

# Houellebecq's Occidentalism

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FROM ONE POINT OF VIEW, IT MIGHT SEEM PERVERSE TO READ THE FICTION OF MICHEL Houellebecq through a transnational lens, because his entire oeuvre is intensely preoccupied with recent French history and the condition of France.<sup>1</sup> More particularly, Houellebecq's novels are all devoted to describing one or another aspect of the supposed decadence of contemporary French society—a *dégringolade* which he traces, in *Les Particules élémentaires* [*Atomised*] (1998), to the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. In his obsession with enumerating the maladies of the French body politic and castigating the pusillanimity of its governing classes, Houellebecq can seem the most parochial of

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<sup>1</sup> By 'transnational' here, I mean to evoke the phenomenon of 'deterritorialisation' influentially described by Arjun Appadurai, understood as a condition in which 'money, commodities and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world' (Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference' 303). In Appadurai's analysis, transnational flows of labour, capital, money and, crucially, media have created a 'disjunction' within the concept of the nation-state: a tension between the pressure exerted on states to stay "open" by the forces of media, technology, and travel', and the dependence of state power on local national 'ethnoscapes' and 'ideoscapes' (304). As we will see, part of Houellebecq's response to this condition is to evoke the idea of Europe as a transnational historical category: a 'symbolic denominator' or 'sociocultural ensemble', as Julia Kristeva puts it, 'superior to the nation' (Kristeva 13-4). In this way, Houellebecq's social vision resembles one of the tendencies mapped out in Appadurai's essay, in which 'ideas of nationhood appear to be steadily increasing in scale and regularly crossing existing state boundaries' (Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference' 304). Although nominally non-nationalist, Houellebecq's focus on Europe implies a similar process of reimagining collective identity beyond the boundaries of the state.

writers. However, in spite of this preoccupation with a narrative of national decline, Houellebecq, like many another cultural pessimist, does not seek to explain the sorry state of contemporary France solely in terms of local historical processes. Particularly in his recent writing, Houellebecq has tended to view the destiny of the French state as almost entirely determined by forces beyond its borders. Indeed, his two most recent novels, *La Carte et le territoire* [*The Map and the Territory*] (2010) and *Soumission* [*Submission*] (2015), appear to reject the idea of the nation as a meaningful historical category, and to contemplate its dissolution or radical transformation with ironic detachment. In what follows, I offer a brief account of Houellebecq's representation of capitalist globalisation—one of the principal ways in which his work projects a trans- or post-national vision of contemporary life—before turning to the importance of the concepts of *l'Occident* and *l'Europe occidentale* in his sociological imagination. Notwithstanding his status as a diagnostician of French national decline, Houellebecq has always overtly indexed his sweeping analyses of social degeneration to the category of the West, rather than the French nation or the French people. This tendency to see the world in terms of civilisations, rather than countries, is very much present in his most recent novel *Soumission* (2015), where, however, it is given a more explicitly religious cast than in his previous work. What seems to attract Houellebecq to the concept of religion in *Soumission*, I suggest below, is not only the prospect of a remedy for late-modern anomie, but also the fact that religion is itself a transnational category, offering an alternative to the outmoded and ineffectual (as Houellebecq sees it) political vocabulary of the nation-state.

### 1. Deterritorialisation

Houellebecq's second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires*, contains his most theoretically elaborate account of contemporary French cultural decline. In essence, the novel suggests that the fetishisation of liberty as a supreme value in all areas of social and economic life has resulted in the disintegration and decay of traditional social structures, replacing them with the weak glue of market relations and the impersonal logic of mass consumption. Reprising an argument that also appears in *L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* [*Whatever*] (1994), *Les Particules élémentaires* propounds the thesis that the movements of sexual and moral emancipation that took place in France in the 1960s and 1970s, ostensibly aligned with the socially progressive left, in fact merely extended the logic of economic liberalism to the sphere of personal—especially sexual—relations and the family. If magazines like *Charlie Hebdo* 'were in principle situated in a political perspective of opposition to capitalism' ['se situaient en principe dans une perspective politique de contestation du capitalisme'], asserts the narrator in one sociological excursus, they 'accorded with the entertainment industry on the essential: destruction of Judeo-Christian moral values, defence of youth and of

individual liberty' ['s'accordaient avec l'industrie du divertissement sur l'essentiel: destruction des valeurs morales judéo-chrétiennes, apologie de la jeunesse et de la liberté individuelle'] (Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* 54-5). This transformation is attributed in part to the Americanisation of French culture following the Second World War, a period during which France succumbed to a culture of 'libidinal mass consumption of North American origin' ['consommation libidinale de masse d'origine nord-américaine'] (*Les Particules élémentaires* 54). The condition of French society, in other words, can be explained only in terms of larger global processes; whether or not these tendencies were originally exogenous, their influence on French society in the late twentieth century is irreversible.<sup>2</sup>

If novels like *Particules* and *Plateforme* (2001) were already overtly concerned with capitalism as a global system—in the latter novel, the sexual fantasies of wealthy Europeans are outsourced to prostitutes in the developing world—it is in *La Carte et le territoire* that Houellebecq thematises the implications of global capitalism for French national identity most explicitly. One of the novel's principal themes is the artificiality of national borders and national identities in an era of economic globalisation, characterised by transnational flows of both capital and labour. In a variety of ways, the novel suggests that the chronotope of late capitalism is incompatible with the assumptions of traditional cartography, upon which depend the concept of the nation-state. Airports, deterritorialised non-places *par excellence*, afford Houellebecq ample opportunity to develop this theme. When the novel's artist protagonist Jed Martin flies to Ireland to meet the novelist Michel Houellebecq, the author does not miss an opportunity to observe that 'The Sushi Warehouse at Roissy 2E offered an exceptional choice of Norwegian mineral waters' ['Le Sushi Warehouse de Roissy 2E proposait un choix exceptionnel d'eaux minérales norvégiennes'] (Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* 133). The motif of culinary globalisation recurs on the return leg, this time in the form of a chicken korma washed down with Irish whiskey at Shannon airport. Shannon itself is a heavily-coded location in the folklore of European economic globalisation: the Shannon Free Zone, established by the Irish government in 1959 as a tax haven for offshore businesses, has provided a prototype for more recent efforts to stimulate foreign investment in underdeveloped regions within the European Union. Waiting to board at this ground zero of European economic liberalism, Jed is struck by the disproportionate number of flights servicing Spain and Poland, an anomaly which is determined, he muses, by the phantom topography of global capitalism.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of globalisation in Houellebecq's work before *La Carte et le territoire*, see Laforest.

Thus, liberalism redrew the geography of the world according to the expectations of the clientele, whether they travelled to engage in tourism or earn their living. In place of the flat, isometric surface of the map of the world was substituted an abnormal topography where Shannon was closer to Katowice than Brussels, to Fuerteventura than Madrid.

[Ainsi, le libéralisme redessinait la géographie du monde en fonction des attentes de la clientèle, que celle-ci se déplace pour se livrer au tourisme ou pour gagner sa vie. A la surface plane, isométrique de la carte du monde se substituait une topographie anormale où Shannon était plus proche de Katowice que de Bruxelles, de Fuerteventura que de Madrid.] (*La Carte et le territoire* 152)

Jed prolongs this meditation by wondering whether the cities serviced by Ryanair are chosen because of their status as attractive tourist destinations, or whether they acquire this status by virtue of being selected as service hubs by the airline. The scene evidently engages with the connotations of the novel's title. By facilitating the free circulation of goods and people across borders, the global liberal economy has altered the imaginary structure of space. In the era of low-cost airlines and free trade zones, factors that might once have acted as territorial absolutes, like physical distance or the location of borders, have become relative, subject to the shifting imperatives of the global economy.

Whereas *Plateforme* had depicted European sex tourism in South East Asia, a central motif of *La Carte et le territoire* is the inversion of this relationship, with Western Europe now serving as a tourist destination for the emerging middle classes of other nations. And if in *Particules* the alien incursion had been North American consumerism, the origin of the invasion in *La Carte et le territoire* is repeatedly identified as the global East: China, Russia and India. In one of the novel's central satirical conceits, the Michelin corporation, a hallowed symbol of both French industrial success and French cultural identity, is depicted as profit-driven and deracinated, adrift on the currents of the global marketplace. 'The firm had recognised that the French, on the whole, no longer really had the means to afford a holiday in France' ['La firme avait pris conscience que les Français n'avaient, dans l'ensemble, plus tellement les moyens de se payer des vacances en France'] (*La Carte et le territoire* 68), and accordingly crafts its iconic guide to privilege the tastes of Chinese and Russian tourists (97). Ironically, however, these foreign consumers are found to have a preference for authentic French culture, with the result that traditional cuisines and practices are reinvented as a commodity. The company's own connection to its French roots is shown to be equally mythical in an era of multinational corporations. When one of the novel's principal characters, the Russian Michelin executive Olga Sheremoyova, is

reassigned to the national branch in her home country, one of her French colleagues complains bitterly that the company has become completely globalised: ‘the interests of Michelin France no longer carried much weight by comparison to Russia, not to mention China’ [‘les intérêts de Michelin France ne pesaient plus grand-chose par rapport à la Russie, sans même parler de la Chine’] (108). The globalised Michelin corporation itself no longer has any organic connection to its French roots, while the Michelin guide—which presents itself as an authoritative inventory of France’s culinary *patrimoine*—has become a marketing catalogue, reflecting not traditional local practices but the tastes of foreign consumers.

Moments like Jed’s visit to Shannon airport, and motifs like the globalisation of the Michelin corporation or the commodification of the French countryside, express a deterritorialised vision of late capitalist society, in which local and national realities count for little beside the abstract imperatives of the global marketplace. The novel is equally skeptical of primitivist attempts to revive or preserve the traditional regional ways of life that capitalist modernity has erased: a figure like the author and media personality Jean-Pierre Pernault, who has made a career out of romanticising ‘the idyllic regions of a preserved countryside’ [‘les régions idylliques d’une campagne préservée’], receives short shrift (*La Carte et le territoire* 234).<sup>3</sup> One of Jed Martin’s early artistic projects, which involves producing digitally-processed blow-ups of Michelin maps, appears to represent a more acceptable, or at least a less fraudulent, response to the non-isometric spaces of global capitalism. Jed is inspired to embark on this stage of his career by a Michelin road-map of La Creuse—the region inhabited by his grandmother—which he purchases at a highway service station. The moment is explicitly presented as an encounter with the ‘sublime’:

This map was sublime; stupefied, he began to tremble in front of the rack. Never had he contemplated so magnificent an object, one so rich in meaning and emotion, as this Michelin map at 1:150,000 of La Creuse, Haute-Vienne. The essence of modernity, of the scientific and technical understanding of the world, found itself mixed together with the essence of animal life. The design was complex and beautiful, of an absolute clarity, using only a restrained code of colours. But in each hamlet and village, represented according to their sizes, one sensed a palpitation, the call of dozens of human lives, dozens or hundreds of souls—some destined to damnation, others to eternal life.

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<sup>3</sup> This mediatization of folk culture happens in accordance with a process described by Appadurai, who links the advance of deterritorialisation to the rise of compensatory ethnic ‘mediascapes’ and ‘ideoscapes’ (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 37-8).

[Cette carte était sublime; bouleversé, il se mit à trembler devant le présentoir. Jamais il n'avait contemplé d'objet aussi magnifique, aussi riche d'émotion et de sens que cette carte Michelin au 1/150 000 de la Creuse, Haute-Vienne. L'essence de la modernité, de l'appréhension scientifique et technique du monde, s'y trouvait mêlée avec l'essence de la vie animale. Le dessin était complexe et beau, d'une clarté absolue, n'utilisant qu'un code restreint de couleurs. Mais dans chacun des hameaux, des villages, représentés suivant leur importance, on sentait la palpitation, l'appel, de dizaines de vies humaines, de dizaines ou de centaines d'âmes—les unes promises à la damnation, les autres à la vie éternelle.] (*La Carte et le territoire* 54)

The sense of this epiphany runs directly counter to the nostalgic preservationism represented by Pernault. Rather than seeking to revive or artificially protect the environment or culture of a region like La Creuse, Jed's attention is seized by an abstract representation of these supposedly primary territorial realities, as if he were embracing the diminishing importance of physical place in an era of global capitalism. The pathos of the image seems to inhere in the tension between 'l'essence de la modernité' and 'l'essence de la vie animale', but Jed does not attempt to resolve this tension, or to assert the rights of the latter—the human 'souls' of La Creuse—against the alienating effects of the former. 'The map' ['La carte'], proclaims a banner at one of Jed's Michelin-sponsored shows, 'is more interesting than the territory' ['est plus intéressante que le territoire'] (*La Carte et le territoire* 82). Moved more by the map than by the territory, Jed's gaze does not seek to resist the processes of deterritorialisation that the Michelin corporation itself represents: whatever 'emotion' and 'sens' he extracts from the Michelin map of La Creuse, they have little to do with a patriotic attachment to the soil. Later in the novel, Jed describes his ambition in his final artistic project—a series of montages in which images of vegetation seem to engulf images of industrial objects and tools—to simply 'take account of the world' '*rendre compte du monde*' (*La Carte et le territoire* 420). It is tempting to impute the same intention to *La Carte et le territoire*, which attempts, like Jed's Michelin map project, to chart the non-isometric topography of global capitalism, rather than revive the idea of the territory.

## 2. L'Occident

In its exuberant portrait of capitalist deterritorialisation, *La Carte et le territoire* takes a cynical view of primitivist attempts to revive or simulate the traditional ways of life that this process has erased. If, however, Houellebecq shows little interest in mourning the demise of local culture, his critique of contemporary France does implicitly rest on a different kind of nostalgia, based not on the idea of *French* national decline, but on a certain conception of the downward historical

trajectory of the West. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, for instance, Houellebecq invokes this transnational frame of reference in the first sentence of the prologue, which announces that '[t]his book is above all the story of a man, who lived most of his life in Western Europe, during the second half of the twentieth century' ['Ce livre est avant tout l'histoire d'un homme, qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du XXe siècle'] (*Les Particules élémentaires* 3). The many sociological theories articulated in the course of the novel, by the narrator as well as various characters, tend to adopt the same vocabulary. When, for example, the physicist Arnaud Desplechin presents a theory of cultural decline to his protégé Michel Djerzinski, one of the two half-brothers at the centre of the novel, he identifies 'the need for rational certainty' ['le besoin de certitude rationnelle'] as a characteristic, not of humanity in general, but of the 'West': 'To this need for rational certainty, the West will have sacrificed all: its religion, its happiness, its hopes, and ultimately its life' ['À ce besoin de certitude rationnelle, l'Occident aura tout sacrifié: sa religion, son bonheur, ses espoirs, et en définitive sa vie'] (270). The events depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires*, as the prologue solemnly proclaims, are to be understood not only as a satire of post-68 French society, but also as a chapter in the history of the West. At least at the level of explicit sociological exposition, the historical protagonist of Houellebecq's fall narrative is not France but Europe.

This narrative of occidental decline is a major theme of *Soumission* (2015). The novel's premise is the victory of an Islamist candidate, Mohammed Ben Abbas, at the 2022 French presidential election, in which he is supported by both the centre-left and centre-right parties in order to ensure the defeat of the Front national's Marine Le Pen. While the point of view of non-white characters is as resoundingly absent from *Soumission* as from all of Houellebecq's other novels, the depiction of Ben Abbas and his Fraternité musulmane conveys a much more nuanced vision of Islam than was apparent in his earlier work. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Desplechin describes Islam as 'by far the stupidest, most false and most obscurantist of all religions' ['de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et la plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions'] (268), and in *Plateforme* the religion features only as a convenient vehicle for a puritanical terrorist attack. In *Soumission*, however, Ben Abbas's moderate Islamism is clearly differentiated from the politics of jihad: as Alain Tanneur, a French secret service analyst who is conveniently well up on Ben Abbas and his movement, explains to François, 'He's a *moderate* muslim, that's the main point: he affirms it constantly, and it's the truth. You mustn't think of him as a Taliban or a terrorist, this would be a gross error' ['C'est un musulman *modéré*, voilà le point central: il l'affirme constamment, et c'est la vérité. Il ne faut pas se le représenter comme un Taliban ni comme un terroriste, ce serait une grossière erreur'] (*Soumission* 154). In an emollient address delivered before the run-off presidential ballot, Ben Abbas claims that his movement reflects a desire in French society for the 'return of the religious'

['retour du religieux'], and outlines a plan to make the French education system compatible, not only with Islamic instruction, but with all 'the great spiritual traditions—Muslim, Christian or Jewish' ['les grandes traditions spirituelles—musulmanes, chrétiennes ou juives'] (Houellebecq 2015: 109). As Tanneur notes, 'the real enemy of the Muslims ... is not Catholicism but secularism' ['le véritable ennemi des musulmans ... ce n'est pas le catholicisme: c'est le sécularisme'] (*Soumission* 156).

Ostensibly, at least, *Soumission* is not so much about Islam as it is about the concept of religion in general, and the condition of anomie that Houellebecq attributes to the rise of secular society. It is in this way that the political fantasy of an Islamic victory at the polls intersects with the travails of the novel's narrator-protagonist, François, a professor at the Université Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle and an expert on the life and work of Joris-Karl Huysmans. As Houellebecq's male characters proliferate, they come increasingly to resemble archetypes rather than individuals, each displaying a limited number of classic Houellebecqian traits in slightly different combinations: like other Houellebecq protagonists François has no close ties of family or friendship ('What good ... are friends?' ['A quoi bon ... des amis?']), displays a predilection for microwave meals and solitary drinking, and is given to droll, bemused, *je-m'en-foutiste* meditations on contemporary French society (*Soumission* 183). Also like Houellebecq's other male characters, François subscribes to a kind of philosophic sexual hedonism, eulogising sexual pleasure and young female bodies in a way that is both drearily pornographic and touchingly lyrical. The mechanical and anatomical details of François's sexual encounters with one of his students, Myriam, or a series of prostitutes, are described in avid but clinical detail.

The slow-motion existential crisis that François undergoes over the course of the narrative, along with his 'longue, très longue relation' with the Catholic convert Huysmans, bring an additional register to the novel's reflections on spirituality (*Soumission* 283). Huysmans's conversion to Catholicism is one of the novel's explicit themes, discussed in a succession of learned narratorial digressions about his life and work, but also deployed as an analogue for François's own spiritual crisis. On at least two occasions, François approaches the possibility of a religious epiphany akin to the one that transformed the life of his *sujet de thèse*. In order to avoid the civil unrest that threatens to break out in the capital, François decides to spend the period of the elections in the 'sud-ouest', a region he vaguely associates with 'le confit de canard', and ultimately elects to sojourn in the vicinity of Rocamadour, an important Catholic *lieu de culte* since the middle ages (126). Having been encouraged by Tanneur—who, in a typically *désinvolte* piece of Houellebecq plotting, happens to own a country-house in the same region—to visit Rocamadour before returning to Paris, François forms the habit of sitting daily in the Chapelle de Notre-Dame, where he is mysteriously attracted to *la*

*Vierge noire*, Rocamadour's famous medieval statue of the Virgin Mary. 'There was something there that was mysterious, sacred and royal' ['Il y avait là quelque chose de mystérieux, de sacerdotal et de royal'], evocative for François of the splendour of medieval Christianity (*Soumission* 170). As the days pass, however, François 'lost contact' ['perdais le contact'] with the *Vierge* and her aura of religious mystery: 'she receded in space and across the centuries while I slumped on my bench, shrunken, restrained' ['elle s'éloignait dans l'espace et dans les siècles tandis que je me tassais sur mon banc, ratatiné, restreint'] (170). Having held out the possibility that François might find meaning in the heritage of pre-Enlightenment Christendom, Houellebecq seems to conclude that he is too irredeemably modern to derive spiritual support from this vanished historical moment. Later in the novel, convinced that he is drifting apathetically towards suicide, François makes a second religious pilgrimage, this time to revisit the monastery which Huysmans himself had joined as an oblate: l'abbé de Ligugé. François believes that Huysmans had been incapable, like him, of orienting his life towards 'l'humanité', but had found spiritual solace in a 'radical' form of 'l'exotisme' ['exoticism']: 'la *divinité*' (208). This strategy, however, 'always left me perplexed' ['me laissait toujours perplexe'], and the visit to the monastery does not result in a religious epiphany. Implicitly, at least, this 'failure' ['échec'] is again due to a sense of historical belatedness: the noise of the passing TGVs and the 'little red eye' ['petit oeil rouge'] of the smoke detector remind François that 'things had deteriorated since Huysmans' ['les choses s'étaient ... détériorées depuis Huysmans'] (218). These failed attempts to follow in Huysmans's footsteps eliminate the most obvious vehicle of religious salvation, Catholicism, from the roster of possible solutions to François's spiritual crisis, leaving the way open for his conversion, at the end of the novel, to Islam.

François's own loneliness and ennui thus provide an empirical illustration of the novel's more abstract historical hypothesis concerning the crisis of secularism, which both Ben Abbes and his supporters cite as the justification for their new religious state. Ben Abbes's most articulate surrogate in the novel is Robert Rediger, president of the reformed, Islamicised Sorbonne, and author of a popular apologetic tract entitled *Dix questions sur l'Islam*. Rediger's defence of a moderate Islamic regime in France echoes the implicit lesson of François's unsuccessful attempts to reconnect with the spirit of the medieval Church: 'medieval Christianity had been a great civilisation' ['la chrétienté médiévale avait été une grande civilisation'], he concedes, but it had been corrupted by the Enlightenment value of 'rationalisme' (*Soumission* 276). With France's traditional form of religious worship compromised by centuries of concessions to modernity, Islam offers a more viable alternative to the 'the humanist atheism' ['l'humanisme athée'] that has overtaken 'European nations' ['les nations européennes'], reducing them to 'bodies without souls—zombies' ['corps sans âme—des zombies'] (254-5). Following a pattern that recurs in all of Houellebecq's novels,

which sometimes give the effect of a single sociological thesis enunciated round-robin fashion by a series of ostensibly distinct characters, Rediger's antiseccularism resonates with sentiments that Houellebecq has expressed elsewhere, resting, for example, upon the same basic analysis of liberal anomie that informs *Les Particules élémentaires*. In one of his more radical essays, Rediger is supposed to have argued that 'liberal individualism' ['l'individualisme libéral'] would eventually lead to the destruction of all 'intermediary structures' ['structures intermédiaires'] in the 'occidental civilisations' ['civilisations occidentales'], including countries, corporations, castes and, ultimately, the family, making the rise of Islam inevitable (271). For the futurist, post-human endgame imagined in *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Soumission* substitutes a recrudescence of religious belief, but both developments follow logically from the same set of conditions: the 'explosion of the family and the complete atomisation of society' ['explosion de la famille et l'atomisation complète de la société'], as another character puts it in the latter novel (203).

*Soumission* also resembles *Les Particules élémentaires* in its adoption of a historical frame of reference that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state. The institutions of the French Republic, and of liberal democratic politics in general, are depicted in *Soumission* as fatuous and irrelevant, superannuated relics of a failed modern experiment. It sometimes feels as if Houellebecq's contempt for the French political class is so vitriolic and so visceral that he can scarcely bring himself to pen a coherent satire, and not only are individual politicians like François Bayrou and François Hollande savagely derided in the novel, but the democratic system itself is also pilloried as a dysfunctional charade. 'Curiously' ['Curieusement'], François muses, adopting the Martian-anthropologist voice that is perhaps Houellebecq's most characteristic mode, 'occidental countries were extremely proud of this electoral system which was nothing more, however, than the sharing of power between two rival gangs' ['les pays occidentaux étaient extrêmement fiers de ce système électif qui n'était pourtant guère plus que le partage du pouvoir entre deux gangs rivaux'] (*Soumission* 50). Houellebecq's political vision purports to be in tune with more primeval historical forces than those represented by party politics: more real for him than the cosy pattern of 'democratic alternation' ['alternance démocratique'] is the prospect of a 'civil war' ['guerre civile'] between irreconcilable belief systems or hostile demographic groups (50). This is the future outlined for François by the right-wing intellectual Godefroy Lempereur, who possesses ties, François suspects, to the 'identitaire' underground, and François himself entertains a similar thought later in the novel, attributing the inevitability of 'guerre civile' in France and 'the other countries of Western Europe' ['les autres pays d'Europe occidentale'] to the 'widening gulf, grown into an abyss, between the population and those who spoke in their name, politicians and journalists' ['écart croissant, devenu abyssal, entre la population et ceux qui parlaient en son nom, politiciens et journalistes'] (69, 116). Houellebecq's

disdain for France's internal political institutions is the other, negative face of his preferred transnational frame of reference: his fondness for 'the West' as a fundamental category of historical explanation, one which liberates him from any need to engage seriously with national politics. As in *Les Particules élémentaires*, 'Europe' and 'the West' are the preferred currency of sociological analysis in *Soumission*: atheism is not a French problem but one which afflicts 'the Western world' ['le monde occidental'] or the 'civilisations occidentales'; Rediger senses the 'suicide', not, like Eric Zemmour, of France, but of 'l'Europe'; and François is not so much an *homme moyen sensuel* as an 'Occidental moyen': an 'average Westerner' (250, 256, 207).

By contrast with the bankrupt political institutions of the French Republic, religion in *Soumission* provides Houellebecq with a political model that precedes and transcends the category of the nation. Most obviously, Ben Abbes's political ambitions are explicitly positioned in the novel as a form of empire-building, which will use the unifying force of religious belief to redraw the petty international boundaries of postwar Europe. According to the ever-informative Tanneur, 'his great reference ... is the Roman empire—and the European project is nothing more for him than a means of realising this millennial ambition' ['sa grande référence ... c'est l'Empire romain—et la construction européenne n'est pour lui qu'un moyen de réaliser cette ambition millénaire'] (157). To achieve this end, Ben Abbes will move to have not only Turkey and Morocco but also Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt integrated into the European Union, with the ultimate aim of becoming 'the first elected president of Europe' ['le premier président élu de l'Europe']—a transnational political entity into which, supposedly, the European Union will inevitably evolve (158). Later in the novel, Rediger takes up the baton of this assessment, agreeing that Ben Abbes possesses many of the traits that distinguish 'the builders of empire' ['les bâtisseurs d'empire'] (289).

Like Houellebecq, Ben Abbes sees the political landscape through transnational glasses, scanning the distant peaks of empire while France's nearsighted political leaders remain fixated on the molehills of national politics. It is in this respect that Ben Abbes's religious empire offers itself as a worthy successor to medieval Christianity. Houellebecq's admiration for the premodern Christian world in *Soumission* is predicated not only on its freedom from the taint of Enlightenment 'rationalisme', but also on the fact that Christianity is a concept of the same ontological order as 'l'Occident': Christendom for Houellebecq is another way of thinking about the West. During his dinner with François between the two rounds of the presidential election, Tanneur refers explicitly to the incommensurability of national and religious categories: 'The French Revolution, the Republic, the Fatherland ... were able to give rise to something ... which lasted a little more than a century. Medieval Christianity, for its part, lasted more than a millennium' ['La Révolution française, la République, la patrie ... a pu donner lieu à quelque chose

... qui a duré un peu plus d'un siècle. La chrétienté médiévale, elle, a duré plus d'un millénaire'] (162). Later, François's fleeting sense of mystical connection with the *Vierge noire* seems to convey a similar insight: the 'something mysterious' ['quelque chose de mystérieux'] he senses has nothing to do with 'attachment to a fatherland, a territory' ['l'attachement à une patrie, à une terre']—nothing to do with Charles Péguy's patriotic religious poem *Eve* (1913), which he has just heard recited by a Polish actor (170). In this episode, medieval Christianity is presented as something that predates the modern concept of patriotism, and the tawdry, contingent trappings of the French state. Ben Abbes's Islamic empire promises to fill the void left by the modern attenuation of Christianity, not only by supplying spiritual values to the zombie nations of Europe, but also by offering a transnational alternative to the pygmy politics of the nation-state.

Although Houellebecq's novels bristle with often parochial references to French national life, he overtly locates his pessimistic world-view in the perspective, not of national decline, but of the decline of Western civilisation. To some extent, as we have seen in relation to the Rocamadour episode, this occidentalism is incompatible with the blood-and-soil narrative of nationalist ideology, represented by the image of the *patrie* in Péguy's poem. Technically, at least, Houellebecq's geopolitical ontology seems as unfriendly to the agenda of the French far right as it is to any other established political ideology (in *Soumission*, Rediger seems to speak with the authority of the author when he dismisses communism as the 'hard variant of humanism' ['variante *hard* de l'humanisme'], and liberal democracy as 'its soft variant' ['sa variante molle']) (254). Nonetheless, Houellebecq's historical conception of European identity shares considerable rhetorical common ground with nativist populism. This affinity is, indeed, illustrated in *Soumission* itself by the 'identitaire' pamphlet given to François by Godefroy Lempereur, which refers not to the 'peuple français' dear to the slogan-makers of the Front national, but to the 'autochthonous populations of Western Europe' ['populations autochtones d'Europe occidentale'] (55). Although the idea of European decline explored in Houellebecq's novels is overtly non-nationalist, or even anti-nationalist, the notion of 'Western Europe' or 'the West' as a homogeneous cultural identity, whether predicated on a historical adherence to Christianity or some other common heritage, involves a similar kind of myth-making—if only because it locates the only real or viable version of Europeanness in an inaccessible premodern past.<sup>4</sup> Houellebecq's elegiac attitude towards medieval Christianity seems to entail an essentially conservative conception of European identity, predicated on nostalgia for a moment before 'rationalisme' began to unpick the fabric of Western society. The idea of a *modern* Europe is a kind of oxymoron in this fictional universe, where the only futures imaginable are post-European ones—whether they take the form

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<sup>4</sup> On the idea of the West itself as a 'myth' or 'invention', intimately related to the cultural politics of imperialism, see, for example, Chakrabarty 1; Gogwilt 15.

of an evolutionary leap into the post-human, or the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. In novels like *Soumission* and *Les Particules élémentaires*, the category of the European West seems to lead Houellebecq into a messianic conception of history, in which the thought of the future requires the postulate of an empire-builder like Ben Abbas or a scientific genius like Michel Djerzinski.<sup>5</sup> As one might expect, perhaps, given the historical relationship between liberal nationalism and the ideology of progress, the version of transnationalism to which Houellebecq subscribes makes it difficult to imagine history as a project. The radical rupture imagined in *Soumission* implies, moreover, not only a decisive break with the present, but also a return to the transnational categories of the past.

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<sup>5</sup> For a vigorous defence of *Soumission* as an 'emancipatory' form of 'speculative political-philosophical argument', see Smith. This reading provides a nuanced account of the vexed relationship between liberal capitalism and male heterosexual desire in Houellebecq's work, which degenerates at times into crude misogyny, but also allows him to conceptualise 'submission as a way out of the liberal model of self-determining subject'. It seems to me, however, that interpretations of Houellebecq's critique of liberalism as 'emancipatory' need to address the reliance of that critique on a myth of shared Western identity, imagined in this novel as the lost totality of 'la chrétienté médiévale'. Although Houellebecq attempts to imagine a radical alternative to the liberal present, this alternative depends on some very familiar categories: it seems hard to separate Houellebecq's rejection of capitalism from his nostalgia for the West.

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