

## The Far Right in a Neo-Liberal Age: Pessimism, Sexism and Racism in Modern French Thought

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In January 2016, *Le Monde* ran a front-page story entitled, “Have the neo-reactionaries won the battle of ideas in France?”<sup>1</sup> The term *néoréacs* (all one word) has come to be used for polemicists like Alain Finkielkraut, Renaud Camus, and, by far the most successful, Éric Zemmour.<sup>2</sup> These increasingly influential writers push racist and sexist authoritarianism fueled by populist resentment, the same resentment that drives the Front national or, for that matter, the voters behind Donald Trump, UKIP, or Pauline Hanson. The *néoréacs*’ message is that the “fall,” “death,” or “suicide” of France is the inevitable result of the sapping of masculine authority and the influx of “Muslims”/“immigrants.” The very terms used preclude hope. Any attempt to fight this “suicide” can only make it worse. “France is dying” already, if not dead.<sup>3</sup>

The *néoréacs* are now immensely successful and their impact can scarcely be overstated. Their message has antecedents, but in its full-blown form it is new in recent history. With the exception of Daniel Lindenberg,<sup>4</sup> analysts have ignored the *néoréacs*, treated them as marginal, or conflated them with those who, since the end of the *trente glorieuses*—the “thirty glorious years” of postwar prosperity<sup>5</sup>—have argued that France is doomed to decline if it does not conform to Anglo neo-liberalism.<sup>6</sup> This strand of thought – which Michel Wieviorka has labelled *déclinisme*<sup>7</sup> – took its modern form with works like Alain Peyrefitte’s *Le mal Français*

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<sup>1</sup> Truong, “Les ‘néoréacs’ ont-ils gagné la bataille des idées en France?”

<sup>2</sup> The term was consecrated by a colloquium: Durand and Sindaco, *Le discours néo-réactionnaire*.

<sup>3</sup> Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, 527.

<sup>4</sup> Lindenberg, *Le rappel à l’ordre*.

<sup>5</sup> The expression originates from the title of Fourastié’s *Les trente glorieuses*.

<sup>6</sup> Hazareesingh, *How the French Think*, 250-51, treats Zemmour as marginal in two paragraphs; Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, does not mention Zemmour! Wieviorka, *Retour au sens*, only mentions Zemmour (150).

<sup>7</sup> Wieviorka, *Le printemps du politique*.

(1979, *The Trouble with France*).<sup>8</sup> Now French bookstore tables groan under the weight of such books. The *décliniste* message, however, is not of inevitable decline but of decline avoidable through a possible though unlikely embrace of neo-liberalism. And, more importantly, the *déclinistes* do not explicitly attribute the cause of decline to the influx of alien races and to the weakening of male authority, as did the counter-revolutionary right and as do the *néoréacs*.

That the *néoréacs* have developed mass audiences as neo-liberalism has established itself as the only political game in town is not accidental. Unlike the *déclinistes*, they see no hope in neo-liberalism; indeed, they decry it, expressing the resentments generated by the inequalities of neo-liberalism, but presenting the neo-liberal world, its alienation and its inequalities as inescapable. It is instructive to compare their work with that of Thomas Piketty, who has achieved popularity and renown analyzing these inequalities. Piketty thus offers a contrasting response to neo-liberalism as well as a framework for analyzing the *néoréacs*.

One mark of the success of the *néoréacs* is that their message underpins the work of a number of fiction writers, including two of France's best-selling novelists: Olivier Rolin, whose novels show men undone by women,<sup>9</sup> and Michel Houellebecq, who has been the top seller for a decade and who has won the Prix Goncourt, ultimate crown of French literature.<sup>10</sup> This paper analyzes the work of Zemmour, Houellebecq, and Piketty, taking them as tips of three major icebergs.

They are, obviously, a disparate trio. Zemmour is a cheap publicist in the lineage of Édouard Drumont, whose work is based on slurs and slanders that push the boundaries between fact and falsehood. Houellebecq is a novelist, whose work might be thought simply a representation of the realities of life in neo-liberal society. But Houellebecq is not a Balzac of the twenty-first century. Balzac's works highlighted the rapacity of capitalism with an implicit comparison to the security of estate society; Houellebecq's works close off alternatives to neo-liberal society by presenting today's world as both soul-destroying and inescapable, confirming that it is as Zemmour presents it. Piketty, by contrast, is an immensely solid economist explicitly arguing for a different society.

#### *Thomas Piketty: Analyst of "Capital's Comeback"*

Thomas Piketty's *Le capital au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* was a best-seller in France after its publication in August 2013 and, barely eight months later, a publishing sensation in the US (and to a lesser extent in the UK).<sup>11</sup> Harvard University Press engaged Arthur Goldhammer, the foremost translator of our era, to provide the English-language edition. It proved the greatest ever sales phenomenon of all Harvard's academic publications. By the end of 2014, it had sold 1.5 million copies worldwide.<sup>12</sup>

Piketty used data from across the western world to prove that growing inequality has characterized capitalism since the eighteenth century. This trend was masked by a significant but temporary break from the 1940s through the 1970s. From the 1980s, however, inequality resumed its apparently inexorable growth. On the eve of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis inequality was as high as in 1929 and, after a short pause, has begun to grow again.<sup>13</sup>

The pause, from the 1950s to the 1980s, was not only a period of decreasing inequality

<sup>8</sup> Peyrefitte, *Le mal français (The Trouble with France)*.

<sup>9</sup> Rolin, *Phénomène futur, Port-Soudan* (Prix Femina), *Tigre en papier* (the first of Rolin's novels translated: *Paper Tiger*; Prix France-Culture); *Le météorologue (The Meteorologist)*.

<sup>10</sup> Houellebecq won the Prix Goncourt for *La Carte et le territoire*.

<sup>11</sup> Piketty, *Le capital au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Capital in the Twenty-first Century*.

<sup>12</sup> Moutot, "Thomas Piketty, jackpot pour les maisons d'édition."

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Figure 1.1, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1910-2010," in Piketty, *Le capital au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 24.

but also one of increasing prosperity—the *trente glorieuses*. “Very soon, however,” as Piketty puts it, “capital began to reconstitute itself. The growth of capital’s share accelerated with the victories of Margaret Thatcher in England in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980, marking the beginning of a conservative revolution.”<sup>14</sup>

“Capital’s comeback”<sup>15</sup> led to “the privatization of wealth” or, in the more forceful French original, “la privatisation du patrimoine.”<sup>16</sup> *Patrimoine* suggests the whole of our common heritage as well as any individual inheritance.<sup>17</sup> Its transfer into private hands vastly increased “capital’s share of income” and thus inequality.<sup>18</sup> Thus western economies returned to the historic pattern whereby “capital’s share of income” increased constantly, a trend only partly masked by the growth of the pie and the reduction of taxes.

On its publication in English, *The Economist* called Piketty’s *Capital* an “authoritative guide.”<sup>19</sup> Piketty, wrote Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize winning economist, “offers what amounts to a unified field theory of inequality;” “conservatives are terrified,” he added, because the book would “reshape the political economic landscape on which all future policy battles will be waged.”<sup>20</sup> It is true that critics found it difficult to refute Piketty. The only attempt to find errors in Piketty’s data was quickly discredited.<sup>21</sup> But Krugman’s prediction that the book would “reshape” policy discussions proved wrong. Within a few months, the stir in the US had died down. Those who feared the book’s policy implications seem to have decided to let the book lapse rather than continue the fruitless quest to discredit it and thus keep it in the public eye. In France, where Piketty’s views were not so new in public discourse, the stir had never been so great.

It is no accident that the triumph of capital charted by Piketty coincided with the triumph of neo-liberalism—Thatcherism or economic rationalism—as the dominant thought pattern in the west. How else to explain that a period of reducing inequality, a period of high taxes, high wages, high growth, high public expenditure on education, health and welfare gave way so suddenly, in the 1980s, to a period of increasing inequality, a period of low taxes, low wages, low growth, low public expenditure on education, health and welfare, a period in which the share of the wealthy in income and capital grew to levels not seen since the Belle Époque/Gilded Age, while that of workers declined?

This increasing inequality—combined with the insecurity caused by precarious employment and the destruction of the safety net elaborated in the post-war period—is obviously behind the widespread resentment that has been so evident in recent months, in Brexit, Trump, and Hanson, not to mention the Front national in France, whose implantation will be tested in 2017.

Piketty’s analysis addresses the root causes of resentment, the inequality and insecurity resulting from three decades of neo-liberal policies. One might expect this analysis to be the basis of a response from progressive political forces, but in France, as throughout the western world, mainstream parties of the left remain resolutely neo-liberal, even as their supporters revolt against neo-liberalism. British Labour supporters elected Jeremy Corbyn as leader, but

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 170. The English translation is more vivid than the original: “le retour du capital,” Ibid., 270.

<sup>16</sup> Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, 183; Piketty, *Le Capital au XIXe siècle*, 289.

<sup>17</sup> “Ensemble des biens, droits et obligations, ... ensemble des éléments aliénables et transmissibles qui sont la propriété ... d’une famille, d’une entreprise ou d’une collectivité publique,” *Larousse Dictionnaire de français* v. 3.3 (Paris, 2016), Article ‘patrimoine’.

<sup>18</sup> Piketty, *Le Capital au XIXe siècle*, 289-95.

<sup>19</sup> Free Exchange, “All Men are Created Unequal: Revisiting an Old Argument About the Impact of Capitalism.”

<sup>20</sup> Krugman, “The Piketty Panic” and “Why We’re in a New Gilded Age.”

<sup>21</sup> Giles, “Thomas Piketty’s Exhaustive Inequality Data Turn Out to be Flawed”; R.A., “A Piketty Problem?”; Gongloff, “Economists Rip Apart FT’s Piketty Takedown”; Wolfers, “A New Critique of Piketty Has Its Own Shortcomings.”

the party's MPs remain in open revolt against him despite Brexit. American voters got enthusiastic about Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, but the Democratic Party fell back on Hillary Clinton as its candidate, a choice which led to the election of a man who articulated an attack on the liberal "swamp" in Washington, which since the 2008 crisis has stood in for neo-liberalism as the target of resentment.

In France, François Hollande abandoned the progressive stance he took to the election and sought to impose a version of neo-liberalism, which the majority of French voters are more than ever determined to turn back. As a result, the Socialist Party is engaged in a battle to the death with its own supporters, with the result that the presidential elections of April 23 and May 7, 2017 are looking like a wipeout for the left. Since Hollande's withdrawal, the choice for Socialists is between Emmanuel Macron and Manuel Valls, both committed to austerity and neo-liberalism. From outside the party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon aims to rally the disaffected to his campaign for the 2017 presidential campaign, basing his campaign on Sanders'. At the end of 2016, Mélenchon's polling was on a par with that of Macron and Valls. But Mélenchon has no chance of winning the Socialist nomination and the polling totals of the three were less than those of the two right-wing front runners, Marine Le Pen and François Fillon, who between them consistently poll more than half of voters, with Fillon enjoying a slight lead over Le Pen.<sup>22</sup>

With his surprise defeat of Juppé and Sarkozy, Fillon appears virtually certain to lead the right in the presidential elections of April 23 and May 7, 2017. Fillon, ironically, offers extreme neo-liberal austerity, promising to cut 500,000 jobs in the public sector, combined with a social stance conditioned by 1950s Catholicism.<sup>23</sup> Unless another voice emerges, opposition to neo-liberalism will remain dominated by Marine Le Pen's Front national, whose program and speeches present a racialized and sexualized version of the French model from the *trente glorieuses* (thus, for example, calling for early retirement for mothers of three or more children or increased child support for families of which at least one partner is "French"<sup>24</sup>). The *néoréacs* articulate the world view, resentment and xenophobia of the Front and its supporters. They are therefore important not only as the dominant strand of French thought today but also as the voice of the rage shattering the political landscape.

### *Éric Zemmour: The Voice of Rage*

Éric Zemmour has made a career of expressing white French resentment. Born to a family of *pièds noirs* who fled during the Algerian War of Independence, (1954–1962), Zemmour carries the resentments of *pièds noirs* and men. In a 2006 interview, he confessed, "My father was generally absent, I was raised by women, who taught me to be a man." And struggling as a journalist instead of as a politician, he resents "elites."<sup>25</sup> Now a successful columnist with radio and television shows, he had already published several best-sellers: *Le premier sexe* (2006, *The First Sex*), *Mélancolie française* (2010).<sup>26</sup>

Zemmour's third book, *Le Suicide français* (2014), sold at least 250,000 copies in its first month (Piketty's *Capital* took more than a year to sell that many). It was the second best-selling book of 2014: only the kiss and tell memoir of President Hollande's former partner Valérie Trierweiler outsold it.<sup>27</sup> The *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and subsequent terrorist acts gave

<sup>22</sup> See [Anon.] "Liste de sondages sur l'élection présidentielle française de 2017."

<sup>23</sup> Goar, "Le programme de François Fillon."

<sup>24</sup> See Front national, "Le Projet du Front National (2012)."

<sup>25</sup> Klein, "Le mâle être."

<sup>26</sup> *Le premier sexe, Mélancolie française.*

<sup>27</sup> Trierweiler, *Merci pour ce moment; Thank You for This Moment: A Story of Love, Power and Betrayal*; Béglé, "Zemmour bat tous les records de vente"; A[gence F[rance] P[resse], "Trierweiler, Zemmour et... Modiano: les cartons de l'année"; [Anon.] "Trierweiler et Zemmour mettent KO le marché du roman"; A. Dt. avec AF, "Le livre de Zemmour, toujours en tête des ventes avec celui de Trierweiler."

Zemmour even greater traction. In a perceptive piece in *The New York Review of Books*, Mark Lilla argued, “one cannot understand the French reaction to the present crisis without understanding the phenomenon of Éric Zemmour.”<sup>28</sup>

Written in a vivid, indeed violent prose, designed to foster resentment and hatred – Australians can find the same style in Andrew Bolt – *Le Suicide Français* is a series of short polemics inspired by historical events, presented in chronological order. The message of each is, “France is dying, France is dead. Our elites ... spit on her tomb and trample on her smoking corpse.”<sup>29</sup>

This message originated in the counter-revolutionary response to the fall of the monarchy, beginning with de Maistre’s *Considérations sur la France* (1797), which became the Bible of the counter-revolutionary right. It was consecrated in Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853–1855), which attributed the fall of the monarchy to the decline of a once-great race of nobles (for which Gobineau coined the term Aryan) through contact with inferior races.<sup>30</sup> In the late nineteenth century this strand of thought melded into notions of degeneration.<sup>31</sup>

Nazism discredited racial approaches and post-war prosperity made fear of decline irrelevant. Modern *déclinisme* emerged only in parallel with Anglo neo-liberalism, as prosperity stalled. Arguably the prototype of *déclinisme* is Alain Peyrefitte’s *Le mal français* (1979, *The Trouble with France*).<sup>32</sup> It is the first work to contain all the ingredients of subsequent *déclinisme*: it attacks centralization, immobilism, and excessive egalitarianism. The remedy would be a revolution in mentalities which looks like modern neo-liberalism. But, as Sudhir Hazareesingh points out, “although Peyrefitte claimed to believe” that this revolution was possible, “the sheer weight of [his] demonstration ... seemed to suggest otherwise.”<sup>33</sup> Modern *déclinisme* is characterized by this duality and thus its implicit message—its sub-text if you will—is similar to the explicit message of the *néoréacs*: “France is stuffed,” as the title of a best-selling 2007 book put it.<sup>34</sup> It is, however, wrong to conflate the *néoréacs*’ explicit hopelessness, racism, and sexism with the *décliniste*’s attack on France’s stagnation owing to its refusal to follow the Anglo lead.<sup>35</sup>

Zemmour’s underlying message is not a continuation of this *déclinisme* but a revived version of Gobineau’s message of racial decline, different only in that the cause is not the influx of yellow and black races, but the takeover of France by Muslims. Zemmour makes racism and sexism fundamental parts of the narrative of decline.<sup>36</sup>

For Zemmour as for Gobineau, the decline has already occurred. Women/feminists have already sapped men’s virility and authority; “supporters [*combattants*] of decolonization” (i.e. “elites”) have already opened the floodgates to Muslims/immigrants; and they have already taken over France.

<sup>28</sup> Lilla, “France: A Strange Defeat.”

<sup>29</sup> Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, 527.

<sup>30</sup> De Maistre, *Considérations sur la France par le Cte Jph de Maistre*; Gobineau, *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*.

<sup>31</sup> Nordau, *Dégénérescence*.

<sup>32</sup> Peyrefitte, *Le mal français*.

<sup>33</sup> Hazareesingh, *How the French Think*, 240.

<sup>34</sup> Laine, “*La France est foutue*.” Laine, however, makes explicit the *décliniste* idea that France could still be saved by a dose of neo-liberalism.

<sup>35</sup> Hazareesingh traces *déclinisme* back to the obscure Emil Cioran, who maintained philosophical pessimism almost alone after World War II (Hazareesingh, *How the French Think*, 239). Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, 210-15, begins with Crozier, *La société bloquée*.

<sup>36</sup> Marnham, “Meet the Intellectuals Leading France to the Right.”

*Target 1: Women/Feminists*

Reactionary sexual politics are the core of Zemmour's position. "The death of the father and of all authority" since May 1968 is the original sin behind the decline of France.<sup>37</sup> Feminism, Zemmour argues, is "an ideology of 'death,' because it forces women to renounce procreation."<sup>38</sup> Feminists and gay activists are behind "the famous 'gender theory',... a thinly disguised totalitarian ambition to transform us into androgynes, into neutrals, neither men nor women."<sup>39</sup> The fear of feminization is a constant theme for Zemmour. This could of course be attributed to his personal issues, but this fear is common to all the *néoréacs*. Ségolène Royal's modest 2002 reform granting men two weeks paid paternity leave meant, for Zemmour, that "man had become a mother, like the others." Modern men, he added, "wait, misty-eyed, for the hero ... who will make them into women."<sup>40</sup> "Workers were enjoined to become housewives; fathers were enjoined to become mothers; men were enjoined to love like women." "Egalitarianism had spread its venom.... Because women had not succeeded in becoming men like the others, men had to become women like the others."<sup>41</sup> Zemmour makes explicit the hatred of women and the male castration fear so fundamental to the reactionary right. Gays are an optional extra target; women are the root cause of the ill.

This complaint is not new. Rousseau made the same point: "this feebler sex, unable to bear our [masculine] manner of life, which is too difficult for it, forces us to take its manner of life, too soft for us; and, not wishing to suffer separation, unable to make themselves into men, women make us into women."<sup>42</sup> The *philosophes* notably targeted Marie-Antoinette for the king's failure to be an enlightened leader.<sup>43</sup> The counter-revolutionary thinkers, beginning with de Maistre, in their turn blamed the Revolution on noblewomen's independent living.<sup>44</sup> The *néoréacs* have revived this fear and made it the basis of their critique.

*Target 2: "Supporters of decolonization"*

Once women weakened men—or "authority in the home"—the result was lack of authority in the nation. The devirilized elites then opened the floodgates to the Muslim hordes. Those shadowy elites are "supporters [*combattants*] of decolonization," a catch-all term for everyone from anti-racists to opponents of Vichy.<sup>45</sup> "Soon," Zemmour tells us:

armies of Lilliputians—feminists, gay activists, and supporters of decolonization—will pull down the statue [of the white male] to dance on its ruins, without being capable of building another, just for the nihilistic pleasure of watching the reflection of the flames, from which ... the last [white males] will light their last cigars.<sup>46</sup>

"Supporters of decolonization" includes not only progressives and intellectuals, but also the entire mainstream political establishment, from the left through the center and center

<sup>37</sup> Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, 13, 527. Zemmour had already denounced feminists in *Le Premier Sexe*; the title was an obvious riposte to Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

<sup>38</sup> Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, 353.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 188, 190.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>42</sup> Rousseau, "Lettre à d'Alembert" (1768). Compare: Fermon, *Domesticating Passions*; Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*.

<sup>43</sup> Compare: Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*; Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs*.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as Margaret Darrow demonstrated ("French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850"), noblewomen themselves repented and embraced bourgeois domesticity.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 21, 26-7, 135.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

right. Even de Gaulle is classed with the “supporters of decolonization:” he “gave up” Algeria and, as a result, France lost “imperial grandeur and geostrategic depth, ... never suspecting that oil and gas [in Algeria], discovered by French engineers, ... could have ensured for France a royal destiny.”<sup>47</sup>

The elite supported decolonization, the loss of Empire, the loss of control over the subalterns, and the loss of the authority once exemplified by Vichy. Vichy was for Zemmour the last regime to offer “authority.” Its rehabilitation is thus integral to his project and so he reserves his biggest thunderbolts for those who discredited Vichy by showing that it played a role in the Holocaust: Robert Paxton, Serge Klarsfeld, and Jacques Chirac (for apologizing). Vichy, Zemmour argues, should be applauded for its role in “the rescue” of French Jews.<sup>48</sup>

### *Target 3: “Immigrants”/“Muslims”*

Race, to be sure, remains a fundamental factor. The beneficiaries of the destruction of authority caused by women, the ones taking not only your jobs but also your country, are “immigrants”/“Muslims.” Zemmour uses the two terms interchangeably for anyone of North African ethnic origin, whether born in France or not.

Although Zemmour is Jewish, his method is eerily reminiscent of Édouard Drumont’s in *La France juive*, the greatest anti-Semitic tract of the nineteenth century,<sup>49</sup> except that for Zemmour the enemy within is not the Jew but the Muslim. Using sleight of hand, he slips from targeting those who “devirilized” France to attacking those who “lost” French colonies and allowed Muslims to take over France.

To understand his method, let us consider a chapter called “Woman is the Future of Man.” It begins by denouncing the 1975 legalization of abortion, but then slips from abortion to immigration: “The traditional French family must give way in the name of ‘progress’ under individualist pressure; at the same time ... the traditional North African family—the most archaic, the most patriarchal—is invited to replace it.”<sup>50</sup>

While *Le Suicide français* rages against Muslims, it proposes no solutions. But in late 2014, Zemmour was interviewed on Italian radio. Asked, “So what would you suggest doing? Deport five million French Muslims?,” he replied, “I know, it’s unrealistic, but History is surprising.”<sup>51</sup> More recently, Zemmour came out in support of the notion of the Grand Remplacement (Great Replacement), a lunar right—or is the term now “alt right?”—conspiracy theory about a plot to effect “the progressive replacement, over a few decades, of the historic population of our country by immigrants, the vast majority of them

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 13, 21, 26-7, 135.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 87-90, 379-82.

<sup>49</sup> Drumont, *La France juive*. This first edition (1886) sold 62,000 copies and led to a commercial edition, *La France juive: Édition populaire* (1888), the first of at least 200 editions.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 136-42.

<sup>51</sup> Melençon, “Zemmour se lâche en Italie: déporter cinq millions de musulmans? Ça peut se voir!” Compare : Plenel, “L’idéologie meurtrière promue par Zemmour.”

non-European.”<sup>52</sup> Zemmour concluded that the Grand Remplacement is “a reality underway that they can’t stop and don’t want to stop.”<sup>53</sup>

So: feminists and gay activists destroyed authority in the home, supporters of decolonization destroyed authority in the nation, and thus enabled immigrants/Muslims to take over France.

Zemmour avoids such clarity, which might make it possible to respond rationally. Murkiness enables him to enclose the reader in resentment and impotence. He makes every page an incendiary bomb of resentment by constant sleights of hand, moving freely from sexual politics to racial politics, from denouncing women and gays to raging against immigrants and Muslims, from targeting those who “devirilized” France to attacking those who “lost” French colonies.

*Michel Houellebecq: The Voice of Despair*

The novels of Michel Houellebecq (1956- ), France’s best-selling author, present a world which corresponds to Zemmour’s message, a world in which men are irredeemably alienated by women’s insubordination and in which the takeover of France by Muslims is already underway.

Houellebecq’s first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*<sup>54</sup> (literally “broadening of the domain of struggle,” English title *Whatever*)<sup>55</sup> announced the themes that would make him famous or infamous: on the one hand, a preoccupation with sex, especially oral sex, presented as the only available response to the commodification of human relationships, but a response that ultimately reinforces that commodification; on the other hand, a preoccupation with alienation, the fate of humanity under neo-liberalism, but a necessary fate, for any effort to address the causes of alienation will only intensify it.

*Extension* was moderate compared to Houellebecq’s largely autobiographical second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998, *Atomised* or *The Elementary Particles*). It aroused a storm of controversy on its publication, not least for its ideological stance, attacking both neo-liberalism and its opponents. “The ideology of continual change,” by which he means neo-liberalism, reduces “the life of a man ... entirely to his individual existence ... past and future generations no longer have any importance for him.”<sup>56</sup> In the world created by neo-liberalism, love is impossible because everything has been commoditized: “In the midst of the suicide of the west,” concludes the narrator, “it was clear that they [the lovers] had no hope.”<sup>57</sup>

Alongside this implicit and explicit message, the novel ridicules efforts to change the society it depicts so corrosively. It contains a strange sub-plot which highlights the impossibility of political or indeed human solutions: the narrator’s brother works out a method to clone human beings, aiming at the progressive replacement of humanity with sexless clones, thus removing all causes of conflict by removing difference between men and women, a project straight from conservative nightmares. Support naturally comes from the usual suspects: environmentalists, feminists, and philosophers, invoking New Age and Gaia. UNESCO finally organizes implementation. By the late twenty-first century, “there subsist a few humans of the

<sup>52</sup> [Anon.] “Qu’est-ce que le Grand Remplacement?” Fabrice Madouas, “Immigration: le tabou du ‘grand remplacement’.” The notion was first mooted by Camus in *Abécédaire de l’In-nocence*, a work which launched Camus as a far-right candidate for president in 2012 (he supported Le Pen when he could not garner sufficient signatures to stand himself). He elaborated the notion in *Le grand remplacement*.

<sup>53</sup> “Les insolences d’Éric Zemmour: Le Grand Remplacement, fantasme ou réalité;” [Anon.] “Zemmour évoque ‘le grand remplacement’ des Français par ‘les arabo-musulmans’”; [Anon.] “Le ‘Grand Remplacement’? Un ‘projet’ soupçonne Éric Zemmour.”

<sup>54</sup> Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte; Whatever: A Novel*.

<sup>55</sup> Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires: Roman; Atomised; The Elementary Particles*.

<sup>56</sup> Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires*, 169.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 237.

old race,” but their “extinction now seems inevitable.”<sup>58</sup>

If left-wing politics are harmful, right-wing politics are at best irrelevant. “I could have joined the Front national,” reflects the protagonist Bruno, who partakes easily of casual racism, “but what’s the use of eating sauerkraut with a bunch of cretins [*cons*]? In any case right-wing women don’t exist and they fuck parachutists.” Thus the novel, while condemning attempts at change, constantly slips back—like Zemmour—to blaming women. Bruno notes morosely that women “generally preferred blacks, and in any case demanded vital statistics he was far from attaining [anxiety about a small penis is another recurrent theme].”<sup>59</sup>

For Bruno, “it was all the fault of Caroline Yessayan’s mini-skirt,” which stands in for May ‘68 and for abortion rights. These “contributed to the establishment of a general depressive, indeed masochistic ambiance.”<sup>60</sup> Meeting his mother on her deathbed, Bruno’s first words are, “you’re just an old whore,” “you deserve to die.”<sup>61</sup> This theme recurs in Houellebecq’s work: the narrator of his 2015 novel *Soumission*, noting an Arab with two child-brides, reflects, “at least he had the compensation of two gracious and charming wives.... My father had ... [*sic*] my mother, that neurotic whore.”<sup>62</sup>

*Les Particules*—unusually for a Houellebecq novel—presents one woman positively. Indeed, she is held up as a model of how women should behave. In a spa at a nudist colony, the narrator notices a couple having sex. He watches. Orgasm. The man leaves, the woman stays. Bruno approaches her and they have sex. Afterward, a relationship develops, dominated by orgies and group sex. Christiane (for that is her name) almost saves Bruno by accepting him sexually. And she has the right attitude. When Bruno—a schoolteacher—tells her of his attempt to seduce one of his students by masturbating in front of her, Christiane replies, “one needs a bit of generosity ... I think I would have accepted to give you pleasure.”<sup>63</sup> Ironically, Christiane is too busy having sex with Bruno to care for her twelve-year old daughter; Bruno finds this a good thing in Christiane, though he blames his mother for failing to care for him and behaving exactly as he expects Christiane to behave.

*Les particules élémentaires* was a runaway success and was widely expected to win the Prix Goncourt. It missed that honor, however, perhaps owing to controversy about Houellebecq’s increasingly strident political views.<sup>64</sup> His next two novels, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, while continuing to present similar themes, were less controversial and less successful.<sup>65</sup> His fifth novel, *La Carte et le Territoire*, finally won Houellebecq the coveted Prix Goncourt.<sup>66</sup>

Houellebecq’s sixth novel, *Soumission*, was published on Wednesday, January 7, 2015. That morning, the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* ran on its cover a caricature of Houellebecq, wearing a wizard’s hat and looking grungier than ever. The caption ran, “Wizard Houellebecq’s predictions: In 2015, I’ll lose my teeth. In 2022, I’ll observe Ramadan.” At 11:30 that same morning, two brothers entered the *Charlie Hebdo* building and killed eleven people, eight of them contributors to the magazine. The coincidence of this terrorist act with the publication of *Soumission* gave the novel extraordinary publicity. It leapt to the top of the bestseller lists in France, selling half a million copies in its first month, and soon topping the lists in Italy and

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 101, 196, 256.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70. Compare: Bowd, “Michel Houellebecq and The Pursuit of Happiness”; Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires*, 256.

<sup>62</sup> Houellebecq, *Soumission*, 227.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-39, 200.

<sup>64</sup> Revue *Perpendiculaire* [author]. “Houellebecq et l’ère du flou”; Noguez, “La Rage de ne pas lire.”

<sup>65</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*; *La possibilité d’une île*.

<sup>66</sup> Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*.

Germany, the first book ever to do so in three European countries at once.<sup>67</sup>

The title *Soumission* refers both to the protagonist's and the nation's submission to Islam. The protagonist is a depressive and emotionless literature professor, a typical Houellebecq male except that he is successful professionally: he is a professor at the University of Paris and an eminent authority on—fittingly—the decadent novelist J-K Huysmans.<sup>68</sup> *Soumission* is set in 2022, when presidential elections are due. By a plausible if improbable scenario, a Muslim is elected president and cleans up France. In this new world, “the riff-raff had entirely disappeared”; so had women's skirts, dresses and tight pants, replaced by loose pants and shoulder-to-knee shirts. François' Jewish girlfriend and her family have already emigrated to Israel and “they're not the only ones to leave.” A friend in the know explains to François that the new president “hopes” all Jews will now do the same.<sup>69</sup>

Neither this soft Holocaust nor the forced retirement of women and non-Muslim professors' troubles François. He sees this as “a new chance, the chance of a second life.” He is happy to submit, renouncing “all professional and intellectual responsibility easily, indeed with relief.” “Fuck autonomy [*English in original*],” he says. Instead, he can devote himself to pleasure. He is especially pleased that polygamy has been introduced and that female students—“pretty, veiled, timid”—now exist only as potential wives for male professors: “Each of these girls [*filles*], no matter how pretty, would be happy and proud to be chosen by me.” The promise of three adolescent wives convinces François. “I would have nothing to regret,” he concludes.<sup>70</sup>

The underlying premise of *Soumission* brings us back to Zemmour and the Grand Remplacement. In a clever and readable manner, *Soumission* presents a scenario where the French are overrun in their own country. The scenario dovetails with Zemmour's and the two reinforce each other. Houellebecq's *œuvre* contains the same key elements as Zemmour's: hatred of women, hatred of elites, hatred of Muslims, and the closing off of all alternatives to the society that generates these hatreds. Houellebecq's fiction reinforces the *néoréac* message.

### Conclusion

The French *néoréacs* share with their Anglo counterparts the same hatreds and the same targets. Women (often along with homosexuals), or at least feminism and abortion, are usually the objects of more or less veiled scorn (I need hardly refer to Donald Trump in this regard). Elites—intellectuals and activists rather than the beneficiaries of the new inequality—are the objects of unveiled scorn. And Muslims/immigrants/Mexicans/Polish plumbers (and still, on occasion, blacks and Jews) are demonized.

The French *néoréacs* also share with their Anglo counterparts the same hopelessness and resentment. Whether one blames women/feminists, shadowy elites, or uppity subalterns of various shades, there is no practicable way to eliminate them. Zemmour may hint at deportation of Muslims, but women?

What is not clear in the Anglo right is the chain of causation we find in the *néoréacs*. While there is plenty of misogyny and racism in the Anglo world, the French are more explicit in a world view that blames women as well as Muslims for the ills of the world and that closes

<sup>67</sup> A[gence F[rance] P[resse], “Houellebecq, superstar des ventes en Europe.” Compare: Bellaigue's perceptive review, “*Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq: Review – 2022 in France.”

<sup>68</sup> Huysmans' *A rebours* figures in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the “poisonous book” which initiates Dorian into evil (see Hanson, “Style at the fin de siècle: Aestheticist, Decadent, Symbolist,” 154-55).

<sup>69</sup> Houellebecq, *Soumission*, 157, 177.

<sup>70</sup> Houellebecq, *Soumission*, 176-7, 181-82, 227, 299-300.

off all possibilities of positive action while simultaneously critiquing neo-liberalism. The French teach us about the thought process underpinning the right in all western countries.

As during the Third Republic, France is fulfilling its traditional role as the west's intellectual incubator of new modes of thought. France pioneered modern representative democracy in the First and Third Republics, but it also pioneered the mix of anti-Semitism and authoritarian nationalism which fed into fascism. Today France continues to pioneer new modes for the right as well as the left.

Piketty's analysis suggests, however, that the balance of power is different now from that which obtained in the middle of the twentieth century, when capital had suffered:

the shocks that buffeted the economy in the period 1914-1945—World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Great Depression, World War II, and the consequent advent of new regulatory and tax policies along with controls on capital [, which] reduced capital's share of income to historically low levels in the 1950s.<sup>71</sup>

Similar shocks may well be in store, as we face climate change and political destabilization, which are already giving us famine, refugee movements, and terrorism. But for the moment, at least, capital is dominant and, not coincidentally, so are the discourses and policies of neo-liberalism.

The result of this dominance is not only into donations to political parties of all persuasions, but also enormous media and opinion clout. Is that what prevents the mainstream left from offering an alternative vision susceptible of attracting some of those now attracted to the politics of resentment fostered by Zemmour and Houellebecq? While we have no way of knowing to what extent racism and sexism are integral to their appeal (are Trump voters necessarily racist and sexist?), we can be sure that the *néoréacs* will continue to channel resentment into racist and sexist channels rather than the political direction which Piketty represents.

Until there is a credible progressive alternative, giving hope by effectively addressing *précarité* and austerity through effective political action, the field will be left to the Front national. None of us can take refuge in thoughts that “it can't happen here”. It is happening here; it is happening everywhere.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

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