‘In the midst of the suicide of the West, it was clear they didn’t stand a chance’.

Rare are those novelists for whom it can be said that they have a genuine intellectual project; Michel Houellebecq, however, is one. His most recent novel, *Soumission*,[[1]](#footnote-1) represents a new stage in this project in which it reaches, if not completion, then at least maturity. Houellebecq has hitherto been content to play the ‘acerbic observer of contemporary reality’, as his narrator in *La Possibilité d’une île* describes himself,[[2]](#footnote-2) documenting the moral and spiritual vacuum of contemporary French society in thrall to an untrammelled liberal individualism which inexorably crushes the individual. In *Soumission*, however, he attempts, for the first time, to move beyond the position of observer in order to entertain the possibility of a life lived otherwise. And, arch-*provocateur* that Houellebecq has always been, this way out only becomes thinkable through the ‘submission’ of France to political Islam.

Given the increasingly strident Islamophobia in France, with which Houellebecq, preceded by a reputation for directing fatuous insults at the religion and its adherents, is in the minds of many loosely associated, this might come as something as a surprise. On its publication, critics either accused *Soumission* of denigrating Islam, or expressed puzzlement that this was not what he was doing at all.[[3]](#footnote-3) After all, the bare bones of *Soumission*’s plot make full use of the Islamist as bogeyman of the contemporary Westerner—the borderline racist and the *bien pensant* alike. In the final pages of *Les Particules élémentaires*, the novel that made Houellebecq’s reputation, humans are gradually replaced with clones. These latter evince some surprise that their human forebears should submit to their own extinction without struggle: ‘Contrary to every pessimist prediction, this extinction is taking place quietly, despite a few isolated acts of violence, whose number decreases constantly. It is surprising, even, to see with what meekness, what resignation, and perhaps some secret relief, human beings have consented to their own disappearance’.[[4]](#footnote-4) In *Soumission* we might wonder if there is something analogous going on in its depiction of secular, liberal French society ‘submitting’ to its own extinction at the hands of political Islam. Houellebecq predicts an utterly credible situation in which the *Front National* becomes the single largest party in France, but the two main parties, the centre-right UMP and centre-left *Parti Socialiste*, club together into a *Front républicain* to prevent it from taking power. To this he adds an Islamist party modelled on the Muslim Brotherhood, the *Fraternité musulmane* (as opposed to *Frères musulmans*), set up to represent France’s increasing Muslim population, worried by the rise of identitarian politics in France. These two parties come ahead of the UMP and the PS in the first round of the 2022 elections, and a new *Front républicain* is formed around the charismatic, statesmanlike Mohammed Ben Abbes. This *Front républicain* is infortuitously named, however, as once in power Ben Abbes almost immediately sets about dismantling the very centrepiece of ‘republican values’: *la laïcité*,whichin recent years has been used to justify the ban of the hijab in schools since 2004, and the burqa in all public spaces since 2010.[[5]](#footnote-5) In place of the clone apocalypse, the ‘Islamicisation of France’ that so many right wing demagogues have been foreseeing, with increasing shrillness, for two decades.

However, the political interest of *Soumission* lies elsewhere. Reading the novel several months later, Houellebecq’s vision seems most perspicacious with regard to a different political trend: notably, a political élite trying frantically to preserve the status quo, but only succeeding in overseeing its own dissolution into obsolescence. The two formerly dominant political parties in *Soumission* resemble nothing more than a technocracy which, having reached a ‘post-ideological’ stage where it is unable to justify its own existence, blindly destroys precisely what it supposedly seeks to preserve. In *Soumission*, Robert Rediger, the new director of the Sorbonne, a Nietzschean literary critic converted to Islam and become political ally of Ben Abbes, follows Arnold Toynbee in arguing that civilisations do not die out, they commit suicide, and do so because they have lost sight of whatever it was that gave them a meaning to continue (255).[[6]](#footnote-6) It is hard not to see an analogy with the EU’s ‘troika’ which, in its dealings with Syriza over the last few months, having set out to kill the last vestiges of the post-war social democratic settlement, cannot see that they are in fact killing the European project as a whole. Here ‘submission’ is not simply a moral failing, but the inevitable historical outcome of internal contradictions that can no longer be held in check.

To assume from this that the novel’s title issues from a political élite’s craven ‘submission’ to the very forces that ensure its extinction, however, would be precipitate. For a start, it is not just the politicians who ‘submit’. Before the deal which puts Ben Abbes into power, France seems destined for civil war between FN-affiliated identitarians and jihadists from the *banlieues*, and François, Houellebecq’s narrator, observes:

That political history should be playing a role in my own life continued to feel disconcerting, even a little repugnant. I was well aware however, and had been for years, that the widening gulf, now become abyssal, between the population and those who spoke in its name, politicians and journalists, would necessarily lead to something chaotic, violent and unpredictable. France, like the other countries of western Europe, had long been veering towards civil war, that was clear enough; but until the last few days I was still persuaded that the vast majority of French citizens remained resigned and apathetic—no doubt because I was myself so resigned and apathetic. I was mistaken. (116)

The irony that he is not mistaken after all. Peaceful capitulation is deemed preferable to chaos, and the popular vote does little more than ratify the backroom dealings of the *Enarques*.[[7]](#footnote-7)But, further irony, this capitulation turns out not necessarily to be a bad thing. It seems that, in their apathy, François’s peers ‘submit’ to the powers that be; but in a bravura twist Houellebecq suggests, through the voice of Rediger, that in such submission lies our salvation: we simply need to learn how to submit *truly*. In his theological terms, this means submit to a Creator who created the world perfect; recognise our own finitude, and become infinite by finding a place in this perfect cosmos. Within the internal dynamics of Houellebecq’s thought as a whole, we can read this as a way to deal with the apathy of contemporary life: either we consider ourselves free agents and yet do nothing, or we grasp ourselves as subject to determinisms, either historical or physicalist, and subsequently—do nothing. Here comes a genuine reframing of the question of freedom around our constitutive unfreedom, but where in appropriating our unfreedom we can actually dignify our existence.

To say that Houellebecq is here endorsing Rediger uncritically would be foolish. But Rediger does provide a shift in focus that both responds to the internal dynamics of Houellebecq’s thinking thus far, and represents a striking advance on his previous work. What *Soumission* intimates is that it is no longer enough to provide diagnoses for the malaise of contemporary life, reported in his customary register of acerbic social commentary; we need a way out. For Houellebecq’s lucid and excoriating account of his contemporary society ultimately led him to an impasse, precisely because they remained at a negative level of critique. In hindsight, it seems like a pre-programmed impasse: the limiting focus was what allowed him to see with such lucidity, to draw together so coherent an overarching historical narrative. What *Soumission* has done—and in this it stands not only as the culmination, but also in a certain, if circumscribed, sense, as the *supersession* of his work thus far—is give credence to the search for an alternative. He might not be speaking through Rediger, but he is asking that we take Rediger seriously. ‘Submission’ no longer names our moral capitulation, but a principle which secular Western modernity has lost sight of, and needs to be thought anew.

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Houellebecq’s great formal innovation lies in his blurring of the distinction between fiction and socio-economic argument, such that each fiction stands as symptom, or exemplum, for the broader historical forces at work. This is what most clearly warrants his being read as a systematic thinker. To this degree it would be inaccurate to say that in *Soumission* Houellebecq has discovered a new metaphysical register: the shift in register lies in moving from negative critique to a substantive overcoming of our current predicament. The negative critique itself required a metaphysics, in order to get his various sociological *aperçus* to cohere into a model of history as epoch. It is only as continuation of Houellebecq’s project that *Soumission* can become a new departure, which aims to articulate a human need that exceeds the historical conjuncture it inhabits. *Soumission* is, in a very precise sense, a *speculative* work of writing; as such, it demands speculation in turn.

Houellebecq’s basic diagnosis is of a liberal capitalism that regulates the production and circulation of affects as much as commodities. In his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1996; translated, rather barbarously, as *Whatever*), which at the time must have read as a promissory note for his work as a whole, the unnamed narrator (the novel, moreover, is semi-autobiographical) espouses a theory of the coexistence of ‘sexual liberalism’ along with economic liberalism. This is then taken up as a more extensive sociological-historical narrative both in *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998; translated, far more appropriately, as *Atomised*), where one woman’s hedonism in the 1960s, as she takes full advantage of the sexual liberation on offer, leaves in its wake the psychological destruction of two ex-husbands, various in-laws, but most of all, her two sons; and in *Plateforme* (2001; translated simply as *Platform*), where the sexual-economic complex of liberalism finds its logical conclusion in the commercial success of sex tourism-oriented package holidays. This is, to borrow Frédéric Lordon’s phrase, neoliberal capitalism as *regime of desire*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Given how it forms the basis of all his subsequent work, the passage in which the narrator of *Extension* elaborates most fully on his theory of sexual-economic liberalism is worth quoting in full:

Truly, I thought to myself, in our societies, sex constitutes a second system of differentiation, wholly independent from money; and it acts like a system of differentiation no less remorseless. The effects of these two systems are, moreover, strictly equivalent. Just like untrammelled economic liberalism, and for analogous reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperisation*. … In a perfectly liberal sexual system, some have a varied and exciting erotic life, others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is the extension of the domain of struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes. In the same way, sexual liberalism is the extension of the domain of struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes.[[9]](#footnote-9)

From this initial diagnosis, Houellebecq will chart the various symptoms of a contemporary life whose culinary signs are the microwave ready meal and take-away sushi, whose erotic signs are internet pornography and the middle class escort service, and whose affective sign is distance between elderly parent and adult offspring. Liberalism’s dirty secret is that, in place of individual fulfilment it leads to an hollowing out of the subject. The supposedly permissive society shows itself to be a parody of anything approaching meaningful ‘liberty’.

Again, this is already laid out in *Extension*, where the narrator describes a former colleague, Jean-Yves Fréchaut, who believed sincerely that

the increase in flow of information within a society was in itself a good thing. Freedom was nothing other than the possibility to establish varied interconnections between individuals, projects, organisms, services. Maximum freedom coincided for him with the maximum possible choices. In a metaphor borrowed from solid mechanics, he called these choices degrees of freedom. … These famous degrees of freedom could be boiled down, as far as he was concerned, to choosing his dinner on Minitel (*Extension* 40).[[10]](#footnote-10)

‘Freedom’ is thus equated with ‘choice’, which is itself governed by the technological and economic mediation through which individual choices are communicated to us: both how these choices are articulated, and what kind of choices we actually have. The take-away dinner becomes its culinary sign not only as it reduces freedom to choosing between commodities, but as in so doing it chains us to our solitude. ‘If human relations are becoming more and more impossible, it is due, of course, to this multiplication of degrees of freedom or which Jean-Yves Fréchaut was the self-styled enthusiastic prophet’ (*Extension* 43). The horizon for a substantive human freedom has been crushed. And this, lest we forget, is what liberalism has bequeathed to its *beneficiaries*.

This evacuated freedom underpins political as well as economic liberalism. In *Particules*,Michel Djerzinski, the biologist-metaphysician protagonist, comes to the conclusion ‘that the belief, foundational for democracy, in a free and reasonable determination for individual political choices, was probably the result of confusing freedom for unpredictability’ (*Particules* 227). The principle of self-determination on which liberal democracy rests is in fact an epistemological error: taking the fact we cannot predict the determinism of human behaviour to mean that humans are self-determining, rather than simply that the science has not yet reached a sufficient level. François's observations of the farce of the French *présidentielles* is more pointed: *‘*Curiously, Western countries were extremely proud of his electoral system which was however nothing but a power-share between two rival gangs [“centre-left” and “centre-right”], and sometimes even went so far as to wage wars in order to impose it on countries which did not share their enthusiasm’ (*Soumission* 51). The notion of a self-determining individual, it transpires, is misguided not only insofar as it is inaccurate, but as it leaves us miserable and apathetic—submissive in the worst sense. Epistemological error becomes political catastrophe. It is fitting, therefore, that *Soumission* should address the challenges set by Houellebecq’s earlier novels through the tentative outline of a new metaphysics of freedom.

The remarkable internal coherence of Houellbecq’s project does lead to a certain repetitiveness from one novel to another, where stock characters, motifs, genres, techniques, forms of argumentation, resurface throughout.[[11]](#footnote-11) To a degree this arises from the shape of Houellebecq’s thinking as a whole. If each fiction plays an exemplary role in his writing it is hardly a surprise to find family resemblances between exempla; the risk is that they become interchangeable with one another. *Plateforme*’s female protagonist, or rather the love-interest of its male narrator-protagonist, Valérie, is a slightly more fleshed-out version of Christiane from *Particules*, and its focus on sex tourism only makes literal the correspondence between sexual and economic liberalism that had been outlined in *Extension*; *La possibilité d’une île* (2005) effectively rewrote the epilogue of *Particules* at great length, telling of an individual, jaded in an infinitely permissive society (he is a ‘winner’ in the competitive markets of both economic and sexual liberalism), who opts to be replaced by clones of himself.[[12]](#footnote-12) By the time one reaches *La carte et le territoire*, in which all the stock motifs (awkward relations with uncommunicative rich fathers [in *Particules*, *Plateforme*], Christmasses spent alone [in *Extension*, *Particules*, *Plateforme*], sex tourism [*Particules*, *Plateforme, Possibilité*], the vanity of a self-proclaimed cultural élite [*Plateforme, Possibilité*] …) are mobilised almost diffidently, and washed down with some soothingly playful self-referentiality, it seems as though whatever internal necessity had galvanised Houellebecq’s earlier career had been snuffed out. The award of the *Prix Goncourt* to this work (a work in which Houellebecq jokes that he has given up writing novels, as he has nothing left to say) had an almost valedictory quality to it. Or maybe the jury were just waiting for him to write something unchallenging and wholly innocuous, which would satisfy the innate risk aversion of institutionalised literary prizes.

If, in the years before *Soumission*, Houellebecq’s writing had reached a dead end, then ironically enough, *Soumission* is to a large degree about escaping from dead ends. Its narrator, François, a scholar of Joris-Karl Huysmans, is absorbed in the predicament in which Huysmans found himself after *À Rebours*—namely, how, after a work of such startling originality, could he continue to write? It is hard not to read this as a hint. Ironically, François describes Huysmans’s own solution as being ‘a simple, tried-and-tested formula: adopt a central character, spokesman for the author, whose evolution one can trace over several books’ (*Soumission* 49). This, by and large, is what Houellebecq had been doing from the start of his writing career—each main protagonist is effectively a variation on the same theme. The hint seems to be double: Houellebecq is both inviting us to take François as his alter-ego, and, anticipating it so overtly, challenging us not to. What irony, then, that the character who offers not only François a way out of his impasse, but Houellebecq a way out of his, is the intellectually inferior, oleaginous Nitzschean-turned-Muslim-proselytiser-turned-political-operator Robert Rediger.

Rediger’s arguments, it is true, are subjected to a highly programmatic authorial irony: François finds his book *Ten Questions about Islam* ‘pleasant to read’, but ‘on a geometric level, the demonstration struck me as false’ (*Soumission* 274); similarly, François is drawn to the prospect of polygamy rather than the metaphysics of submission, which might make us conclude that all this discussion of theology and existential crisis is simply a pretext for Houellebecq to cast forth once more on the cupidity of French men.[[13]](#footnote-13) But there is some ambivalence here: his encounter with Rediger gives him the impetus to escape a writing block days later. But what is most striking about *Soumission* is Houellebecq’s fascination with Rediger himself. Contemporary liberalism, Houellebecq’s novels have demonstrated these last two decades, leads to apathy: we adapt to whatever circumstances without putting up a fight, we submit without thinking. But if submissiveness is thus the sign of our moral capitulation, it also provides the basis for its overcoming. In a *tour de force* passage, Houellebecq (through Rediger) links the *Qur'an* with Pauline Réage’s erotic novel *Histoire d’O*: both texts tell us that ‘the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission’ (*Soumission* 260). Submission provides a principle which will not merely make sense of the spinelessness of contemporary humanity but will raise it to a new dignity, as it becomes the way we register our encounter with powers beyond our comprehension. Like so many before him, Houellebecq shows himself to have been a moralist, and moraliser, in nihilist’s clothing. But that should not sidetrack us from the actual claim being, if not advanced, then at least seriously entertained. For the first time, Houellebecq gives voice to a substantive alternative to the malaise of liberal individualism. And, by playing the theology of submission off against its erotics, this would not entail subsuming the individual into the collective, but rather a re-experiencing of individuality.

The significance lies less in his proposing this alternative himself than in his recognising the possibility of a way out. This is also the novel’s major interest as we observe the most recent throes in the ongoing crisis of European liberalism: once one possibility is recognised, it invites us to think of others. But as we consider other possibilities, Houellebecq’s own epochal narrative comes to look suspect. There is a vacillation between seeing individual characters as symptoms, of a historical malaise, and seeing them as trying to glorify their own mediocre suffering by casting themselves as such symptoms. Otherwise put: are his novels simply so many self-pitying men endowing their personal misery with epochal significance? If so, then surely this would vitiate Houellebecq’s own diagnosis. In *Extension*, the protagonist is admitted to a sanatorium, where he is interviewed by a psychiatry PhD student, who ‘reproached me for speaking in terms that were too general, too sociological. … “In expounding on society you establish a barrier behind which you protect yourself”’ (*Extension* 145). This line of criticism is thus anticipated, pre-empted, and even assimilated into the novel’s own self-reflection. Here Houellebecq can attribute this sociologising tendency to his protagonist. By contrast, when in *Particules* Michel and Annabelle, childhood sweethearts who meet again in disaffected middle age, attempt to rekindle their youthful romance, it is the omniscient narrator who writes: ‘In the midst of the suicide of the West, it was clear they didn’t stand a chance’ (*Particules* 227), the symptomising tendency is raised to a grand narrative. Due to the present historical conjuncture, it is impossible for two people to live in accordance with the principles of love, and indeed for the narrative trajectory of two fictional characters to satisfy the generic demands of a love story. It is the sheer philosophical scope of this gesture that makes Houellebecq such a thrilling author; it is this scope, also, that raises our suspicions.

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As Houellebecq starts to entertain alternatives to sexual-economic liberalism, so his understanding of Islam is turned on its head. In *Particules*, a colleague of Michel’s embarks on a monologue: ‘I’ve come to think that religions are above all attempts to explain the world; and no attempt at explanation can hold if it comes up short against our need for rational certainty. I know well enough that the facts seem to contradict me, I know that Islam—by far the most idiotic, the most false and most obscurantist of all the religions—seems today to be gaining ground; but that is only a superficial, transitory phenomenon: in the long term Islam is condemned, even more surely than is Christianity’ (*Particules* 270).[[14]](#footnote-14) And then, in *Plateforme*, the narrator (also called Michel) is told by a Jordanian banker, on holiday in a Thai brothel, that the ‘problem for Muslims … is that the promised paraduse already existed here: there were places on earth where young girls, available and lascivious, danced for the pleasure of men, where one could get drunk on nectar while listening to music with celestial rhythms; there are twenty-odd within a 500 metre radius of this hotel’ (*Plateforme* 358). If the scientific need for proof does not doom Islam, then the sexual-economic liberal regime of desire will. ‘Already,’ he is informed, ‘young Arabs dreamed only of consumption and sex’ (*Plateforme* 359). Compare this to Rediger in *Soumission*: ‘it’s for metaphysical questions that people fight, certainly not for increases in economic growth’ (*Soumission* 251). For Rediger the religion’s strength lies in its not dissociating the metaphysical search for meaning into scientific explanation, regulation of desire, and social organisation. Neoliberalism has always justified itself through the displacement (and purportedly non-ideological) discourse of technocratic efficiency; such a redrawing of the rules of engagement is destabilising. Its great efficiency has not been in economic management, but self-reproduction; it is precisely this which is put at risk, for now the existence of a system is expected to justifiy itself from (metaphysical) first principles.[[15]](#footnote-15)

So much for the rational self-interested agent posited by liberalism. Not only because rational self-interest is deluded in its model of freedom; it reproduces itself through reducing knowledge to a technical competence (a kind of post-ideological take on formalism) unaware of its own intellectual vacuity. However, we should not see Rediger as simply providing a new slant on a classic trope within the discourse of clash-of-civilisations/West-versus-Islam, in which Islam is communitarian rather than individualist, mystical rather than rational, etc. For if Islam in *Soumission* looks as though it might supersede sexual-economic liberalism, this is due to a fundamental similarity in kind. Ben Abbes is able to get socialist support for slashing the welfare budget via his own take on ‘distributism’, the economic theory proposed by Catholic anti-liberals Hillaire Belloc and GK Chesterton in the 1910s, where state responsibilities to individuals are farmed out to civil society organisations, not a million miles away from the Conservative Party’s vision of the ‘Big Society’.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is the kind of thing, Houellebecq’s narrator archly observes, that the *Parti Socialiste* would condemn if it were carried out by a centre-right government, but will cajole themselves into supporting when carried out by their allies with barely a whimper. Ben Abbes proves far more effective in dismantling the post-1945 social democratic settlement than Nicolas Sarkozy ever was.

However, it is as regimes of desire that sexual-economic liberalism and *Soumission*’s depiction of Islam converge most remarkably. When Rediger justifies polygamy by arguing that all humans have a duty to populate the world with the best genes—‘the Creator’s designs were expressed through natural selection: … only certain individuals were called to transmit their genes, and engender the future generation’ (*Soumission* 268-69)—he is simply reiterating the argument here about sexual pauperisation outlined in *Extension*. The polygamists will indeed have ‘a varied and exciting erotic life’. One of the central questions in *Soumission* is whether we are meant to take its theological-metaphysical speculation seriously, or whether it is simply a diversion: François converts so he can be supplied with one wife to cook for him, and another (preferably fifteen years old) for sex.[[17]](#footnote-17) On this reading, there is one constant: male cupidity. This might seem comforting to some, insofar as it divests the novel of its political and philosophical awkwardness: the comfort of the conservative platitude (boys will be boys, etc.). But Houellebecq opens up a far more unsettling suggestion: that the two regimes of desire converge in their hypostasis of a male gaze as the zero point for desire. And indeed, Houellebecq too is subject to this hypostasis—as an account of Islam itself, *Soumission* will not be enormously illuminating; as an account of how different Western conceptions of Islam crystallise, more so; but most illuminating is that, in Houellebecq’s attempt to think Islam, we come face to face with the structuring limits of how he thinks as such. It is because he bears so openly the marks of the sexual-economic liberal regime he excoriates that he can document it with such lucidity.

Islam in *Soumission* at such junctures comes to resemble not much more than petrodollars plus subjection of women; this caricature does not so much undermine Rediger’s metaphysical-theological speculation as *facilitate* it. But the account of regimes of desire is perhaps most striking where it is most banal. When the *Parti Socialiste* is in negotiations with the *Fraternité musulmane*, the two points Houellebecq dwells on are education (because girls and boys must not be the same classroom, and should follow different syllabi) and polygamy (*Soumission* 82-83). And as François wonders how a shopping mall will change under a Muslim government, his reflections soon settle on women’s dress: that after spending their days covered by their ‘impenetrable black burqas, rich Saudi women transform themselves into birds of paradise … the precise opposite of Western women’, who dress with elegance in public, and return home to put on sweatpants (91). Houellebecq is hardly the only Westerner whose fascination with Islam (as it is for neocon imperialists and liberal multiculturalists alike) makes a fetish of how women dress. But he has the virtue of making manifest the latent hypocrisy according to which politicians in America, France, and elsewhere, in large majority men, to attack Islam for telling women what they can and cannot wear in public, and to do so by telling women what they can and cannot wear in public.[[18]](#footnote-18)

It is at this juncture that we come face to face with the vexed question of Houellebecq’s misogyny. For Houellebecq is not simply documenting this convergence of regimes of desire, and the liberal self-denial regarding gender politics; he also embodies it. Reading *Soumission*, like all of Houellebecq’s novels, one can never be sure that the misogyny belongs to the narrator, to society at large, or to the author. This is analogous to the question as to whether the protagonists turn themselves into symptoms out of narcissism, or whether they are being offered as symptoms by Houellebecq himself. Is it, for example, Houellebecq or the (semi-autobiographical) narrator of *Extension* who takes such glee in the descriptions of ‘ugly’ women? (His favourite term is ‘boudin’: *boudin blanc* is a liver sausage; *boudin noir* is blood sausage.) Is it Houellebecq or society that dictates that each of his heroines must die gruesomely, and in a way linked to her sexuality (suicide after discovering she has cervical cancer, itself triggered by a miscarriage; suicide after a car crash leaving her paralysed from the waist down; murdered by Islamist militants whilst on a sex holiday…)? Such slipperiness cannot obscure the systematic role misogyny plays throughout his *œuvre*. Houellebecq’s misogyny is not merely morally objectionable (though it certainly is that): it is of absolute structural necessity, whose only virtue is its sheer blatancy. It is what facilitates his insight into the ravages of sexual-economic liberalism, as well as signalling the point at which his vision fails absolutely.

As mentioned, the most intellectually breathtaking moment in *Soumission* is Rediger’s analogy between the *Qur’an* and Pauline Réage’s *Histoire d’O*. Man’s submission to God, he suggests, is equivalent to woman’s submission to man. Not only does this give theological sustenance to patriarchy; if men should take women’s submissiveness as a model, the implication is that women are not capable of this more exalted submission. But this would mean that, at the very moment that a way out of the malaise of contemporary sexual-economic liberalism is entertained, Houellebecq falls back on an unthinking gender essentialism which wholly contravenes the historical thrust underpinning his analysis of this malaise. In *Soumission*, François notes that the effect of women dressing with greater ‘decency’ is that his own erotic impulses at seeing them were calmed, not unlike Huysmans himself, withdrawing to a monastery and not feeling chastity to be a burden in any way (*Soumission* 280): evidence, perhaps, of how a regime of desire produces desires by regulating them. But note that such desire takes a pre-determined gendered form. Similarly, when the Jordanian banker in *Plateforme* explains that Islam will eventually be defeated by capitalism because capitalism produces and satisfies the desires people ultimately want, these are the desires of a (certain kind of) heterosexual man, which are posited as universal. Again, we are led to wonder whether this is a feature of the society Houellebecq diagnoses, or his diagnosis; again, it is Houellebecq’s own propensity to universalise this view that makes him such a lucid, if unwitting, observer.

At issue, in fact, is an essentialisation not just of *desire*, but of *gender* as such. Rediger suggests that fifteen year old girls can be prevailed upon to be sexually drawn to forty-something university professors by virtue of their innate ‘intellectual plasticity’: provided with the ‘appropriate education’, such girls will willingly dedicate their fertility to the continued propagation of the species (294). Under the *Fraternité musulmane*, François tells us: ‘Obviously [women] lost autonomy, but *fuck autonomy* [in English in original]; I had to admit that for my own part I would quite easily, and even with genuine relief, have given up every personal or professional responsibility’ (227). The only female characters who appear to be fulfilled in *Soumission* are ones liberated into housework, notably the senior professor Marie-Françoise, barred from her job as a result of the *Fraternité musulmane*’s higher education reforms (in which no woman can hold a university post), and delighted to spend her enforced early retirement whipping up gastronomic masterpieces for her husband. This newly Islamicised France, on Houellebecq’s account, liberates women not from *liberalism*, but from *liberation*. But then, if *Soumission* is to believed, and here it takes up the grand narrative of *Particules* wholesale, women’s liberation had been an aberration all along.

Houellebecq’s critique of liberal feminism is complex, and ambivalent. In *Extension* the narrator observes two women chatting in a party about another woman, who is wearing a miniskirt and receiving lacivious glances from the other people there. ‘Good for her’, they say: she’s dressing how she wants, regardless of what others think. It is purposely ambiguous as to whether the two women are engaging in disingenuous sniping; either way it leads the narrator to remark ‘the disturbing final residues of the collapse of feminism’ (*Extension* 6). And not without some reason: when the feeling of being ‘empowered’ is confused for *actual power*, the performance to a male gaze is internalised as self-determination, rather than recognised as a new form of political subjugation. But it is a bit rich to put all this at the door of feminism, and overlooking the tenacity of a market-based phallocracy in which the right of women to ‘do what they want’ pits the individual desire against the socio-economic structure that frames how such desires can be articulated. When in *Particules* Houellebecq turns to the cult of youth that arose around ’68, he describes with evident glee the fates of those *soixante-huitardes* who had participated in this cult, only to find themselves hoist by their own *pétard* as they too would lose their attractiveness and be jilted by their men, with the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family they had done so much to erode no longer a safety net. Worst of all is the psychological, rather than economic, insecurity it inflicts upon them: ‘the cult of the body they had powerfully contributed to establishing could, as their own flesh sagged, merely lead them to feel for themselves a more and more acute disgust—the same disgust they could read in the gazes of others’ (*Particules* 107).[[19]](#footnote-19)

At this point, the historical account of how sexual-economic liberalism turned female sexuality into a zero sum game gives way to victim-blaming in its crudest form: Houellebecq both casts women in the role of victim, and then holds them responsible for the causes of their victimhood. And at this point, his overarching historical narrative gets tangled up in self-contradiction. For the very model of victim-blaming that he has recourse to is predicated on a conception of freedom as individual self-determination: the victim could be something other than victim, if only they had acted differently. But this is that same model of freedom Houellebecq continually excoriates. In *Particules* the absent mother is lambasted for her irresponsible promiscuity; but how to square this with the depiction of characters as symptoms of supra-individual historical processes, and not moral agents? Are only the men allowed to be seen as symptoms of historical processes? Once again, we have the suspicion that this epochal narrative serves not to place the individual in symptomatic relation to their epoch, but rather to demonstrate a male individual narcissitically endowing their own misery with epochal significance. Or perhaps we could say that it is the very process of trying to cast one’s own suffering as epochally significant that becomes symptomatic of the current malaise. The falsehood underpinning Houellebecq’s entire *modus operandi* contains within it an element of truth—just not the truth he envisaged.

Quite simply, Houellebecq conflates sexual and economic *liberalism* with women’s sexual and economic *liberation*. Both are made possible by the contraceptive pill, by the extension of the franchise, of higher education, of divorce laws, and so forth. And both led inexorably to the dissolution of the model of the nuclear family, that paragon of tradition and stability which, it transpired, was only able to exist on the basis of the systematic repression of fifty per cent of the population on account of their gender alone (as well as naturalising ideological norms of sexual desire, sexual self-identity, etc.). But the only way in which he can make sense of female economic independence is as promiscuity, such is his own dependence on sexual-economic liberalism. Once again, he takes a model of agency for granted that elsewhere he will powerfully call into question. And such reductivism means that Houellebecq misses the far more major philosophical significance of liberation, and dwells only on its most immediate socio-economic effects (notably, the introduction of a new sexual agency which leads to a shift in the generalised economy of desire). For the purpose of women’s liberation was not to give women the same freedoms enjoyed by men, but to dispute and transform the very category of liberty.

This structural, and essentialising, misogyny permits Houellebecq’s insight into the principle of submission as a way out of the liberal model of self-determining subject; it privileges feminine submissiveness because it is women who have a vocation to give pleasure. He is seeming incapable of thinking outside of a gender politics along the axis of male-active/female-passive. In *Histoire d’O*, O has the epiphany that, ‘in being prostituted her dignity might increase was astonishing, and yet it was dignity at issue.’[[20]](#footnote-20) It is not for nothing that the blowjob is the Houellebecq protagonist’s sex act of choice. But in the structure of taking-pleasure-in-giving-pleasure, active and passive are confused. Indeed, the French *faire plaisir* inhabits a kind of middle voice, implying that the giving of pleasure to another is a means of attaining to pleasure oneself. As it were, *ça fait plaisir de faire plaisir*: the impersonal *ça* complements the uncertain agency of *faire*. And this, perhaps, is how we should read Houellebecq’s rather sentimental attachment to the nuclear family. The central argument of *Particules* is that the generation of ’68 heralded not a new utopia, but rather the individualism of the 1980s and onwards, and nowhere is this more visible than in the dissolution of marriage: ‘It is bittersweet to note that this sexual liberation has sometimes between presented as a kind of communitarian dream, whereas in fact it indicated a new step in the historic rise of individualism. As the beautiful word household indicates, the couple and the family represented the last islet of primitive communism within a liberal society. Sexual liberation had the effect of destroying these intermediary communities, the last ones to separate the individual from the market’ (116). Here Houellebecq finds an unlikely (or perhaps no so unlikely) ally in Theodor Adorno, for whom marriage, as a legal-financial institution, makes the love commitments it claims to consecrate *a priori* impossible, a bad joke, yet nevertheless provides ‘one of the last possibilities of forming human cells within universal inhumanity’ which will to any degree the all-encompassing atomisation of life that we live under mature capitalism, and as such offer the possibility for a life lived otherwise.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is when Houellebecq shows himself not only to be a moralist (and moraliser) in nihilist’s clothing, but in fact a sentimentalist, that we find his most compelling conception of an affective economy—‘economy’ here in its broadest sense of the production, distribution and consumption of value—that outstrips sexual-economic liberalism and points to a different thinking of freedom.

§

When, in *La Carte et le territoire*, where Michel Houellebecq enters as a character, the main protagonist is struck to notice that his bookshelves are given over almost exclusively to works of political economy from the nineteenth century, with no contemporary literature in sight (250). Not for the first time, Houellebecq’s hint is playfully overdetermined, but once more, we should not be scared to take it at face value.[[22]](#footnote-22) His account of sexual-economic liberalism, in which capitalist production regulates desires and affects as much as it does commodity exchange, would certainly corroborate this; similarly, his desire to treat the individual as symptom, through which the historical forces to which s/he is subjected become apparent. Yet ‘Houellebecq economist’ is, it transpires, *not economistic enough*. Because, it becomes clear, his claim that economic forces shape desire gives way to an essentialisation of desire before any economic force. The economism such as it stands could well be the narcissitic aggrandisement of one’s personal predicament. Narcissistic male insecurity is one which in which the current crisis in sexual-economic liberalism articulates itself.

It is within this context that we should see the supreme importance of *Soumission* in Houellebecq’s *œuvre*. For, until *Soumission*, the question of a life lived otherwise was never broached. It is this which warrants his being read not simply as ‘acerbic observer of contemporary reality’ but as speculative political-philosophical argument. In this work Houellebecq has overcome one dead end, has moved beyond purely oppositional polemic against sexual-economic liberalism, to broach, with however much indeterminable irony, a metaphysics that would both account for how the model of freedom as self-determination should descend into apathy, and offer an account of its overcoming through the appropriation of human finitude as a genuinely emancipatory gesture. But in so doing, it encounters another: misogyny, already glaring in the opening pages of *Extension*,demonstrates itself to be of systematic necessity to Houellebecq’s thinking, and his art. As the quasi-sociological *aperçu* gives over to the metaphysical vista, so his sexual politics no longer grasps contemporary gender relations as a function of liberalism, but is raised to an unthought gender essentialism which depends on the very regime of desire and agency Houellebecq strives to think beyond. His virtue is to make clear how this misogyny belongs to sexual-economic liberalism’s regime of desire; but he manages this only by demonstrating the degree to which he himself remains subject to the very regime he attempts to dismantle, and think beyond. In *Soumission*, Houellebecq writes his way out of one dead end; what *Soumission* asks of us, is to think beyond the dead end in which he nevertheless found himself.

1. Paris: Flammarion, Jan. 2015. English edition trans. Lorin Stein (London: William Heinemann, Sept. 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *La Possibilité d’une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Laurent Joffrin, editor of centre-left newspaper *Libération*, said that the novel ‘will remain a key date in the history of ideas, which will mark the irruption—or return—of the theses of the far right into high literature’ (‘“Soumission”, Le Pen au Flore, *Libération*, 2 January 2015). By contrast, Adam Gopnik in the *New Yorker* (more accurately in my view) observes that ‘it turns out that the principal target of the satire is not French Islam—which is really a bystander that gets, at most, winged—but the spinelessness of the French intellectual class’ (‘Michel Houellebecq’s Francophobic Satire’, *New Yorker*, January 26, 2015). Joffrin’s own outrage, with its appeals to ‘high literature’ and the ‘intellectual élite’ does rather read like a strategy for deflection. This was exacerbated by the fact that on novel’s date of publication, 7 January 2015, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi marched into the offices of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and opened fire on the editorial team, murdering twelve people (an image of Houellebecq as Nostradamus was on the front cover of the issue of *Charlie Hebdo* published that day). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 315-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This soon extends to the education system, totemic for the socialists, and the standard of the TGVs, regularly held aloft as the one area where France leads the world in infrastructure and engineering. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is also, in this phrase, an echo of right wing demagogue Éric Zemmour’s *Le Suicide français*, which appeared two months before *Soumission* in October 2014, charting as he sees it the weakening of France, notably via immigration, since 1968. Zemmour is a central reference point for those French critics who wish to dismiss Houellebecq as right wing provocateur. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An *énarque* is an alumnus of the *Ecole Nationale d’Administration*, which has produced the vast majority of France’s major politicians and civil servants since its creation by Charles de Gaulle in 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (trans. Gabriel Ash; Verso, 2014). Ironically, one of the earliest essays on Houellebecq, Jack I Abecassis’ ‘The Eclipse of Desire: *L’Affaire Houellebecq*’, also uses the term ‘regime of desire’, but in a very different sense. Whereas he means that desire exerts a ‘regime’ in which it cannot be questioned (and so *Les Particules élémentaires* caused polemic primarily for its ‘desecration of the regime of desire, our last idol’, MLN 115:4, 801-826; 801), Lordon sees desire as function of the regime which creates us as desiring subjects. It is this latter use of the phrase which I will employ in the following. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Editions Maurice Nadeau, 1994), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Minitel was a pre-internet online service run by France Telecom, and largely limited to France, a videotext box linked to telephone lines through which one could buy products. By 1996 (the year *Extension* was published) it had been overtaken by the World Wide Web and was considered by many to be an emblem of the parochialism and backwardness of French capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Re-reading over a decade later, the earlier novels now seem uncannily prescient, both as they predict general societal trends and, on certain occasions (e.g. the shock ending of *Plateforme)* actual events that followed on shortly after the books’ publication. Similarly, the basic analysis from which Houellebecq predicts the 2022 political situation strikes me as fundamentally astute: a centre-right overcome by the *Front National*, an ideologically moribund centre-left which stays in government by default, meaning that French society moves increasingly to the right whilst the left clings on to power [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Indeed, early on he makes the following statement, as though lifted verbatim from *Extension*: ‘At a social level there were the rich, there was the poor, with some fragile paths between the two—*social mobility*, a subject we could mock, and the more serious possibility of ruin. On a sexual leve there were those who inspired desire, and those who didn’t inspire any: a narrow mechanism, with some complications in mode (homosexuality, etc.), but all the same easily boiled down to vanity and narcissistic competition, already well analysed by French moralists three centuries earlier’ (21-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. cf. Adam Shatz, ‘Colombey-les-deux-Mosquées’, LRB 37:7, April 2015. The desire to depoliticise & unravel the novel’s intellectual content until it seems almost accidental is rather suspect, and, the French might say, very Anglo-Saxon. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Houellebecq then repeated these comments in his own voice in an interview with the literary magazine *Lire* in September 2001, leading to him being sued by four Islamic organisations (he was acquitted). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On an analogous point, when François sees the sums the Saudis will spend to take over the Sorbonne, he remarks: ‘Deep down, they still believed in the power of an intellectual elite, it was almost touching’ (*Soumission* 179). The Saudis might have an auratic, mystifying relation to the ‘humanities’, but *Soumission* as a whole would have us believe (and as an employee of a literature department, I will refrain from casting judgement here) that university is where literature goes to die. The contemporary humanities department seems just as prey to the intellectual bankruptcy of technocracy as governing elites, and for the same reason: a deep-seated embarrassment when it comes to ‘metaphysical questions’. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Indeed, as the fundamental unit of civil society transpires to be the family, we might be reminded of a different Conservative leader for whom there was ‘no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is the interpretation given by Adam Shatz in the *London Review of Books* (26 April, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. One is reminded of a cartoon by Malcolm Evans, where two women, one dressed in a bikini with sunglasses, the other in a burqa, each see the other’s dress as symptom of patriarchy. Malcolm Evans, 6 January 2011. <http://www.evanscartoons.com/image.php?id=1294733061> accessed 11 August, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This goes some way to explain why Houellebecq’s heroines (Christiane in *Particules*, Valérie in *Plateforme*, Isabelle in *Possibilité*) should read so much like the repository for an infantile fantasy in which they are assertive about their desire to give pleasure to men, and their disdain for women who have lost the desire to give pleasure. Christiane makes clear that this is a rejection of ‘feminism’: feminists whined about doing the dishes until they had fully domesticated their men, turning them ‘into impotent, sulky neurotics’. Does this satisfy them? Does it hell: ‘From then on—and this is absolutely systematic—they started to feel nostalgia for virility’ (145). What a satsifaction to be able to put this anti-feminism in the mouth of a female character. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Histoire d’O* (Pauvert, 1975), 64. This is what inspired the effusions of Jean Paulhan (Pauline Réage was pen-name for Dominique Aury, Paulhan’s lover) in his introductory essay: ‘Finally a woman who admits what women have always forbidden themselves from admitting […]. that they must be fed incessantly, washed incessantly, lavished in make-up [*fardée*: the English translation has ‘burdened’, derived from the French *fard*, yet the context for each use of this verb in the text makes it clear that it is to do with applying make-up, even if the added connotation serve’s Réage’s/Aury’s purposes], beaten. That they have but one requirement, and that is a good master, who refuses to be treat them with too much “goodness”…’ (ibid., 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* trans. EFN Jephcott (Verso, 2005), 31. Not that Houellebecq in *Soumission* will have much truck for communism. François’s description of Huysmans, not for the first time, can equally apply to Houellebecq himself: ‘his growing contempt for the left had never erased his initial aversion to capitalism’ (*Soumission* 31). But more serious is Rediger’s suggestion that communism constituted ‘a first attempt at struggling against liberal individualism’ (274). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As does Bernard Maris, author of the critical work *Houellebecq économiste* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014) and member of the Charlie Hebdo editorial team, murdered on 7 January 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)