The Strange Trial of Michel Houellebecq

by Sophie Masson

If ever a court case exemplified the clash between modern realities and modern pieties in France, it is that of the writer Michel Houellebecq, whose *succes de scandale* novels have earned him immense notoriety, immense sales, and immense ire. Recently, he found himself at the center of an extraordinary court battle, which pitted *soixante-huitard*[1] politico-cultural orthodoxies, in alliance with Islamic organizations, against secularism and free speech.

Houellebecq (pronounced "Wellbeck") has been no stranger to controversy since the publication of his second novel, *Les particules élementaires (Atomized*) in 1998. Published in twenty-five countries, this pessimistic, often sickening, but mordantly clever novel was a direct, savage attack on *soixante-huitard* values and what they did to France and to its culture. It is also a pitiless exposé of the ways in which normal human interactions have been robotized and trivialized since then, displaying a deep and scary unease in French society. The main characters, two 40ish half-brothers, live in a world of peep-shows and sex clubs – a rebellion against political pieties that is their only validation. It is a highly disturbing portrayal of a society rotten to the core, slowly committing suicide. A similar portrait had already been drawn by politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen – reason enough for the 1968 orthodoxy which dominates the French literary establishment to hate the book. But Houellebecq is no Le Pen, defending the old ways and fighting for a return to tradition; in person and in his work, he truly represents that atomized state in which France's post-68 generations find themselves. Despite his fracas with Islam, he is no Salman Rushdie, either. He has occasionally, with characteristic unblushing swagger, compared himself to Albert Camus. But that is hardly a good comparison, for Camus, though amoral and existentialist, is much more grounded in the old values. Houellebecq can perhaps be best compared with novelist Martin Amis: at heart a deeply bruised moralist, a savage observer of humanity's ugliest side, despairing of finding real love in a world increasingly brutalized and trivialized. Theirs is a dark, dark vision. Strange, in a way, for it can be seen as utterly self-indulgent. They grew up at a time of unprecedented prosperity, nuclear-umbrella peace and individual freedom in the West, to see their societies only as corrupt. The world of their books is a jungle, where jackals rather than tigers or lions rule. They reject every political "solution" or interpretation, from whatever source. Fearless in their dissection of the times, they are nevertheless vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy: for are they not living off the very outrage their books create?

Born in 1958, Houellebecq is of the in-between generation that came to adulthood in the late seventies and early eighties, too young to have been an actor in the sixties' but, nevertheless, heir to the world created by the revolution in values. Born Michel Thomas in the French Indian Ocean island of La Reunion, he was abandoned by his parents at age six, when his mother met a Muslim, converted, and left the family. The boy's father handed him over to the care of *his* mother – whose maiden name, Houellebecq, the writer eventually adopted. The grandmother was a Stalinist whose influence shows through in the hardline materialistic atheism of Houellebecq's public persona. He trained as an agricultural scientist, but never worked in this field. In his thirties, he had several nervous breakdowns, and was hospitalized for depression. Currently, he lives with his second wife on an island in Bantry Bay, in western Ireland.

In 1994, his first novel, *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (published in English as *Whatever*) brought him some small success. But his life changed with the publication of *Atomized*, which launched him on the

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French literary scene and in the popular media as an outrageous denouncer of every *soixante-huitard* piety, who blames the "generation of 68" for the declining quality of food and conversation in France, along with the decline in morals! At every turn he challenges the received wisdom that has been part of the fragile postwar French consensus, even voicing contempt for the sacrosanct General Charles de Gaulle and sympathy for Marshal Philippe Pétain, head of the Vichy government.

It was an interview in *Lire*, a literary quarterly, which got Michel Houellebecq into the deepest hot water yet – and which confirmed his status as anarchist troublemaker to some and free-speech hero to others. Houellebecq got hauled into court to face the very modern French "human-rights" charge of "incitement to religious and racial hatred" for his inflammatory comments on Islam, characteristically delivered with a brutal, ill-mannered, and rather incoherent directness.

The context of the outburst was this: in September 2001, *Lire* magazine published an interview with Houellebecq which had been conducted some months before. The interview was to mark the imminent publication of his new novel, *Plateforme* (*Platform*).

Set in Thailand, it is focused around the sex trade and Westerners' frenzied search for sexual intimacy with supposedly more 'liberated' people (Houellebecq's perhaps deliberate misreading of Thai culture and Asian realities add more fuel to the fire, of course). Especially for an Australian reader, the book is eerily prescient in its final scene. The main female character, Valerie, dies in an Islamist terrorist attack on a bar in a Thai tourist resort – an attack which kills 117 people, the majority of them foreign tourists. Indeed, Islamist terrorism, and Islamic hypocrisy (there are frenzied sex-seeking Arab tourists in the book, too) are the *leitmotif* in the novel, along with Houellebecq's familiar themes of Western alienation and robotization, his atheism and his depiction of sex, especially commercial sex, as a lifesaver for stressed, spiritually empty Westerners.

The interviewer, Didier Senecal, asked: '*Platform*, then, is set partly overseas (in Thailand) and looks both at sexual tourism and Islam. You really look for controversial subjects?"

"I don't look for them," replied the author, "I happen across them…at the intersection of those two things is something that struck me greatly.. I saw lots of Arab tourists in Bangkok… when one thinks of Islam, one thinks of the fate of women..but there are lots of men too who are terribly pissed off, in Arab countries…many of them have no faith and live in complete hypocrisy… when they come to Thailand they are even more frantic than Westerners in their search for pleasure…"

Later in the interview, he elaborated on his feelings about Islam. "It is more than contempt I have for Islam, it is hatred," he said. "…It was because of a negative revelation I had in the Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments…suddenly I experienced a complete rejection of all monotheisms… I told myself that to believe in one God, you had to be a cretin..really, I can't think of another word for it. And the most stupid religion of all would have to be Islam. When you read the Koran, it is a devastating experience! The Bible, at least, is very beautiful, because Jews have a real literary talent..which can excuse many things… I have a residual sympathy for Catholicism, because of its polytheistic aspect… and all its works of art, churches, paintings, sculptures, stained glass..Islam is a dangerous religion, since its very first appearance. Fortunately, it is doomed. First of all, because God doesn't exist, and even if one is a bloody idiot, one finishes up understanding that..In the long term, truth triumphs..On another part, Islam is undermined, under attack by capitalism. All one can wish for is that it(capitalism)will rapidly triumph. Materialism is a lesser evil. Its values are despicable, but less destructive, less cruel than those of Islam."

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It was these remarks, rather than the novel itself (which no-one had as yet read) which prompted the suit against him. Five plaintiffs banded together to present the case against him in the French courts, for religious and racial incitement: three French-based Muslim

organizations, including the Lyon and Paris mosques; an international Muslim organization, based in Saudi Arabia; and a very s*oixante-huitard* organization, the League for the Rights of Man. Damages in excess of 190, 000 euros were sought, as well as a condemnation of the writer. Houellebecq received no support from the French literary establishment, and even his publisher, Flammarion, deserted him. But individual French writers, of very different philosophical orientations – an atheist, an agnostic, and a Catholic among them – defended him. Typically opportunistic support came from Bruno Megret's *Mouvement National Republicain*, an offshoot from Le Pen's National Front. More honorably, Le Pen himself kept quiet – after all, Houellebecq, symbol of modern French decadence, is hardly a suitable pin-up boy for 'traditional France.'

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The case galvanized France. The media ran hot with opinions on the issues, a mix of today's unrest, unease, problems and dangers. All sorts of ungovernable forces suddenly expressed themselves. Traditional anti-clerical atheists saw it as a battle against the dark forces of religion; democracy's defenders as a battle for individual freedom and free speech; anti-Muslim activists as a vindication of their beliefs; people who distrust social engineering spoke-up publicly; mischief makers of all sorts banded together. But the establishment was more or less paralyzed; for the case was a clear example of what happens when pieties and realities clash. What was a poor *soixante-huitard* to do? Champion Houellebecq's free speech against wicked religion? Defend the poor Muslims, victims of "racism"? The verdict was eagerly awaited. Who would triumph? Would it be "secular, enlightened' France", or the France that's "Haven of the oppressed, leader of the Rights of Man"? Wait! Aren't they supposed to be one and the same?

The hearing of the case, on the 17th of September 2002, was tumultuous, with demonstrators for both sides shouting outside, and wild accusations flying inside. Dalil Boubakeur, of the Paris mosque, accused the writer of "seeking a fatwa[2], for publicity," and pointed out that "Words have a price. One can kill with a word." Houellebecq was more subdued at the hearing, but still defended himself vigorously, declaring that it was impossible to be "racist against Muslims," for they are not a race but a religious group, denying that he had intentionally caused harm to anyone, or that he despised Muslims, as people: it was "only" their religion that was stupid and hateful. In theory, the writer risked heavy penalties: a year's imprisonment, and a fine of 45,000 euros. In practice, however, the circus atmosphere hid a not-so-secret reality: this particular law had never been successfully prosecuted. It's all very well to have a silencing weapon but another thing to be able to wield it, as the plaintiffs found out. The courts and the government were well aware of the dangers inherent in a successful prosecution: with such a precedent, blasphemy laws would regain currency. Surely, the floodgates would open for that Old Enemy, the Catholic Church, to also bring suit.

The outcome was almost a foregone conclusion. Houellebecq was acquitted of all charges, the magistrate finding that his words had been "directed against the religion of Islam, not its adherents." Free speech against religion was one of the post-1789 freedoms granted, and though a writer could not act "with impunity" altogether, there was no racism in Houellebecq's words, more abstractly directed against Islam.

The plaintiffs could scarcely believe it, and appealed. A second finding, on October 22, upheld the original one. Secularist France had triumphed. The Muslim groups had learnt a difficult lesson: if you are petted and patronized by the "elite," you're not thereby guaranteed power. Alliance with the League of the Rights of Man and accusations of racism may seem to be smart moves, but it's not really, not when you're facing an array of entrenched interests, traditions, populist feelings, democratic anger, and general fed-up-ness. One feels sympathy for the anonymous writer in a Muslim publication whose "Open Letter to Michel Houellebecq," pleads with the novelist to understand that saying "I don't hate Muslims, but I hate their religion," is bewildering to

Muslims and non-Muslims alike. How can you hate the essence of a culture, and not hate the people who carry that culture in their hearts? A very valid point, difficult to answer honestly.

The court hearing made Houellebecq even more famous than before, of course. Though it highlighted his inconsistency of thought and belief – an inconsistency he cheerfully admits – the plaintiffs' unanswerable questions fell on deaf ears. They had to, really. The finding had managed to clumsily paper over the gulf between piety and reality in today's France, and any questioning of it could tear that delicate euphemism once and for all, and expose the dreadful, yawning abyss underneath. •

NOTES

1. A member of the generation that launched the "revolution" of 1968, spearheaded by university students, that brought about major social and political reforms in France. Literally, a "sixty-eighter."

2. A punitive sentence pronounced by an Islamic religious authority.