CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ABUSE AND ATTACKS

If anti-Semitism in schools is mentioned in the public sphere, it is usually after the most serious expressions of it, those which can be referred to as ‘incidents’, beginning with attacks on Jewish pupils. Anti-Semitism also makes an impact when it has the proportions of a scandal, as is particularly the case when it arises in connection with the Shoah. But it can also be part and parcel of daily life in schools, in pupils’ remarks where it is associated with interaction, the gravity of which is more often than not the subject of contradictory interpretations. Anti-Semitic insults at school, between pupils, are rarely the subject of disciplinary action. They do not come under the category of acts which are reported and on which statistics are kept as such. They nevertheless constitute a significant reality, especially for those whose intellectual or moral integrity may be affected by the contempt and the desire to humiliate and reject revealed by these insults.

The phenomenon is relatively widespread, including amongst the youngest, even before adolescence and one parent complained:

What my daughter tells me is that in school, in the second form, there are in fact remarks made by the pupils which are anti-Semitic. But they are not made openly. Those who hear them are not those who are targeted by them [...]. The teachers are not aware of this.

In fact, the teachers are not aware of specific remarks but the phenomenon of abuse and, in particular, that of ‘filthy Jew’ is a matter of concern both to them and the school staff as a whole. A daily, recurrent phenomenon, abuse hostile to Jews is drowned in a torrent of other abuse which is equally pejorative (‘sale négro’ (filthy negro), ‘sale Arabe’ (filthy Arab)). Is it on the same level or does it have special significance? When all is said and done, are the tensions involving young Jews, if not acceptable or tolerable, at least commonplace, sufficiently in line with the usual conflicts between pupils to avoid our speaking in this context of anti-Semitism?

Faced with abuse of an ethnic, racial or religious nature, members of staff in schools hesitate or waver between two attitudes. The first consists in considering them as jokes, juvenile provocations or mere marks
of familiarity with no hostile intention, especially if it is a question of interaction between pupils. In class, provocative remarks targeting the teacher or expressions denoting affiliation to a different culture are then perceived as part of the adolescents’ attempts to find their bearings or else, the inevitable consequence—but one which does not imply any racial hostility—of young people of different origins and cultures coming face to face. This position always risks endorsing expressions which are not pleasant for those targeted and tolerating distressing remarks until a really serious drift forces a reaction and a punishment. It underestimates the possible burden of humiliation, of desire to belittle or to hurt the person targeted in his or her moral integrity.

A second attitude is based on the idea that the insults and abuse are meaningful and that this meaning is alarming. While the teacher may not really be able to evaluate their status, he or she attributes meaning to them, at the risk of overloading them and of reinforcing processes of identity construction and therefore of associations or identifications, beginning with those which refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Relativise or De-Dramatise?

A teacher of French in Stains referred to:

This story of a boy who was called a ‘filthy Jew’ [...]. Perhaps he was Jewish, perhaps he wasn’t and perhaps that had nothing to do with what followed ... I think he was simply a child who was being victimised by the others and was being called a filthy Jew, filthy homo, filthy whatever, and there was a gang of children who had been tormenting him since the beginning of the year. That’s the story. And at some point he couldn’t bear it any longer and he must have punched a child who had come to taunt him and...

All in all, in this teacher’s opinion, the incident was banal and it had little to do with anti-Semitism. A teacher at the Collège Montaigne, dealing with an incident which was in the news, followed a similar course and called for caution:

There was a child who was being taunted by several others and at the outset, there is no question about it, one has to be on the side of the weakest person who is being oppressed. I also think that after a while the morons found nothing better to do than to play on the fact that he was Jewish to hurl anti-Semitic insults at him. But now I think that, at the outset, they were not oppressing him because he was Jewish but because he was feeble, etc., and that the whole thing gained momentum.