, 9 Jun. 1969.

<sup>74</sup>Loiret, Commissaire central to préfet.

<sup>75</sup>Morin, *Rumeur*, 127.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 15–16, 157.

<sup>77</sup>Michael Rothberg, “The Work of Testimony in the Age of Decolonization: ‘Chronicle of a Summer,’ Cinema Verité, and the Emergence of the Holocaust Survivor,” *PMLA* 119, 5 (2004): 1231–46; Ivone Margulies, *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 113–40.

By today's standards, Morin's sociology can look strange. As Philippe Aldrin has noted, after only three days of investigation he produced a work that did not distinguish between hypotheses, theories, and findings—evidence was used only to support his pre-existing thesis.<sup>78</sup> Most of the research was carried out during a “sociological banquet” in which informants were invited for dinner, a technique which he had also used in *Chronique*.<sup>79</sup> This was a way to elicit more spontaneous responses and get to the “truth” in a way that formal interviews could not.

For Morin, the fundamental cause of the rumor was “modernization,” which, by disturbing society, was generating new forms of primal urges (“*arkhê*,” he wrote, using the Greek philosophical concept for “origin, beginning”). Thus, the young girls of Orléans, shaken by urbanization, consumer society, May 1968, and sexual liberation, were spontaneously inventing Jews as new monsters. Miniskirts were taking people back to the Middle Ages.

Much like other actors in Orléans, Morin insisted that the antisemitic aspect of the rumor was mysterious and surprising. He stated repeatedly in the report and in interviews that what surprised him was not the story of abductions in fitting rooms, which was widespread, but that *Jews* would be accused of white slavery. To him, white slavery was a real and well-established phenomenon, but it was an activity of “Marseillais, Corsicans, North Africans, or immigrants (*métèques*),” and not, in France, markedly associated with Jews.<sup>80</sup>

In fact, as many people have written about, there was nothing especially novel about a rumor of Jews abducting women.<sup>81</sup> The vast antisemitic literature on white slavery that had flourished since the late nineteenth century accused Jews of being pimps preying upon innocent flesh. This had been popularized in various forms of popular culture, including magazines and film, and was not a creation of either the late 1960s or the *Orléanais*. Moreover, there was a longstanding connection between Jewish migrants and the garment industry in France and elsewhere, which made the leap from changing rooms in clothing stores to Jewish pimps relatively easy for the popular imagination.<sup>82</sup>

Morin insisted that the rumor was instead a “fantasy” (*fantasme*), what he called a “pure” fantasy because there had been no initiating incident. He positioned himself in the book as a quasi-psychoanalyst, an “explorer” on the “still poorly known continent of female adolescence.”<sup>83</sup> In trying to distance himself from the rumor, Morin followed everyone else who had tried to interpret it, but he was novel in attributing it to the borderline hysterical sexual fantasies of schoolgirls. In his pop-Freudian analysis, the depths of underground caves and submarines mobilized by the rumor evoked subconscious sexual desires, the “abyssal ecstasy,” while the “hypnotic sting”

<sup>78</sup>Philippe Aldrin, *Sociologie politique des rumeurs* (Paris: PUF, 2005), 236–39.

<sup>79</sup>Morin, *Rumeur*, 16.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 52; and this also comes up in his research diary, 153. On accusations against Arab pimps in the same period, see Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962–1979* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 190–93.

<sup>81</sup>Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Mara Keire, “The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907–1917,” *Journal of Social History* 35, 1 (2001): 5–41.

<sup>82</sup>Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Work and Ready-to-Wear: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>83</sup>Morin, *La rumeur d'Orléans*, 131.

of the needle lay at the “source of eros and fantasy” itself. His gendered perspective assumed that masculine environments were less prone to sexual fantasy and thus to spreading the rumor, a view that ignored the extensive erotic and pornographic culture based around the myth of “white slavery.” When Morin wrote of “our ignorance of the fantasies of this other sex,” his use of the first-person plural excluded the three female members of his research team. As the field notes at the end of the book revealed, Burguière, Vêrone, and de Lusignan were able to elicit different stories from informants than their male colleagues did, but their analysis was not given equal footing in Morin’s final text.

Morin thus engaged in the same lurid exaggeration as other actors in the rumor. What was distinctive in his analysis was a social scientific vocabulary of “rumor,” understood as a “psychopathological” phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> In social scientific terms, “rumor” was a negative, recent, and poorly theorized concept. In its older, French sense, *rumeur* had a political meaning, signifying popular noise “announcing some disposition to revolt, to sedition,” as one nineteenth-century dictionary put it.<sup>85</sup> Rumors were defined as a crime against authority, coming out of the behavior of bad subjects (*mauvais sujets*) which had to be tracked.<sup>86</sup> In the twentieth century, a military imperative to quash rumors in wartime led to new forms of analysis. For Marc Bloch, writing during the First World War, “false news” (*fausses nouvelles*) was of social scientific interest because it could be used to reveal underlying, long-term mental and cultural structures.<sup>87</sup>

Research on rumors truly blossomed during and after the Second World War, particularly in the United States in the work of scholars like Allport, Postman, and Shibutani. This came directly out of military attempts to control information and successfully spread propaganda, as Pascal Froissart explained.<sup>88</sup> The contention of this research was that rumors were not the outcome of individual, criminal behavior, and instead revealed collective dynamics, especially in times of crisis. It is unclear exactly where Morin got his ideas about rumors from, because he cited no academic works in his essay. From 1957, Allport and Postman had been mainstream teaching in French universities.<sup>89</sup> Morin was not a specialist on rumors or communications, and he did not define his terms. Media studies and communications were “hot” in the late 1960s, and work of the icon of that moment in the English-speaking world, Marshall McLuhan, had been translated into French by 1969, though he was received with less enthusiasm on that side of the Atlantic.<sup>90</sup> But it is unclear if Morin had read him. The similarity was that, much like McLuhan, Morin was good at creating

<sup>84</sup> Aldrin, *Sociologie politique*, 40–45; Froissart, *La rumeur*.

<sup>85</sup> “Rumeur,” in Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1863–1877): “Rumeur: bruit sourd et général, excité par quelque mécontentement, annonçant quelque disposition à la révolte, à la sédition.”

<sup>86</sup> François Ploux, *De bouche à Oreille: Naissance et propagation des rumeurs dans la France du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 2003). For the eighteenth century, see Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1995).

<sup>87</sup> Marc Bloch, *Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre* (Paris: Allia, 2012[1921]); Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100–29.

<sup>88</sup> Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947); Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1966).

<sup>89</sup> Pascal Froissart, “L’invention du ‘plus vieux média du monde,’” *Média et information*, 12–13 (2000): 181–95.

<sup>90</sup> Olivier Burgelin, “Un essayiste pop,” *Esprit*, June 1969. Much of McLuhan’s key work had just been translated into French. See the French editions of *La galaxie Gutenberg* (Montreal: HMH, 1967); *Pour*



exciting theories for the wider media without embarrassing himself with academic conventions.

Instead, he developed a loose social-psychoanalytic reading of the rumor as repressed adolescent sexual fantasy. His generalization of the Orléans rumor into an ideal type meant that Jews could be substituted for any other kind of myth. This was, in a sense, a comforting way to eliminate the problem of antisemitism's persistence. It allowed Morin to skirt the trickiest problem in Orléans: when had the rumor become racist? For him, its very format made this difficult to establish since not all versions of the rumor mentioned Jews. As described in his study, this rumor had two "levels" (*étages*): At the "public" level, when people spread it openly, it was a more generic story about abductions in fitting rooms, one which had circulated in the media long before Orléans. It did not mention Jews. It was only among some people, in the second "level," that the Jews were designated as culprits. The origin of this second level was unknown.<sup>91</sup>

Morin reproduced this problem within his own research team. The six researchers were uncertain who among them was Jewish. One, Suzanne de Lusignan, wrote in her field notes published at the end of the book that she thought she had a different relationship with the informants because she was the only Catholic (that is, the only non-Jew). Morin added an asterisk to this with a note: in fact, three of the investigators were Catholic. He then elaborated that Julia Vérone had a Jewish father and Capelier had a Jewish mother, and that he himself "in Orléans, did not indicate that he was of Jewish origin."<sup>92</sup> Thus, not only had the researchers not discussed who was and was not Jewish (in a study about antisemitism funded by a Jewish community organization) but at least one of them continued to speculate about this even after the research process had ended.

It is telling that Morin did not discuss his being Jewish during the investigation. Born Edgar Nahoum (a recognizably "Oriental" last name, as he would put it), he had kept his Resistance name of "Morin," which made him relatively invisible. His own research notes at the end of *La rumeur d'Orléans* suggest a fear of the visibly different Jew, and he expressed surprise that the rumor did not target "a very hairy North African with a prominent schnozz" (*un Nord-Africain très velu avec un tarin proéminent*).<sup>93</sup>

Morin was concerned about when Jews were visible and not. In his reading, the targets of the rumor were not Jews who were visibly different: "The rumor does not pick on old immigrant Jews that have kept a foreign accent, nor on recent arrivals from North Africa."<sup>94</sup> Instead, according to him, the rumor targeted younger Jews, usually from Paris, who owned the shops and bore no external sign of their difference. The content of the rumor dramatized this fear of a person who does not appear to be foreign and hides their gruesome difference. Beneath the respectable surface of a clothing store lay a basement prostitution ring.

---

comprendre les médias (*Paris: Seuil, 1968*); and *Message et massage: un inventaire des effets* (*Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1968*).

<sup>91</sup>Morin, *Rumeur*, 27–28.

<sup>92</sup>Presumably, the "three Catholics" were therefore de Lusignan, Paillard, and Burguière, though it is telling that the text does not name them and only names the Jewish origins of certain investigators, as if majority Catholicism did not need to be named.

<sup>93</sup>Morin, *Rumeur*, 156.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 34–35.

This analysis was not entirely accurate—of the six shops incriminated, one was owned by an immigrant born in Poland, Mendel Burtin, and another by a recent arrival from Algeria, Aaron Benatouil.<sup>95</sup> Again, another owner, H el ene Lemsen, was not Jewish at all. Thus, only three of the six shop-owners fit Morin’s description of a young, Parisian Jew. This theme of the invisible Jew appears to have been Morin’s own creation.

Morin’s investigation in Orl ans appears to have led him to wonder about the role of visibility and invisibility in antisemitism. He would return to this much later, in the early 2000s, when in *Le monde moderne et la question juive* he extolled the virtues of “gentile Jews”—Jews in contact with the Western world who had been central to modernity.<sup>96</sup> In this same text he related this to himself and mentioned his choice of his last name. But in 1969, Morin did not connect the events to his own experience in either his published work or subsequent interviews about it. The study was not read as a specifically “Jewish” perspective on the rumor, but as an authoritative and neutral one.

Morin’s reduction of events in Orl ans to a rumor was an attempt to circumscribe racist dynamics by describing them as irrational and to distance social scientists from them. He tried to make racism in Orl ans disappear by positing the rumor as pure fantasy, as a superficial superstition of modernity that could be quickly diagnosed and treated. As Jean-Michel Chaumont has observed, he thereby eliminated any evidence that the rumor in Orl ans was not entirely spontaneous: that is, that it had occurred before, was widespread in popular media, and would surface again.<sup>97</sup>

Morin’s intervention aimed to dismiss a number of alternative explanations for events in Orl ans, most importantly that there had been an organized, politically oriented, antisemitic cabal. His sociology rescued this case from a simple understanding of racism-as-crime, but he remade it into racism-as-rumor. Racism became an accidental outcome of communication problems and wider social changes, and not a dynamic that drove events. Today, *La rumeur d’Orl ans* is remembered and read as a study not of racism but of rumor.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Since the Second World War, racism has become taboo and has evolved toward indirect forms of expression,” said political scientist Nonna Mayer in 2019.<sup>98</sup> What has not been sufficiently recognized is that this pattern was being diagnosed even as it emerged. In the late 1960s, social scientists noted that racism was taking new, indirect forms. They positioned themselves as the excavators of hidden racial logics underlying ostensibly colorblind societies.

In France, one of the more prominent figures to study racism was Colette Guillaumin, who, unlike Morin, put the concept at the core of her work throughout her career. In her major book, *L’id ologie raciste*, she claimed that only

<sup>95</sup>Loiret, 1019W 77923 A.

<sup>96</sup>Edgar Morin, *Le monde moderne et la question juive* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

<sup>97</sup>Jean-Michel Chaumont, “Des paniques morales spontan ees? Le cas de la ‘rumeur d’Orl ans,” *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques* 43, 1 (2012): 119–37.

<sup>98</sup>Juliette Galonnier and Jules Naudet, “Pol miques et controverses autour de la question raciale,” *La vie des id es*, 11 June 2019: 6, at <https://laviedesidees.fr/Pol miques-et-controverses-autour-de-la-question-raciale.html>.

a sociological perspective could account for the social mechanics of racism.<sup>99</sup> Guillaumin made manifest the invisible racist understructure of society by analyzing language in media coverage. Rather than looking at specific racist laws or ideologies, “racist ideology” in her reading was far more diffuse and pervasive, and race could be understood by exploring “common language” in everyday speech. She stressed the importance of indirect communication in analyzing contemporary racism: “The fall of Nazism and the accession to independence of those who had been colonized at the beginning of the industrial period seems at first sight to have considerably modified forms of racism.”<sup>100</sup> The outcome of this, she asserted, was “verbal censorship.” Though her book was published in 1972, Guillaumin had already written most of it in 1967–1968, before the Orléans affair.

Unlike Guillaumin’s approach, Morin’s entirely dissolved the problem of racism, leaving it unclear when things in Orléans had turned racist. This seems to have proved more convincing, either because of Morin’s existing status or the usefulness of his argument. In any case, it endured: his explanation of Orléans was so successful that it became definitive and remains so today. It allowed what happened to be read as an interesting and colorful phenomenon.

Despite their different approaches, though, Guillaumin and Morin’s studies share something: both were trying to understand a situation in which racist behavior was manifest, but its perpetrators tried to obscure it. Both turned to language and communication to explain this.

In the 1960s, racism was increasingly understood as both socially constructed and adaptable to new historical circumstances, thus requiring new forms of analysis. Yet, this did not mean that everyone agreed what its causes were. While some turned to individual criminal behavior, social scientists increasingly highlighted a nexus of concerns around language and collective behavior. This nexus is why the Orléans episode generated so much discussion. In Morin’s reading, rumor, like racism, was present in society. It had no clear origin, was constantly mutating, and could strike suddenly. It spread like a disease in vulnerable environments. But it had no author. Morin’s labeling of events in Orléans as a *rumeur* offered intellectual resources to think through changes in racism in postwar France.

Morin’s analysis was not just a convenient way for French people to avoid reckoning with antisemitism, though this is a tempting explanation for its popularity. That view would go something like this: by describing what took place as a rumor, a form of speech with no author, Morin eliminated the problem of responsibility, providing an out for unwilling antisemites and making an uncomfortable problem disappear. But this account is too harsh on Morin, and crucially, credits him with too much influence. It is not novel to claim that sociologists have played an active role in building racist structures and have allowed racists to pretend that they are colorblind.<sup>101</sup> What I am suggesting here is different. It is not that sociologists were Machiavellian actors manipulating the social

<sup>99</sup>Colette Guillaumin, *L'idéologie raciste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Though published in 1972, Guillaumin stated, “*Les pages qui suivent ont été écrites au cours des années 1967–8.*”

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>101</sup>For some French examples, see Alain Morice, “Du seuil de tolérance au racisme banal, ou les avatars de l’opinion fabriquée,” *Journal des anthropologues* 110–11 (2007): 379–408; Minayo Nasiali, *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship and Everyday Life in Marseille* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 104; and Hervé Le Bras, *L'invention de l'immigré* (La Tour d'Aigues: Aube, 2014).

order; they were embedded in a wider 1960s transformation in how racism was understood, as something similar to rumor.

It was the interaction of the *Orléanais*, the police, the Jewish victims, the journalists, national organizations, and the sociologists that produced the interpretation that became the *rumeur d'Orléans*.

In one article, Katia Kaupp compared what happened in Orléans to a witch-hunt, a "*histoire de sorcières*."<sup>102</sup> Witch-hunts were a popular way of thinking about the role of irrational mass behavior. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, about the Salem witch trials, had in 1957 been adapted into an acclaimed French film with a script by Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>103</sup> But there was a deeper sense in which understandings of racism in Orléans could be reminiscent of witchcraft. A few years later, anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada described a system of witchcraft in western France in her 1977 book *Deadly Words*. She found that beliefs in witchcraft could exist without any witches.<sup>104</sup> Some people claimed they could fight witches, but nobody admitted to being a witch. Witchcraft, as she describes it, is a system of speech, made of spells (*les sorts*). By asking questions about witchcraft, she came to realize that she was herself involved in the system of spells, and not outside it. Once you start talking about witches, you entangle yourself in the system of witchcraft.

Similarly, most actors in Orléans believed that racism was a serious problem and that there were people who could fight it, but nobody would say aloud that they were racist. Like spells, racism risked engulfing the researchers, who could not extricate themselves from its web of communication. Social scientists who descended upon Orléans positioned themselves as capable of understanding racism because they were removed from it, but instead they fit squarely within the wider racial dynamics of the society they inhabited. Sociologists did not note the repetition of the rumors' motifs in the dynamics of the research team itself, whose members did not know who was Jewish, and speculated about that privately. Together with others (journalists, schoolgirls, and policemen), they built a system of speech in which racism was a real social phenomenon but was always being perpetrated by someone else. Making racism into a problem of communication was not without peril.

**Acknowledgments.** The research for this article was supported by a Pro Futura Scientia Fellowship by the Riksbanken Jubileumsfond at SCAS in Uppsala and CRASSH in Cambridge. The author thanks the staff of the Archives Départementales du Loiret for their assistance and, for their feedback and suggestions, Ruth Lawlor, Pascal Froissart, Maxime Cervulle, Petter Hellström, Pierre France, Morgan Corriou, Sara-Jane Vigneault, Christelle Rabier, Silyane Larcher, and Abdellali Hajjat, as well as seminar audiences at Paris 8, Cambridge, Uppsala, and Stockholm, and the reviewers for *CSSH*.

<sup>102</sup>Katia Kaupp, "Une histoire de sorcières," *L'observateur*, 9 June 1969.

<sup>103</sup>Raymond Rouleau, *Les sorcières de Salem* (1957), Borderie/CICC/Pathé/DEFA, 157 mins.

<sup>104</sup>Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Les mots, la mort, les sorts: la sorcellerie dans le bocage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). For a comparison of the ethnography of race and witchcraft, see Karen E. Fields, "Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible Ontology in Its Sensible Manifestations," in G. C. Bond, ed., *Witchcraft Dialogues: Anthropological and Philosophical Exchanges* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 283–315.

**Cite this article:** Asseraf, Arthur 2024. "Return to Orléans: Racism, Rumor, and Social Scientists in 1960s France." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1–24, doi:10.1017/S0010417524000136