

## **(Euro)déclinisme: ‘Le mot déclin est presque trop doux’**

**Abstract:** Michel Houellebecq’s views on the European Union have been consistently negative, recently declaring in an interview that anti-Europeanism is his ‘only political engagement.’ Houellebecq’s work takes for granted civilizational decline, what Oswald Spengler called the ‘decline of the West’, and regards the EU, described in *Submission* as a ‘putrid decomposition’, as central to this vision. The only way to revitalise Europe and to reverse this decline, *Submission* suggests, is by reinstating the traditions and moralities that have been eradicated in Europe by post-‘68 moral and sexual liberalisation. On this view then, only those cultures untouched by progressive politics can rebuild Europe and in *Submission* only the Muslim Brotherhood can provide ‘the moral and familial rearmament of Europe’.

### **Résumé:**

Au fil des années, Michel Houellebecq a toujours considéré négativement l’Union européenne, allant jusqu’à déclarer récemment au cours d’une interview que l’anti-européanisme était son seul engagement politique. Pour lui, l’idée d’un déclin ou l’assassinat de la civilisation est au cœur de la vision de l’Union Européenne décrite dans *Soumission* comme une « décomposition putride ». L’œuvre de Houellebecq tient ce que Oswald Spengler a appelé le déclin de l’Ouest et, en particulier, de l’Europe pour un fait acquis. La seule façon de revitaliser l’Europe est de rétablir les traditions et la moralité qui ont disparu avec la libéralisation morale et sexuelle post-soixante-huitarde. On en déduira que seules les cultures non touchées par une politique progressiste permettront de reconstruire l’Europe et les Frères musulmans d’assurer « le réarmement moral et familial de l’Europe ».

**Keywords:** *Submission*; Islam; European Union; déclinisme; Eurabia; Front National.

## Introduction

In days leading up to Britain's referendum to decide their future in the European Union on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, Houellebecq gave an interview to the *Financial Times* in which he declared his enthusiasm for Brexit: 'I'd love it. I'd love it if the English gave the starting signal for the dismantling. I hope they won't disappoint me. I've been against the [European] idea from the start. It's not democratic, it's not good'. Elaborating on this, he continues: 'Europe is worse than anything because there isn't even the parody of representative democracy. It's a pure oligarchy, Europe.' (FT interview). Elsewhere, in another pre-Brexit interview, Houellebecq reiterated this stance, saying: 'I'm really counting on the UK to vote no, which could have a domino effect of the collapse of Europe.' (Chrisafis, 2015). Asked to explain such an intense aversion to the EU, he answered, 'There's both a coercive side, and a rapid degradation process, which nicely sums up what I think about Europe' (Kuper 2016). What stands out here is the use of the word 'degradation' which is less immediately comprehensible as an objection to Europe than the idea of 'coercion', that is, a lack of democratic accountability which provokes justifiable doubts about the EU as a supranational trading bloc both on the Right and the Left. Degradation has several possible meanings; it can refer to disintegration and ruination, but also strongly connotes ruin and dereliction. Both meanings resonate with Houellebecq's concern with the idea of decline and degeneration; a falling away of one stage of European history as a result of the failure of secular Republicanism that has been, in his view, fatally weakened by the Liberal-Left and the socially permissive libertarianism inherited from the spirit of 1968.

Clearly, Houellebecq's antipathy towards the EU as a site of decay and putridity functions metonymically for a more general sense of decline in France. Reaching back to as early as 1996 in *Le Sens du combat*, his sense of *Eurodéclinisme* seems to be not only longstanding

but extremely deep-rooted. In this collection of poetry, one poem, 'Fin de soirée' fuses the inexorable processes of bodily dilapidation and dissolution – 'je pense au pourrissement prochain de mon corps' with the 'pourrissement' and the 'déclin de l'Europe' (*The Art of The Struggle*, 26). More recently, Houellebecq has affirmed what he regards as an advanced state of decay of Europe: '... à l'intérieur du monde occidental, l'Europe a choisi un mode de suicide particulier, qui inclut le fait d'assassiner les nations qui le composent'.<sup>1</sup>

A preoccupation with the idea of *déclinisme* has been at the centre of much of Houellebecq's work which has, from *Whatever* in 1994 to *Submission* in 2015, accentuated, albeit with occasional modulations, a thesis of cultural pessimism that takes for granted the decline of the West, and in particular of Europe and its institutional incarnation in the European Union. In fact, recently Houellebecq has admitted that a good overarching description for all his novels might be 'the suicide of the west' – it is, he says, 'un bon résumé de mes livres' <sup>2</sup>(*Valeurs Actuelles* 22). While each novel addresses the idea of decline in different inflections, it is possible to trace across how novels a more general rhetoric of *déclinisme* that incorporates an escalating anti-Europeanism, what I am calling here, *eurodéclinisme*, that reaches its apex in *Submission*. While we are, of course, not able to read Houellebecq's positions in his novels as journalistic or sociological reports, or as having a straightforward relationship to authorial presence, neither can we fully accept that the exceptional status of his literary architectonics, what Martin Crowley calls his insulating framing devices, continue to offer a level of undecidability in his fiction. <sup>3</sup> I am concerned here with looking at how *déclinisme* has metamorphosed into *eurodéclinisme* in *Submission* and the ways in which this transmutation is accompanied by increasingly frequent public expressions of antipathy towards the EU, the latest of which was a long piece in *Valeurs Actuelles* clarifying and expanding upon his anti-EU sentiments. In this way, then one might suggest that the *eurodéclinisme* in Houellebecq's fiction is effectively indistinguishable from

his pronouncements in the world thus further diminishing any claims that such views are ironic or satirical:

Dans l'histoire récente de la France, il y a quelque chose qui relève non pas du suicide, mais bel et bien de l'assassinat. Et le coupable de cet assassinat n'est guère difficile à découvrir: c'est l'Union européenne. [...] À l'intérieur du monde occidental, l'Europe a choisi un mode de suicide particulier, qui inclut le fait d'assassiner les nations qui la composent. <sup>4</sup>

While I do not regard the treatment of *déclinisme* in *Submission* as straightforwardly expository, it is certainly true, as Russell Williams astutely notes in this issue, that there is a distinct 'thinning of the literary' in Houellebecq's writing and that the political positions adopted in *Submission* have become 'alarmingly unambiguous' (13). As one critic observes of *Submission*, 'the novel at once intrigues for its engagement with contemporary politics and yet retreats at precisely the moment it would be read as a speech act—it is a work of literature, we are told.' (Allan). The *décliniste* mood of *Submission*, familiar from much of Houellebecq's writing, is delivered in characteristic Houellebecquian style, one that is, as Laurent Joffrin says is 'un style faussement plat [...] 'tissé d'une ironie perverse' (2015). This 'style plat' is a recognisable mixture of pessimism and misanthropy, alleviated with touches of romantic idealism, philosophical meditations on Catholicism and some leavening bathetic humour placing Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans alongside You Porn, microwave dinners and the serio-comic misery of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> But what emerges in *Submission*, more so than in the previous novels, is a falling away of any mitigating literary devices that maintains any sense of 'literary' undecidability or irony. In this way then, the idea of *déclinisme* in *Submission* might be read in ways that do not have to account for the alibi of

literariness which is, arguably, wearing ever thinner in many aspects of Houellebecq's writing. Houellebecq's very public anti-Europeanism -- 'Je suis prêt à voter pour n'importe qui pourvu qu'on propose la sortie de l'Union européenne et de l'Otan, ça, j'y tiens beaucoup' -- cannot simply be explained away as the satirical gesture of an established provocateur.<sup>6</sup> This unequivocal anti-EU position was already made evident in public 2005 when Houellebecq wrote in support of his friend Phillippe Mury's article 'Bien sûr que non', proclaiming that 'sortir de l'Europe est quand même le préalable d'une politique indépendante'.<sup>7</sup>

*Submission* explores what Slavoj Žižek describes as 'today's post-political democracy' in which old ideological stances are increasingly obsolete and being replaced 'by a new bipolarity between politics and post-politics: the technocratic-liberal multiculturalist-tolerant party of post-political administration and its Rightist-populist counterpart of passionate political struggle', given these circumstances, says Žižek, it is little wonder that 'the old Centrist opponents [ ...] are often compelled to join forces against the common enemy' (*Living in End Times*, 2). This is potentially fertile terrain for the contemporary novelist to observe the complexities of democratic politics in Europe and ideas of sovereignty and cosmopolitanism. An examination of the putative political failure of the European Union might consider the class tensions between well-educated, cosmopolitan, post-national, citizens who have the most to gain from the possibilities of supranational work, culture and travel versus those who adhere to a strongly nationalistic identity and whose concerns are more parochial. Questions of religion, freedom, both personal and national, and political democracy are examined through the novel's central conceit of an Islamic France but, finally, lose much of their potency as they are put in the service of a pre-fabricated thesis of cultural and political pessimism from which Houellebecq has never deviated. Houellebecq's explicit anti-EU stance must be examined in the context of his enduring preoccupation with the

political and cultural decline of France and its fate as a society stripped of the fundamental certainties of religiosity and sublimity – ‘somewhat empty rituals,’ but ones that ‘gave you something to believe in’ (*Atomised*, 100).<sup>8</sup>

For a writer who had once declared Islam to be ‘the stupidest of religions’, it seemed unsurprising that Houellebecq’s new novel depicting a supine, exhausted France submitting to the rejuvenating energies of Islam would court intense controversy especially, as Angelique Chrisafis notes, in the context of ‘a long build-up of tension in France in which books, media and magazines had for months been relentlessly focusing on Islam as if the religion itself was a threat to France’ (2015). The plot of *Submission* imagines a near-future scenario, 2022, in French politics where the Front Nationale are kept out of power only by a strategic political coalition between the Socialists and the UMP that results in an Islamic organisation called the Muslim Brotherhood, led by the charismatic Ben Abbes who peacefully governs France bringing peace and prosperity to the hitherto ailing nation. The advent of Islamic rule calms all ethnic conflict, cures France of its chronic unemployment and reverses its declining (white) birth-rate problem by financially encouraging women not to work outside of the home and, crucially for Houellebecq’s concerns, resolves issues of sexual pauperisation (of white men) by allowing men who convert to Islam the possibility of polygamy. The protagonist, François, a disaffected Huysmans scholar attempts unsuccessfully to convert to Catholicism, before finally submitting to the new Islamic regime that allows him to marry several ‘devoted and submissive’ wives of varying ages; ‘forty-year old wives to do the cooking’ and a ‘fifteen-year-old wife for whatever else’ (Houellebecq 2015 247218).<sup>9</sup> Such regressive sexual politics notwithstanding, a novel depicting an ideologically exhausted France willingly yielding to Islamic rule could scarcely have attracted more media attention.

The wholesale capitulation to Islam depicted in *Submission* is presented as the inevitable result of a devitalized political discourse in contemporary France. More figuratively stated, the ailing 'body' of France has lost an essential virility that can only be revived by the fecundity and vigour of Islam. This idea of the ethnic substitution of the 'indigenous' French by others, that is non-Western people echoes, of course, Renaud Camus' conspiracy theory of 'le grand remplacement' (2011) whereby Muslims, because of their significantly higher birthrate, will replace the white population of France, spelling the end of indigenous Frenchness.<sup>10</sup> This threat to ethnic Frenchness, usefully understood in Habermasian terms as a lifeworld of shared cultural rituals, always present in Houellebecq's novels, reaches its apotheosis in *Submission*'s depiction of France surrendering to Islam.

France's conversion to Sharia law in *Submission* meets virtually no opposition as its opponents, made up of soixante-huitards, the globalised elite, are so pusillanimous and self-seeking that their collaboration with the new order is guaranteed; distinct echoes here of wartime 'collabos'. Out of touch with 'les petits gens' of a disgruntled 'France périphérique', these political elites in France are to blame for the 'widening gap, now a chasm, between the people and those who claimed to speak for them' (*Submission* 94). Houellebecq gestures to the governing elite's *pantouflage*, a practice described by Perry Anderson as 'high functionaries gliding noiselessly from administration to business and politics, or back again' (2014) that is exemplified in the practices of the European Union, a byzantine anti-democratic organisation, says Houellebecq, that receives unqualified support only from the 'socialistes, libéraux et autres crapules' (1992). Suggested here is the idea that left-liberals have uncritically supported the economic and political project of European Union. Far from advancing economic prosperity, military peace and cultural union, the EU has encouraged a debilitating liberalism that has resulted in loss of national sovereignty and endorsed a weakening of national culture that has diminished the role of the traditional family, displaced

organised religion and turned rural France into a theme park for Chinese and Russian tourists.<sup>11</sup> Such a detached political class has, *Submission* suggests, created conditions in which a divisive ‘crispation identitaire’ can flourish, expediting the development of the ‘strong’ moral positions of the Far Right. In this way, then, the target of the novel is not so much Islam, but the ‘crapules’ who have weakened democracy in France thereby fostering the conditions in which extremism can flourish.

### **Decline and fall**

Most of Houellebecq’s novels have been explorations of a perceived decline and disintegration of the West. Not for nothing has he recently received Le Prix Oswald Spengler for which he responded: ‘il est évident que j’aboutis à des conclusions exactement identiques à celles de Spengler’ (*Le Point Culture*)<sup>12</sup> Despite his claim not to have read Eric Zemmour’s *Le suicide français* (2014), arguably the most influential of the recent crop of *décliniste* publications, Houellebecq’s writing is very clearly influenced by the various discourses of *déclinisme* that have become fairly commonplace in France in the past decade.<sup>13</sup> In the discourse of *déclinisme*, France is perceived as a despondent, second-rate and exhausted global presence. A nation diminished on all fronts, it is defined by a pervasive ‘malaise’ and has arrived, just like every successive phase of human civilisation at ‘a terminal stage’, one that it still refuses to acknowledge (*Public Enemies*, 2011, 63). No longer considered exceptional for its cultural and intellectual life, there is, as Houellebecq points out in *Atomised*, more rap than Racine in contemporary France. Sliding into the ‘ranks of the less developed countries’, France has become, notes Emily Apter, a nation of ‘abrogated sovereignty, atrophied national consciousness, and barbaric cultural atavisms’ (2002, 82). Two things drive Houellebecq’s own rhetoric of *déclinisme*; a general belief in the ‘*absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay*’ (*Atomised*, 111), stated elsewhere as ‘in everything,



foresee the end' (Houellebecq and Levy, 2011, 112) and a simultaneous wistfulness for a lost France: 'Is it possible to be nostalgic for time you never knew?' asks Houellebecq in *Public Enemies* (2011 63). What Houellebecq shares with Zemmour and with Alain Finkielkraut in *L'Identité Malheureuse* is a strong sense of cultural nostalgia, a sense of displacement that becomes an acute homesickness, for a France untouched by immigration, feminism, loss of religiosity and globalization. Finkielkraut's *L'identité malheureuse* mourns this lost France: 'Dans cette France de naguère, on croyait à la politique. Dans cette France d'autrefois, l'histoire devait déjà répondre de ses crimes, mais elle semblait encore porteuse de sens' (2013 5). Both Finkielkraut and Houellebecq are examples of what Mark Lilla calls reactionary 'shipwrecked minds'; nostalgic for a time that goes back to the Enlightenment before the decoupling of religion from life. Houellebecq, Lilla argues,

appears genuinely to believe that France has, regrettably and irretrievably, lost its sense of self, but not because of feminism or immigration or the European Union or globalization. Those are just symptoms of a crisis that was set off two centuries ago when Europeans made a wager on history: that the more they extended human freedom, the happier they would be. For him, that wager has been lost. (Lilla, 2016, 128-9)

While the narrative of French national decline is by no means new, in its most recent incarnation emphasizes the idea of the end of Christian religiosity as a significant part of life, a theme to which Houellebecq has retuned many times-- sex, shopping, travel, reading, work, all failing to fill the void left by spirituality. Emmanuel Todd's recent *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* examines the role of religion in contemporary France but crucially sees Christianity not as dead but dispersed across a bifurcated nation with a 'culture de l'incroyance, au coeur de l'Hexagone, avec des masses restes catholiques sur la périphérie' (2015, 43).

Adam Gopnik has identified some features in common of these so-called ‘new reactionaries’: ‘The tenets of the faith are simple: liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and international finance are the source of all evil. Liberal capitalism is a conspiracy against folk authenticity on behalf of the “internationalists,” the rootless cosmopolitans. The nation is everything, and internationalism is its nemesis.’ (Gopnik) For Houellebecq, France, as a nation state, has lost its patrimonial narrative of continuity and indigenous tradition. This is a state of lamentation repeatedly expressed in his writing as a profound nostalgia for a lost France beloved of the Identitaires--‘la France éternelle’-- where tradition governed, Christianity prevailed, gender roles were clearly defined and, crucially, the nation’s post-colonial legacy had not yet become visible and troublesome. The multicultural project foisted on France by Europe to address this legacy and also that of mass migration in the last decade, will, *Submission* suggests, provoke ‘zones of instability’ even ‘a general uprising’ in Europe (57) that may end in ‘civil war between Muslim immigrants and the indigenous populations of Western Europe’ (43). Such a quasi-eschatological idea of national catastrophe -- the violent end of Frenchness -- has been a recurring theme in much all of Houellebecq’s work (with the possible exception of his poetry) but is more disturbingly rendered in *Submission*’s presentation of the country’s inexorable descent into ‘something chaotic, violent and unpredictable’: ‘France, like the other countries of Western Europe, had been long heading toward civil war’ (94); a warning not dissimilar to that of the newly ‘detoxified’ FN who have warned of the EU’s liberal multicultural policies as spelling the end of France. <sup>14</sup>

The only way to revitalise the ailing nation and to avoid ‘ethnic conflict ‘between ‘Muslims and everybody else is to surrender to the strong religious and moral structures of Islam, thus ending a long stage of European history in which the rational secularism of the Enlightenment disappears; we will have to say ‘good-bye to a civilization.’ (56-58). Sylvain Bourmeau is one of the few interviewers who have rigorously questioned Houellebecq’s

claim to assume ‘utter irresponsibility’ as a writer; a phrase that sounds artistically intrepid, but in the reality of contemporary France might be regarded as intellectually glib, even dangerous. Bourmeau challenges Houellebecq on *Submission’s* scaremongering apocalypticism that abounds, in his opinion, with intellectual contradictions concerning Islam and secularism: ‘I feel that you have adopted categories of description, oppositions, that are worse than dubious—the sort of categories relied on by the editors of *Causeur*, or by Alain Finkielkraut, Éric Zemmour, even Renaud Camus.’ Houellebecq’s succinct, perhaps maddeningly enigmatic, response was ‘One cannot deny there is a contradiction there.’<sup>15</sup> *Submission* expounds its thesis of decline and malaise quite clearly in long expository passages that clearly show the influence of these three *décliniste* thinkers.

François is the recipient of a mini-lecture by his colleague Lempereur who conveys, in characteristic Houellebecquian ventriloquized style, the declinist ‘thesis’ of the novel. He obligingly gives François some articles that suggest ‘indigenous’ Europeans are doomed both by their atheism and their plummeting birth rates. According to one article, ‘atheistic humanism—the basis of any pluralist society’ shared by the twenty two EU member states spells demographic, even biogenetic, disaster as a ‘belief in a transcendent being conveys a genetic advantage’ and a patriarchal order sees ‘less education of woman, less hedonism and individualism’ resulting in higher birth-rates. (56). In an interview Houellebecq emphasizes this idea of demographic suicide: ‘in the middle of Europe, France is struggling desperately to survive. It is almost the only country that is fighting to survive, the only country whose demographics allow it to survive. Suicide is a matter of demographics, it’s the best and most effective way to commit suicide.’ (*Paris Review*). Failing to arrest the decline of spirituality is another way of committing national suicide: ‘Without Christianity, the European nations had become bodies without souls—zombies [...] I subscribed more and more to Toynbee’s idea that civilisation die not by murder but by suicide.’ (*Submission*, 213). *Submission* thus pits a

sickly, moribund West teetering on the edge of civil unrest against the health and vigour of Islam under the tutelage of Ben Abbas whose economic model of distributivist state capitalism compared to the lassitude and weakness of a society based on ‘atheist humanism’ (56). With a falling birthrate and lacking a strong sense of religion, France is vulnerable to being conquered by stronger, more motivated, religious forces; ‘Monotheism is on the rise’, In *Submission*, Redeker, a convert to Islam who directs the Sorbonne (now wholly funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar) tells François that France had become a nation of faithless zombies.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Map and The Territory* (2012) the contemporary political climate is described as ‘an ideologically strange period’ in which ‘everyone in Western Europe seems persuaded that capitalism is doomed [...] without, however, the ultra-left parties managing to attract anyone beyond their usual clientele of spiteful masochists. A veil of ashes seemed to have spread over people’s minds’ (2011, 270). This sense of doom is continued and intensified in *Submission* which presents an ailing, ideologically exhausted France ready to submit to the more vigorous, ultra-masculine order of the Muslim Brotherhood whose introduction of Sharia law in France (re)asserts a morally strong, ‘natural’ social and sexual order that can reverse economic and social decline, not just in France but also in Europe. In this way, then, Houellebecq’s cultural and political pessimism, already explicit in his other writing, extends outwards in *Submission* to incorporate a profound sense of European decline in which the EU stands for all that is rotten in liberal democracies that combine progressive social policies with the consolidation of capitalist globalisation. Such *eurodéclinisme* is imagined in visual terms in Houellebecq’s exhibition, *Rester Vivant*, which opened at the Palais de Tokyo in 2016 on the same day of the UK’s referendum on Europe. One exhibit, a photograph entitled France #014, depicts a forlorn concrete shopping centre in Calais, its architectural bleakness alleviated by one stark word, ‘EUROPE’.

**Q. Do you want Europe to succeed? A. No, I hope it will fail.**

For Houellebecq, the European Union is not the Kantian dream of perpetual peace and a harmonious movement towards ‘une conscience humaine européenne’ but rather a tawdry marketplace of insider trading: ‘[...] ’il s’agit uniquement de maximizer les taux de profit des multinationals européennes en facilitant les transferts massifs de capital et de travail entre les États membres’ (Houellebecq, 2017, 85). As both a real and an imagined entity, the EU becomes in Houellebecq’s work *the* institutional embodiment, its epitome in fact, of the twentieth century’s political decline into ‘mediocrity and cloying humanitarianism’ (2015, 47). Along with cynical politicians and a malfunctioning political system, the EU, in Houellebecq’s view, has contributed to the ‘*toxic atmosphere*’ in French society, one that will inevitably lead, *Submission* suggests, to ethnic conflict, even civil war (58, 126).

Houellebecq’s objections to Europe do not, however, only concern the EU’s extension of the domain of capitalism but also focus on the idea of Europe Union as the geo-political manifestation of ‘un continent qui se suicide’ on all fronts: ‘économique, démographique et surtout spirituel [...] qui est celui de l’Occident’ (Houellebecq, *Le Figaro* January 6<sup>th</sup> 2015.) Governed by an out-of-touch and autocratic global elite, what he calls ‘crapules’, the EU has encouraged a post-secular, post-national and multicultural society, thus hastening, *Submission* suggests, widespread political degeneration: ‘The facts were plain: Europe had reached a point of such putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself, any more than fifth-century Rome could have done’ (230). The idea of Europe as an unrepresentative, undemocratic entity becomes a vehicle on which to hang a more general perception of Western cultural extinction and moral decline; familiar themes in Houellebecq’s novels, these have in different ways, proffered solutions—sex tourism, cloning, Elohimism—to the prospect of civilisational collapse. The suggestion in *Submission* is that only Islam, with its respect for tradition, high birth-rates and religious certainties, can save France: ‘This wave of

immigrants, with their traditional culture — of natural hierarchies, the submission of women, and respect for elders — offered a historic opportunity for the moral and familial rearmament of Europe' (*Submission* 231).

Houellebecq's negative view of Europe, not so much as a geopolitical reality but rather the EU as an institutional entity, is motivated by what he sees as the moral decadence of the *soixante-huitards* who have occupied all positions at the top table of power. These former radicals have allowed the European Union to oil the wheels of unimpeded transnational capitalism that has led to a concomitant loss of national sovereignty. His enduring contempt, as much ideological as psychological, for the *soixante-huitard* generation has been present in much of his work and is particularly intense in *Atomised* where he depicts the sixties as the source of all enervating liberalization that has led to a weakening of the traditions and rituals that characterised the France of the grandparental generation.<sup>17</sup> The attack on the *soixante-huitards* continues apace and with even more intensity in *Submission*. They are described as 'progressive mummified corpses' who are cushioned from the exigencies of the real world and paralysed by their commitment to multiculturalism. These privileged liberals are mostly 'extinct in the wider world' but have wielded disproportionate power in politics and 'the citadels of the media' where they have become increasingly out of touch with 'la France de la périphérie'. Furthermore, they have facilitated 'the growing gap, which had become an abyss, between the population and those who would speak in its name, both politicians and journalists...' (*Submission* 126). Such sentiments about the 'people' versus the cosmopolitan elite are, of course, comparable to the scaremongering populist discourses around Brexit and Donald Trump's presidential victory in 2016, both of which played on the idea of insecurity and the fear of 'others' crossing national borders and corrupting indigenous cultures.

The threat of ‘insecurité culturelle’ has been a crucial factor in the success of the FN’s anti-EU rhetoric that has emphasized the role that immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, has played in the destruction of French culture. *Submission* takes this further and by evoking the prospect of Eurabia<sup>18</sup> in which ‘Europe’s centre of gravity’ dramatically shifts Eastwards and Southwards (128). A largely discredited conspiracy theory, Eurabia is the idea of an Islamic Europe with its borders extended to the East to include Turkey and to the South to the Mediterranean, to Algeria, Tunisia, and finally, to incorporate Egypt. In the optimistic first days of Mohammed Ben Abbas’ government, a period in the novel compared to the les Trentes Glorieuses, Morocco had ‘re-entered negotiations to join the EU’ and there was ‘already a timetable in place for Turkey [...] The rebuilding of the Roman Empire was well under way’ (2015 164). These views may be regarded as satirical in the novel but taken more literally, they sail disquietingly close to Marine Le Pen’s recent warnings about European Islamification: ‘If we go on like this, Europe will no longer be Europe [but] will turn into an Islamic republic [...] We are at a turning point, and if we don’t protect our civilisation it will disappear.’<sup>19</sup> Le Pen blames the prospect of France becoming part of Eurabia on the European Union’s policies that encourage a boundless ‘economic globalism’ and ‘consequently weakens the immune defences of the nation state, dispossessing it of its constituent elements: borders, national currency, the authority of its laws and management of the economy, thus enabling another globalism to be born and to grow: Islamist fundamentalism [...]’<sup>20</sup> In this way then, the FN brings together capitalism and religion: ‘Financial globalisation and Islamist globalisation’, Le Pen has said, ‘are helping each other out.’<sup>21</sup> The success of the Right’s anti-globalisation and anti-Islam appeal in regional and national elections is rendered succinctly in *Submission*: ‘Over the years, the rise of the far right had made things a little more interesting. It gave the debate a long-lost frisson of fascism’ (40). It is not only globalization that is at issue here but also the ethical and

ideological attenuation of the political sphere. *Submission* presents the France of 2022 as an ideologically impoverished nation state with an archaic political system that has become ‘little more than a power-sharing deal between two gangs’ (40) who have colluded to ‘sell-out’ France thus paving the way for the FN to speak on behalf of the ‘invisible, the forgotten and the voiceless’ (Berthelet, 2013 260). *Submission* represents the French political system as antiquated and full of cynical opportunists who have paved the way for the FN’s popularity and allowed the EU to become the tool of the Troika. This is a view held by Jürgen Habermas who laments the current state of the EU blaming it on political parties and politicians who ‘have long been incapable of aspiring to anything whatsoever other than being re-elected. They have no political substance whatsoever, no convictions.’<sup>22</sup> More optimistically, Žižek, while acknowledging the ‘brutal implosion of the two—party system’ and the advent the era of ‘post-political administration’ (165), does not see the obvious shortcomings of the EU as the occasion for a Houellebecquian despair but rather as an opportunity to emphasize and develop ‘the most precious part of Europe’; its ‘contribution to civilization’ by extending ‘social protections’ that have imposed ‘standards on anti-racism and women’s rights’ (*Living in End Times* 2016 a 165). After the Brexit vote, Žižek said that the bogus choice offered by the referendum only maintained ‘a vicious cycle,’ in the debates on the EU, ‘oscillating between the false opposites of *surrender* to global capitalism and *surrender* to anti-immigrant populism – which politics has a chance of enabling us to step out of this mad dance?’ (italics mine, 2016 b). *Submission* does little to alleviate the madness of the dance. Rather, it merely exacerbates the idea that surrender is inevitable and any real political engagement is futile.

**‘It’s my only political engagement.’**

Asked by an interviewer if he thought the idea of ‘Europe was a nice idea’, he replied, ‘I don’t think that it’s a nice idea. From the start, I was against it. It’s very important for me.



It's my only political engagement. We didn't realize it. It was slow, progressive. The French weren't at all interested in it.' <sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, he reveals that his only real interest in politics resides in the question of the undemocratic nature of Europe which is striking given his aversion to voting in any national elections--'I vote only on referendums' and further 'I'm against representative democracy [...] It's a bad system.' This seems to be a contradictory stance. Is it possible to denounce representative democracy because it is a 'bad system' and then object to the EU on grounds that it is undemocratic? Perhaps. But to make such a case requires more elaboration about the merits of democracy and the ways in which this might be alternatively imagined. Discussing the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, Houellebecq opined:

It's a nightmare. It's the disappearance of any possibility of democracy. It's something that I don't want, that many French people never wanted. It's bringing together countries that don't have common interests. European culture existed until the 18th century and the 19th. Now it doesn't exist anymore.<sup>24</sup>

For Houellebecq, then, European integration is not the realization of perpetual peace and the end of intra-national aggression but rather stands for the erosion of regional and national cultures as they are swept up into the voracious maw of globalization, a force that can only lead to homogenization in which all particularities of French culture are erased. On the face of it, this is a reasonable objection and one consonant with much of the Left's opposition to what they regard as EU's expedition of global capitalism – a state of affairs far-removed from the original magnanimous aims of an egalitarian confederation of nation states that sought to bring together '... in peace European peoples speaking different languages, submersed in different cultures, proving that it was possible to create a shared framework of human rights

across a continent that was, not long ago, home to murderous chauvinism, racism and barbarity.’<sup>25</sup>

Houellebecq’s view on the EU’s lack of democratic accountability has, of course, been expressed on both left and the right of the political spectrum. Referring to the referendum of 2005 that the government eventually ratified even after a NO vote, Baudrillard says that the ramification of the EU’s democratic deficit ‘goes far beyond’ a single referendum: ‘It signifies the breakdown of the principle of representation, inasmuch as the representative institutions no longer function in the ‘democratic’ direction—from the people and the citizens towards the authorities—but in reverse: from the authorities down ...’ (‘Holy Europe’ 2). He also observes, as many on the left have done, that the project of the EU has capitulated to capitalism, forcing what Habermas called an ‘economistic narrowing of vision’ (2012 3). In this failure of political vision, says Baudrillard, ‘lies the presentiment of a more serious annihilation than that threatened by the market and the supranational institutions’ whereby ‘Europe’s peoples will find themselves irrevocably consigned to the role of extras, requested to supply a rubber stamp from time to time’ (2). Houellebecq’s solution, then, for this loss of democracy is the creation of an Islamic ‘greater Europe’ that will not only become ‘one of the world’s great economic powers’ but will also ‘evolve towards more direct democracy’ with a ‘president of Europe elected by the people of Europe’ (*Submission* 129).

Seen more positively, *Submission* addresses the oppositions between increasingly abstract abstract global power as exemplified by the EU and the the consequences of such dematerialized powers that have resulted in recourse to reactionary discourses around ethnicity, language and culture as a way of resisting powerlessness. A more negative view of the novel might view the novel’s proposition of an Islamic France, however peaceful and prosperous it appears under the benevolent rule of Ben Abbes, is a provocative, even reckless, intervention in France’s current political environment. In *Submission*, these complexities surrounding the

merits and failings of the European Union are simplified into a reductive argument about which political party wants France to ‘disappear’ into Europe the most. In a prolonged discussion about politics, Alain Tanneur informs François of the possibilities of new political alliances in France: ‘And finally there’s Europe. That’s the deal killer. What the UMP wants, and Socialists too, is for France to disappear –to be integrated into a European federation’ the only way to avoid this is, Tanner says, a ‘republican alliance’ (119). This alliance results, of course, in the election of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Such a ‘solution’ to complex questions surrounding national identity, sovereignty and democracy signify for Shlomo Sand the ‘tragicomic end to a long cycle of Parisian intellectuals’. He regards the neo-conservatism of *Submission* as ‘a sign of the times’ that is ‘inscribed in the more general context of the end of the utopias of the twentieth century, the defeat of communism and of the national liberation movements in the Third World’ (2016 a).<sup>26</sup> To be sure, writing a political satire that sounds and feels almost identical to the incendiary rhetoric of the ‘nouveaux reactionnaires as well as the Front National is a hazardous venture. When the nation’s foremost writer expresses similar sentiments to those articulated on the far Right that can surely only aggravate an already escalating ethno-nationalism and Islamophobia in France. Witness, for example, in the conservative weekly, *Valeurs Actuelles*, Laurent Dandrieu’s assessment of the Catholic church’s indifference to the ‘establishment of millions of Muslims in Europe [ ... ] But the civilizational question is simply never asked [...] By breaking away from the Europe's indigenous peoples and their legitimate concerns, the Church is not only leading Europe to an impasse, it is also shooting itself in the foot.’<sup>27</sup> *Submission*, then, poses this ‘civilizational question’ in highly provocative ways by showing Islamic France as a nation that has achieved peace and prosperity based on the ‘intellectual plasticity of women’ and their placid acceptance of the veil as well as polygamous marriage and enforced unemployment (245).

In his recent book on Houellebecq and religious metaphysics, Louis Betty suggests that the ‘unbinding of humanity from God lies at the heart of the historical narrative the reader encounters in Houellebecq’s work’ (2016, 11). Such an ‘unbinding’ radiates outwards, stripping symbolic signification from the world and leaving behind only alienation and disenchantment. Islam then, offers the possibility of binding Western Europe back into clearly differentiated, hierarchal social relations based on pre-Enlightenment religious beliefs and a return to the past--a life-jacket of religiosity for the ‘shipwrecked mind’-- to a lost moment where citizens had ‘spiritual instruction in their own traditions’ (*Submission*, 88). Hypnotized into a ‘state of free-floating doubt’ by the ‘smooth and purring voice’ of Ben Abbes, opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood (improbably) dissolves and laicity is doomed: ‘This return to religion was deep, it crossed sectarian lines’ (88-9). Only Islam, then, can help France reinstate ‘traditions’ and a sense of moral order that have been eradicated in Western Europe by post-68 moral and sexual liberalization. On this view, then, only those cultures untouched by progressive politics can rebuild Europe but they will rebuild it in their own image, reinstating ‘traditional culture — of natural hierarchies, the submission of women, and respect for elders’ (*Submission*, 231). This anthropological model proposes a return to a patriarchal and hierarchal society where traditions are transmitted across generations, reestablishing authoritarian, and in this case strictly patriarchal, moral and social order, one lost after 1968, and can now only be offered by a strong return to religiosity via the Muslim Brotherhood. Having suggested cloning and sex tourism in his earlier novels as ‘cures’ for modernity, it is to the pre-modern inclinations of Islam, never meaningfully differentiated as a diverse religious practice in *Submission*, that will save France. With its steadily increasing birth-rate, that depends to a significant extent on the strict imposition of patriarchy and polygamy, only Islam has the capability to subdue the Front Nationale and the Nativists, or the ‘Indigenous Europeans,’ as they are call themselves (55). Thus, in this vision, the only

peaceful future of Europe is a non-secular monoculture in which democracy operates within a patriarchal authoritarianism that enforces polygamy and the sequestration of women. The alternative to submission is civil unrest which is more likely, the novel suggests, in the European ‘zones of instability’ Scandinavia and in Holland as their ‘multiculturalism is even more oppressive’ than in France making them more vulnerable to ‘a general uprising (57).

### **Conclusion**

The way we read *Submission* depends largely on the extent to which we believe in the intentions of the novel. Does the novel, as Laurent Joffrin has suggested in *Libération*, warm up Le Pen’s place at the Café du Flore? (2015). Or does it, as Anders Berg-Sørensen argues, permit a timely examination of ‘doubts and raises crucial questions of contemporary political relevance that the ideological formation in Europe today bypasses’ (144). Is it a recklessly irresponsible provocation fanning the flames of an already volatile political moment in French politics or a contemplative culmination of Houellebecq’s thinking on religion, post-68 Western Europe and the end-times of secular liberal democracy? Some critics believe the former and have decried Houellebecq’s *Submission* as a dereliction, and a dangerous one at that, of intellectual duty. Pierre Assouline writes that ‘if we agree to take it seriously’ then we emerge from reading the novel ‘sad, gloomy, disenchanted.’

There is nothing to salvage from his nihilism, his misanthropy, his misogyny that is more and more pronounced. [...] In his view, a writer has only one duty: to be present in his book [...] And if one talks about responsibility, his or any other writer’s, he will claim the right of every artist to be irresponsible. But what is more irresponsible than playing with the fire of an imagined civil war in the France of today? (2015)

Houellebecq's *eurodéclinisme* must be read in context of his general cultural pessimism as well as of his penchant, as Crowley notes, for the 'language of tragedy' (2010, 159-60). The overstatement and bathetic irony that has typically distinguished Houellebecq's narrative style is perturbing not simply because it continues to be regarded as satirical, but also because we are aware, through his tangible presence in the world, that his views do not diverge in any meaningful ways from those expressed in *Submission*. There are clear suggestions the 'modest proposal' of an Islamic France is, as Adam Shatz put it, as 'a solution, if not *the* solution' to the crisis of civilizational decline inaugurated and intensified by the coercive idea of Europe as promulgated by the EU.<sup>28</sup>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Valeurs Actuelles*, 'Déambulation bruxelloise avec Michel Houellebecq,' 25 octobre 2018, pp. 17-29, p 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Valeurs Actuelles*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Crowley, "The Wreckage of Liberation".

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<sup>4</sup> This piece is quoted on *Le Point* website from the original article in *Valeurs Actuelles*: [https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/union-europeenne-islam-gpa-houellebecq-et-l-assassinat-de-l-occident-25-10-2018-2266021\\_3.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/union-europeenne-islam-gpa-houellebecq-et-l-assassinat-de-l-occident-25-10-2018-2266021_3.php)

<sup>5</sup> See Crowley's "Low Resistance".

<sup>6</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (2013), satire requires a critical distance from its subject, one increasingly lacking in Houellebecq's work.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Valeurs Actuelles*, p. 18

<sup>8</sup> See Louis Betty in this issue on the question of religion.

<sup>9</sup> There is frequent mention of teenage girls, typically 15 and 16 year olds, as fair sexual game in Houellebecq's work. Surprisingly few critics have taken this on, perhaps for fear of appearing to be, in Sara Ahmed's terms, a 'feminist killjoy' who must 'kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism?' (65). I will, however, continue to point up these 'moments' in Houellebecq's work.

<sup>10</sup> See also Christophe Guilluy's *Fractures françaises* (2013) for a more moderate discussion of how migratory fluxes might lead to some form of cultural restructuring in France.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Map and the Territory* on France as a theme park.

<sup>12</sup> He won this prize in October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Along with 'Europhobe' and 'Youtubeurs', the word *déclinisme* has recently entered the Larousse dictionary, thereby enshrining its official standing in contemporary French culture. See for example, Donald Morrison and Antoine Compagnon, *Que reste-t-il de la culture française?, suivi du Le souci de la grandeur* (Paris, Editions Denoel, 2008); Nicolas Baverez, *La France qui tombe* (Paris: Perrin, 2004); Alain Chaffel, "La thèse du déclin français n'est pas nouvelle", *Le Monde*, 20 février 2010; Robert Frank's *The Fear of Decline: France from 1914 to 2014*. This *décliniste* discourse is not confined to the Right. Pascal Bruckner and Gilles Kepel, both of whom can be regarded as representing the left, have published similarly

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pessimistic accounts of France and Frenchness. See also, Michel Onfary's *Decadence: The Life and Death of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*.

<sup>14</sup> See James Shields (2007).

<sup>15</sup> [www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/02/scare-tactics-michel-houellebecq-on-his-new-book](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/02/scare-tactics-michel-houellebecq-on-his-new-book)

<sup>16</sup> See Betty in this issue on the role of religion in Houellebecq.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Liquidating the Sixties' in Sweeney (2013).

<sup>18</sup> See Bat Ye'or 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in José Pedro Zuquete, 2008. "The European Extreme Right and Islam: New Prejudices?" *Journal of Political Ideologies*. 13 (3): 321–344, p. 338. It is significant, also, that Renaud Camus, the most prominent scaremonger around an Islamic Europe features as a speechwriter in the novel.

<sup>20</sup> [euronews.com/2017/02/09/what-do-we-know-about-marine-le-pens-policies](http://euronews.com/2017/02/09/what-do-we-know-about-marine-le-pens-policies)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/05/marine-le-pen-promises-liberation-from-the-eu-with-france-first-policies>

<sup>22</sup> George Diez, 'A Philosopher's Mission to Save the EU', *Spiegel Online*, [www.spiegel.de/international/europe/habermas-the-last-european-a-philosopher-s-mission-to-save-the-eu-](http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/habermas-the-last-european-a-philosopher-s-mission-to-save-the-eu-)

<sup>23</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/books/the-submission-of-michel-houellebecq](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/books/the-submission-of-michel-houellebecq)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/books/the-submission-of-michel-houellebecq>

<sup>25</sup> See the manifesto of the group DiEM25 at <https://diem25.org/manifesto-long>

<sup>26</sup> See also Shlomo Sands, 2016. *La fin de l'intellectuel français?: De Zola à Houellebecq*. Paris: La Découverte.

<sup>27</sup> <http://teleobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20151201.OBS0468/valeurs-actuelles-enquete-sur-une-extreme-droitisation>



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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n07/adam-shatz/colombey-les-deux-mosquees>

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