

# IT'S NOT 'THEM', IT'S 'US'

## *Submission*

By Michel Houellebecq

Translated by Lorin Stein

London: William Heinemann, 2015

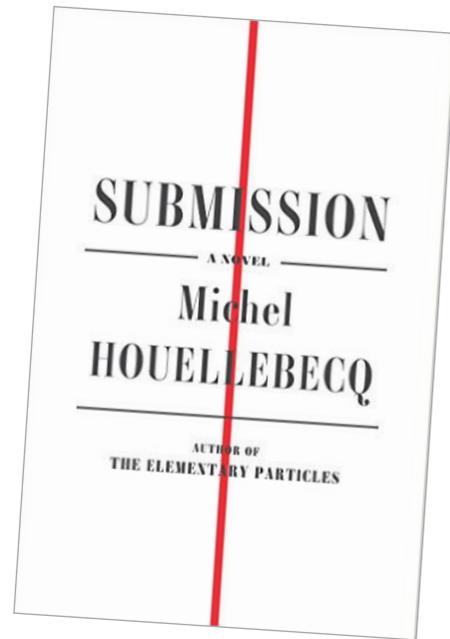
\$32.95, 251 pages

ISBN 978-1-78-515025-8

Reviewed by David Martin Jones

Michel Houellebecq's latest novel, *Submission*, in which a Muslim leader is elected President of France, was published on the same day jihadists attacked the Paris offices of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing twelve people. The attacks coincided with the latest issue of *Charlie* that portrayed Houellebecq on the front cover as a stoned visionary predicting France's Muslim future, the novel's pre-publicity having ensured that its main premise was well-known. Houellebecq was inextricably linked with the *Charlie* massacre, and the novel became a *cause célèbre*.

Because of his past criticism of religion in general and Islam in particular, it was widely anticipated that his latest novel attacked Islam, fuelling the flames of Islamophobia and fears of Eurabia whilst garnering literary support for Marine le Pen's far right National Front. The Socialist French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, stated in the weeks following the *Charlie* attacks that 'France is not Michel Houellebecq. It is not intolerance, hate and fear.' The left daily *Liberation* claimed the novel 'kept the seat warm for Marine Le Pen' while the former Trotskyite editor of *Mediapart* Edwy Plenel called on his fellow critics to silence the work, Soviet style. Meanwhile the right assumed that the *enfant terrible* of French literature had written another vitriolic polemic against progressive political enthusiasms like feminism,



gay marriage and 'oppressive multiculturalism' (p. 57) favoured by the politically-correct *soixante-huitard* generation that Houellebecq, born in 1958, particularly despises.

This hysterical reception of the novel also assumed that Houellebecq would develop themes articulated in earlier works like *Atomised* (1998) and *Platform* (2001) that explored the narcissism, alienation and economic failure of France and the growing threat Islam posed to French secularism or *laïcité* and pluralism. In a 2001 interview with *Lire* magazine to promote *Platform*—which ended with an Abu Sayyaf style attack on a Thai tourist resort—Houellebecq contended that 'to believe in God you had to be a cretin. . . . And the most stupid religion of all would have to be Islam'. These remarks led to his prosecution for racial and religious incitement under the human rights act, the French equivalent of



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section 18c. The courts exonerated him in October 2003, but the affair sealed Houellebecq's reputation as a divisive writer on subjects of acute political sensitivity.

Only latterly did some reviewers point out that the novel did not fit any obvious category of racial or religious incitement. Far from it. Unlike those who postured on the left and right of the political spectrum, Houellebecq had re-examined the positions he held in 2003 and reached very different conclusions about not only tradition, religion, the family and the role of the economy but also the flawed character of the Enlightenment enthusiasm for liberty, equality and secular pluralism. Throughout *Submission*, Houellebecq treats religion in general and Islam in particular as far from cretinous. Indeed, it is not immediately obvious what message the novel seeks to convey. Set in the near future, it traces the spectacular rise of the Muslim Brotherhood party under the charismatic leadership of Ben Abbas, a graduate of one of France's elite *grandes écoles*. Abbas becomes President of France, runs it along moderate Islamic lines, and restores stability and purpose to the French polity.

An improbable scenario, for sure—although the fact that the incumbent political class has presided over catastrophic decline renders an extreme political realignment far from implausible. Indeed, from the outset the novel is far more critical of Western democracy than of Islam. François, the protagonist-narrator of *Submission*, likens democracy to little more than a power sharing deal between two rival gangs. These gangs, or mainstream representative parties, have lost touch with the masses through the promotion of multiculturalism, immigration, gender and identity politics. They are now, as the Irish political scientist Peter Mair recently noted, 'ruling the void'.<sup>1</sup> Like Mair, Houellebecq observes that the failure of the European political class has created 'a gap, now a chasm, between the people and those who claimed to speak for them, the politicians and journalists, [that] would necessarily lead to something chaotic, violent and unpredictable' (p. 40). The political elites, 'who had lived and prospered under a given social system' could not 'imagine the point of view of those who feel it offers them nothing, and

who can contemplate its destruction without any particular dismay' (p. 44). Indeed, with no end in sight to rising unemployment, refugee flows and economic stagnation, the dream of a post Cold War pan European Union is seen by the extreme right in France, and across Europe, as a problem rather than a solution. The failings of Europe and representative democracy intimate that—as François observes on the eve of the 2022 election—the political system 'might suddenly explode'.

It is hard to dismiss this jeremiad about representative democracy as Islamophobic. Confused by the novel's pessimistic view of politics and secular progress most reviewers assumed it to be satire. Thus Karl Ove Knausgaard in *The New York Times* termed it 'Swiftian'<sup>2</sup> whilst others thought it a 'dystopia' in the vein of *1984* or *Brave New World*. Meanwhile Mark Lilla maintained that Houellebecq had created an entirely new genre, the 'dystopian conversion tale'.<sup>3</sup>

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These categorisations, however, all seem inadequate. In an interview with *The Paris Review* Houellebecq said he conceived the work as 'a political fiction' and took his inspiration from Conrad and Buchan rather than Orwell or Huxley.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Houellebecq endorses the view of political philosopher Richard Rorty, who contends that political fiction rather than the social sciences, or the 'philosophical treatise', represents 'the genre in which the West excelled'.<sup>5</sup> Rorty further maintained that political fiction constitutes the 'principle vehicle of moral change and progress',<sup>6</sup> and can clarify the options that confront us.<sup>7</sup> Houellebecq too recognises that political fiction can offer insights into our political condition. What possible political future, we may ask, does *Submission* envisage?

In the wake of the jihadist attacks on Paris last November (which killed some 130 people), the subsequent decision of the Hollande government to extend emergency powers indefinitely and even write them into the French constitution renders Houellebecq's attempt to clarify the moral and political options available even more pertinent now

than when the novel was first published in France over a year ago. These events, coupled with the seemingly unstoppable flows of refugees from the Middle East that have exposed the impotence of a Europe Sans Frontières, and the migrant attacks on female revellers in Cologne on New Year's Eve together with the mainstream media's attempt to suppress coverage of these and similar outrages in Sweden, give Houellebecq's insights an eerie prescience.

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### 'Smoked dry by dissipation' —Huysmans, *En route*

Houellebecq divides the novel into five chapters. The first four outline the life and times of François, a disillusioned but successful academic. He enjoys tenure at the Sorbonne, where he teaches French literature and considers 'literature the major art form of Western civilisation' (p. 19). At the same time, he is dismayed by a growing propensity to mediocrity as the *soixante-huitard* generation have, over time, imposed a politically-correct orthodoxy on the prestigious university. François is an authority on Karl Joris Huysmans, author of *À Rebours* (Against Nature), the seminal work of the late 19th century decadent and symbolist movement that influenced Oscar Wilde amongst others. Huysmans is an interesting choice as he converted to a monastic Catholicism after a mid-life crisis. When François is faced with an analogous crisis, he finds—unlike Huysmans—that Christianity is no longer an option. Modern rationalism has fatally compromised it.

Scholarship apart, François leads an atomised existence that reflects the meaninglessness of modern life in a secular consumerist society, a recurring theme in Houellebecq's work. Unmarried, he lives alone and never cooks: his diet consists of microwaved supermarket meals or takeaway

Japanese. He drinks and smokes heavily. He has lost touch with his parents who had little time for him anyway. His private life is a series of casual affairs with students that last on average an academic year. Sex is never about love; it is merely a physical urge, an itch that requires scratching. At one particularly depressed point, he observes that his dick is all he has.

The book then proceeds like a political thriller complete with angst-ridden anti-hero. Revolutionary political changes impact on François's desultory lifestyle as events surrounding the presidential elections in May 2022 unfold. Violence stalks the first round of voting. A media blackout, not dissimilar to the events in Cologne at New Year, ensues so that no-one knows the extent of the rioting. It is clear, however, that the 'indigenous' or 'nativist' resistance movement that supports the National Front anticipates an inevitable civil war. The vote for the mainstream Socialist and Conservative (UMP) parties collapses. The second round run-off a week later becomes a contest between two non-mainstream candidates: Marine le Pen of the National Front and Ben Abbes of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the election dissolves into chaos as voting stations across France are attacked. Polling is suspended, giving the centre right and socialists an opportunity to form a coalition with the Muslim Brotherhood to keep the National Front from power. Ben Abbes wins the postponed second round by a landslide, and France and François embark upon a new political journey.

### 'Après moi le déluge' but 'what if the deluge came before I died?'

Tracing the lineaments of this journey reveals Houellebecq's engagement with contemporary Islamic political thought and how it might blend creatively with French conservative, socialist and Catholic self-understandings to revive Europe's 'decomposing corpse'. This requires a Machiavellian political figure of the stature of Charles de Gaulle. Ben Abbes fits the bill. He is a pragmatic visionary unsympathetic to jihadism. The rogue Salafi jihadists view France as 'a land of disbelief' where the infidels deserve extermination. For the Muslim Brotherhood, however, France is ready for absorption into a moderate Muslim world or Dar

al-Islam (p. 117). In fact this is France's only hope. Nor does Abbes see his version of Euro-Islam as progressive, revolutionary and anti-capitalist like the influential Oxford University Muslim thinker, Tariq Ramadan. Instead, Abbes appeals to France's conservative, Catholic and imperial values by offering 'Islam as the best possible form of this new, unifying humanism' (p. 125). He also proclaims respect for the three religions of the Book, although Jews are encouraged to migrate to Israel.

In foreign policy, Abbes envisages France at the centre of a European superpower that rapidly brings Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Egypt into the Union, shifting Europe's centre of gravity to the south and its capital to Rome. Somewhat fancifully, Abbes sees himself as a new Augustus reviving the fortunes not only of France but also the Mediterranean world.

In domestic politics, Abbes introduces a radically conservative programme. Crime drops in the most troubled neighbourhoods, and unemployment plummets as women leave the workforce in droves to qualify for a large new family subsidy. Welfare spending is slashed. The government introduces polygamy alongside civil marriage. Abbes also promotes a 'distributivist' approach to capitalism. The government withdraws subsidies to big conglomerates in an attempt to restore a small family business model. This reform recognises that 'the transition to a salaried workforce had doomed the nuclear family and led to a complete atomisation of society' (p. 168).

The family emphasis reflects the Muslim Brotherhood's central focus on demographics and education, for they believe that 'whichever segment of the population has the highest birth rate and does the best job of transmitting its values wins. If you control the children you control the future' (p.165). Secondary and higher education are privatised, and Muslim schools and universities thrive. Elsewhere faith schools, charter schools and some secular universities struggle on. Cuts to education finance the family subsidy, thus restoring the family as the core social institution. Social mores change: almost overnight, women dress conservatively and sex and the city is a thing of the past.

The implications for a secular, atomised individual like François are profound. The new statutes of the Saudi-financed Islamic University

of Paris-Sorbonne bar him from teaching unless he converts to Islam. He accepts an offer of early retirement at full pension instead. Bereft of purpose, he pursues paid sex with escorts or downloads porn and even contemplates suicide after realising that Huysmans' path to austere Catholicism is no longer available. Escape from his chronic anomie appears in the shadowy shape of the new university president Robert Rediger. Rediger is a convert to Islam and craven collaborator with the new regime, having been well known for his pro-Palestinian stance and support for academic boycotts of Israel long before Abbes comes to power. He offers François a literature chair on the proviso that he embraces Islam. That Rediger lives in an exclusive neighbourhood with two submissive wives—in the unapologetically patriarchal tradition of Islam, the 15-year-old tends to the bedroom whilst the 40-year-old tends to the kitchen—and enjoys gourmet food and wine (despite the Islamic prohibition on alcohol) impresses François.

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#### **'If Islam is not political it is nothing': Conversion to the post-Western order**

The last chapter adopts a very different tone and style, abandoning the narrative for a politico-theological dialogue between Rediger and François. This renders the novel disjointed and may account for its many contradictory readings. Rediger assumes the role of spiritual confessor, persuading the initially sceptical François to convert to Islam. The chapter reveals how far Houellebecq has abandoned his former nihilism and embraced the quasi-mystical world of hermeticism and metaphysics.

Central to this worldview is the need to return to a traditional faith-based society. Christianity is not up to the task because Enlightenment rationalism—with its gods of individualism, secularism and the market—has compromised its spiritual authority.

Without a higher truth than science, European civilisation, at the height of its *fin de siècle* power, 'committed suicide'. The struggle to 'establish a new organic phase of civilisation could [therefore] no longer be waged in the name of Christianity' (p. 230) but rather its living sister faith, Islam.

The West ends not with a clash-of-civilisations style bang, but an exhausted whimper. 'The facts were plain': Europe 'had reached a point of such putrid decomposition it could no longer save itself anymore than fifth century Rome had done' (p. 230). The new Rome with its new Muslim Augustus would run on different and aristocratic lines. The majority would live in 'self respecting' poverty whilst a 'tiny minority of individuals so fantastically rich that they could throw away vast, insane sums' would assure 'the survival of luxury and the arts' (p.227).

Houellebecq's political vision is therefore profoundly illiberal. It takes its inspiration from anti-liberal and anti-egalitarian European thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th century like Friedrich Nietzsche. Less obvious is the pervasive influence of the obscure French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951).

The question of decline has been an enduring preoccupation of a certain species of Western intellectual thought that assumes those who can avert the approaching cataclysm must be given power.

Guénon considered the modern world a degeneration from the traditional world which it superseded. Built on false foundations, modernity was destined to crumble. Guénon, who converted to Sufi Islam in the 1930s, assumed that the great spiritual traditions shared an esoteric knowledge or gnosis. Western atheism and scientific positivism deformed this understanding. In *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1942), Guénon contended the West would reach a 'stopping point' and 'may even be plunged in its entirety into some cataclysm'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Houellebecq ends his novel by treating recent history in apocalyptic terms, where a syncretic form of Islam taken from Guénon via

Rediger offers the only hope of restoring a 'principle of a higher order'. François, in the manner of the born again, submits to Allah and accepts a 'second life with very little connection to the old one. I would have nothing to mourn' (p. 250).

## Conclusion

The apocalyptic and messianic conclusion to *Submission* follows an established European tradition of declinist literature that goes back at least to the late Roman Empire. In the 19th century Arthur Gobineau pointed to racial decline and in the 20th century Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, like Guénon, contemplated the inexorable civilisational decline of the West. Indeed the question of decline has been an enduring preoccupation of a certain species of Western intellectual thought that assumes those who can avert the approaching cataclysm must be given power. Fascist, or for Houellebecq 'nativist', Islamist and egalitarian doctrines share this gnostic and salvationist flavour.

The novel's commentary on our political condition therefore leads not to an Orwellian dystopia but a bizarre Gnostic third ageism. Ultimately, Houellebecq's pretentious metaphysics spoil what is an otherwise compelling and prescient insight into Europe's ideological and moral exhaustion.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy* (London: Verso 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, 'Michel Houellebecq's Submission', *The New York Times* (2 November 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Lilla, 'Slouching Toward Mecca', *The New York Review of Books* (2 April 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Sylvain Bourmeau, 'Scare Tactics: Michel Houellebecq Defends His Controversial New Novel', *The Paris Review* (2 January 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 68.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Introduction', in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xvii.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, 'The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty', as above, p. 173.
- <sup>8</sup> René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* [1942] (London: Indica, 2004), p. 2