In the Trenches of the War between Literature and Sociology: Exploring the Scandalous Sociology of Modernity in the Novels of Michel Houellebecq

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The Scandal of Houellebecq: Why All the Fuss?

In his home country of France, and then later in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules Elémentaires* and *Plateforme* (respectively, his second and third novels, published respectively in 1998 and 2001) were the subject of important cultural and aesthetic debates. *Les Particules* particularly evoked an intense polarization of response from the French literary public. Some saw Houellebecq as a new Balzac, Camus, Celine, or Sartre, while others rejected the book as a repugnant exercise in racist and misogynistic literary politics. The book even provoked threatened lawsuits and other court action; a neo-hippie campground named in the book threatened Flammarion, the book’s publisher, with seizure and destruction of the first printing before they were satisfied by the publisher’s decision to alter the name of the site in the book that Houellebecq describes as a meeting place for sexual libertines (Devinat 1998). *Plateforme* was met by an equally divided reception. Some claimed that President Jacques Chirac found the book sufficiently insightful on some political and social questions (likely those having to do with the public’s perception of growing inattention to social problems stemming from immigration) that he urged his cabinet members to read it (Ajavon 2002). Others were disgusted by the novel’s purported misogyny or anti-Muslim animus.

Upon translation of the works into English, the American reaction was equally charged, if perhaps more skewed toward the negative. *Les Particules* was dismissed as a “deeply repugnant read…a bad, self-conscious pastiche of Camus, Foucault and Bret Easton Ellis” that achieved its success only due to controversy caused by “the book’s right-wing politics and willfully pornographic passages” (Kakutani 2000). Even critics who found Houellebecq “a gifted writer” nonetheless negatively characterized the work itself (in this case, *Plateforme*) as “an extraordinary blend of pornography, satire and diatribe, an often silly and offensive book whose diagnosis of the world’s ills is
challenging in the way that wrong-headed critiques often are” (Matthews 2003). Other critics read his books as “coherent on nothing…[and] full of contradictions,” both attacking the sexual liberalism of the 1960s and endlessly describing his characters engaging in just the kinds of sex acts that are made possible only by that liberalism (Nehring 2003).

At one level, we might explain the controversy surrounding Houellebecq’s work by simple reference to its salacious nature, as he writes frequently of sexual matters and relationships in a very frank way. But there are other salacious novels that attract less charged reactions. Perhaps then it is the fact that Houellebecq takes on so many big issues at once and thereby inevitably treats them insufficiently? But many other writers greeted with significantly less outrage can be judged guilty of this crime too. I want to suggest there is something deeper behind the scandalized reaction that has to do with the analytic effort of his work. Houellebecq’s novels arguably endeavor to do something more than merely shock; they attempt to say something about the nature of modernity. In brief, Houellebecq is scandalous to many of us for many of the same reasons that classical sociological attempts to understand modernity were scandalous to the dogma of their time, for, like those first sociological thinkers, Houellebecq reveals things about ourselves and our dilemma that contradict what we think we know and where we think we are going.

**Literature vs. Sociology: The Struggle for Hegemony**

Before launching into a reading of Houellebecq’s treatment of these just-mentioned things, let us try to better situate his work within a historical framework and a historical rivalry of sorts that are not often enough understood. If Arnold Hauser was correct in arguing that the novel emerged as "the leading literary genre of the eighteenth century because it [gave] the most comprehensive and profound expression to...the antithesis between individualism and society," it seems equally evident that the same
social problem remains central in considerations of the nature of the Western world in the twenty-first century (Hauser 1951:28). Even as theoretical language has changed to endeavor to accommodate a proposed distinction between modern, industrialized and postmodern, post-industrialized and information-based societies, the question of the relationship of the individual to the social and moral bonds that contain him/her remains important. Social de-differentiation and the proliferation of differing moral regimes have perhaps presented additional avenues for agency to the individual, but they have also inevitably taken away opportunities and possibilities tied to the cultural and moral regimes of the past, both the pre-industrial and the industrial. A recognition of the social embeddedness of agency in fact results in an *a priori* acknowledgement that any particular set of social arrangements, insofar as it aims toward social reproduction and the creation of a stable cultural and institutional base, must inevitably restrict some possible modes of action for social actors, however much it aims toward increasing the freedom of the individual to act as s/he pleases. In this sense, then, the dilemma for the contemporary individual comprises the limits on development of the human personality posed by both the traditionalism carried over from feudal society and the bourgeois revolutionary humanism that in large measure destroyed and replaced it. It is not merely the remnants of a reactionary *Gemeinschaft* that threaten to crush the individual in the coils of stifling communities and families; it is widely recognized that even many of the elements of *Gesellschaft* that usurped the place of those communal, familial ties have culminated in a separate but at least equally substantial assault on the human personality. Weberian analyses of bureaucratic alienation and critics of the mass media on both the political left and right have pointed to this latter fact for more than half a century now.

The novel as genre is not however the first literary effort to speak to specific social problems. Sociologists have long recognized a certain struggle with literature for the rights to speak to at least some of the same kinds of questions about the human
Wolf Lepenies (1988) has described the peculiar family connection and the concomitant family quarrels between the ancestors of sociology and men of letters that had been in existence long before the emergence of the discipline of sociology and that in fact shaped the tenor of this nascent way of thinking the social. If sociology comes to be recognized as a kind of 'third culture' between literature and the natural sciences, this is only after a lengthy historical intermingling of theoretical and methodological concerns among social scientists and novelists, and we must recognize the contingency and historicity of the distinction that only becomes 'real' as a result of a reifying of differences always empirically difficult to recognize and categorize.

In France, particularly, the category 'scientist-author,' exemplified in the mid-18th century by Buffon, lived on and was a site for the contestation of central intellectual disputes long after the first case was made for the necessity of separating the two functions. The emergence of the discipline of sociology in France is clearly implicated in this contest. De Bonald is easily overlooked in contemporary sociology, at least in part because the left-leaning discipline finds his conservative politics intolerable, but he exemplified the struggle between science and literature, and between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment, as modes of explanation of human action and nature. Lepenies also reminds us that the early (the *Cours de philosophie positive* of the 1830s) and late (the *Système de politique positive, ou Traité de sociologie instituant la religion de l’humanité* of the early 1850s) works of Auguste Comte represent the same struggle. His early commitment to a positivist science that Durkheim would inherit was significantly modified later, at least in part by the personal obsession he developed for Clotilde de Vaux, into a quasi-religious social theory that postulated the need for true apostles of Positivism to read poetry and literature (Lepenies 1988:41). The fact that the social sciences become the ground on which some of the harshest battles between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment intellectual *Weltanschauungen* are staged is of course radically at odds with accounts of the
history of sociology and its consequent contemporary status as a pure child of the Enlightenment (Lepenies 1988:7). Instead, here, sociology is at its birth and remains something of a meeting ground for literary and scientific discourses on the state of the human world.

Given this history, it seems obvious that much of the more recent attention to the dialogue between sociology and literature should also focus on questions of the relative place of rationality (the domain of science) and emotion (that of literature) in the analysis of the human condition. Some, notably Pierre Bourdieu, have attacked the pretensions of literary intellectuals to holistically make sense of the human world precisely by championing sociology's epistemological superiority over intellectual competitors. Bourdieu's long-term epistemological war with philosophy (e.g., Bourdieu 1988; 1991), carried out even in the work of some of his lieutenants such as Louis Pinto (1987; 1995) and Jean-Louis Fabiani (1988), is only the most visible part of this project. In explicit treatment of literary figures, Bourdieu has sought to demonstrate the inadequacies of literary treatments of modernity and of the attempts by writers to objectively make sense of social fields in which they are also players. Following Sartre (but whose efforts to understand the literary world he likewise rejects as insufficiently sophisticated), he spends significant time evaluating the literary effort of Gustave Flaubert to describe the social world which he inhabited. For Bourdieu, the greatness of that effort is precisely in that Flaubert more successfully approximates, in a literary genre, the sociological effort to objectivize positions than any other writer of his time. In other words, the success of Flaubert’s work is not literary, but sociological, and that success is in fact limited by the very literary genre in which the oeuvre is situated. It is true that Flaubert goes one step further than the other novelists in his generation in attempting to depict the social field in which they exist, as his characters discuss the works and characters of other writers (e.g., Balzac's Rastignac) and he thereby incorporates even his
competitors into his analysis of French society (Bourdieu 1995:101). Yet this success is necessarily limited by the work’s very genre, for, although such a work as *Sentimental Education* “can sometimes say more, even about the social realm than many writings with scientific pretensions… *it says it only in a mode such that it does not truly say it*” (Bourdieu 1995:32, emphasis added). The hermeneutic circle, Bourdieu argues, can only adequately be escaped via sociological objectivation, which “breaks the spell” of the literary presentation and gets at the truth of the social world. Like Bourdieu, others have still more recently noted the apparent competitor status of the novelist and the sociologist and they have likewise leapt to the defense of sociology, with Bourdieusian rebukes of novelists who, in their view, disparage sociological treatments of human life as lifeless and disembodied via literary portrayals of sociologists that are just as stereotypical and overgeneralized (Bjorklund 2001). Here, the criticism of the literary perspective on the social world extends to the writer’s efforts to include the purported scientist of society in his/her account of the world.

Instead of defending sociology against a perceived attack from novelists, I would like instead to contribute to the effort to look at precisely what the novelists are doing in the way of describing and analyzing modernity in order to evaluate how effectively they are or are not attending to this project. The novels of Houellebecq offer a particularly interesting ‘location’ for such an examination in the contemporary landscape. What, if anything, does Houellebecq allow us to see in the modern world differently from, if not necessarily better than, contemporary sociology?

**Houellebecq’s Position on Bourgeois Modernity: Flaubert II or Something New?**

We might begin by attempting to use some of the insights of the sociology of literature to locate Houellebecq within the intellectual world he inhabits. Viewed from a certain distance, there seems little new about Houellebecq’s scandalized reception by the *bien-pensant* French bourgeoisie. This is in many ways the same reception received a
century and a half ago by the first generation of truly modern French writers, those who first took up the literary task of modernity of reporting to the bourgeoisie on its own depressing condition. The alienation experienced by Baudelaire, Flaubert, and others in their generation of post-Romantic Bohemian writers is expertly situated historically and sociologically by Cesar Graña, who traces their disaffection to a criticism of the dogmatic optimism and egalitarianism of bourgeois modernity. Bohemianism as an aesthetic and social movement is widely understood as a manifestation of self-criticism by bourgeois society, the failed and would-be painters, writers and musicians that made up La Bohème drawn from the ranks of those in the bourgeoisie who rejected the goals and meanings bourgeois society presented to individuals. The very raison d’être of the bohemian artistic milieu was to 'épater les bourgeois,' and the clearest means to this end involved a demonstration of the bohemian rejection of the moral foundations of bourgeois society. This rejection could take both form both via artistic production and personal comportment of the artist, and the ideal was engagement on both these fronts. Thus, Nerval led lobsters on a leash through the Jardin du Luxembourg in addition to writing scandalous poetry; Toulouse-Lautrec painted the scenery of his own drunken adventures with prostitutes and criminals; etc. Flaubert summed up the aspirations of the anti-bourgeois artist of the French 19th century in his own prediction of the reaction to his Salammbô: "It will 1) annoy the bourgeois...; 2) unnerve and shock sensitive people; 3) anger the archeologists; 4) be unintelligible to the ladies; 5) earn me a reputation as a pederast and a cannibal. Let us hope so" (Graña 1964:145).

As the Bohemian literary and artistic critics of the mid-1800s responded to the failure of the utopian project of the 1848 Revolution, decimating the culture and norms of the class that had been unable to bring about the promised vision of a new society, so the criticisms of Houellebecq and his artistic generation emerge from the ruins of the Socialist victory of Mitterand in the '80s and '90s. It has been noted already by
numerous commentators that many of the intellectual and artistic allies of the Mitterand project and presidency became, in due course as the project revealed itself as a crushing failure, the most vehement of its critics (Reader 1987:19). Houellebecq is a former communist and participant in a number of radical left literary reviews who has progressively distanced himself from the ideology that, in the era of Sartre, i.e., throughout most of the 20th century, was the automatic choice for nearly all of France's significant writers. He has borne a certain outsider status within French literary intellectual circles, however, for much longer than the moment of his break with the political left. He is neither a Parisian by birth nor a graduate of the _grandes écoles_ or any other prestigious educational institution, as are most prestigious French writers who precede him, but rather a provincial with a degree in agronomical engineering. In strictly structural terms, then, he constitutes a break with the traditional social sources of literary producers in France (Clark 1987), and this should immediately strike us as of significance in the task of understanding his perspective on the French world and his reception by French cultural publics. His socio-biographical position is in fact explicitly invoked in his literary project, as his own sociological roots provide a clear model for many of his protagonists. As in the case of Bruno and Michel in _Les Particules_, for example, Houellebecq's father and mother (a mountain-guide and a physician, respectively) are products of the hippie culture of the sixties who were inattentive parents. Houellebecq was himself sent by his parents to live with a grandmother, just as the Michel of _Les Particules_ (Eakin 2002).

So if there are similarities to be found in the sociological positions of Flaubert and the bourgeois writers of the 19th century and that of Houellebecq the bourgeois writer of the end of the 20th century, there are also differences. The social novelists of the 19th century, among whom Flaubert, Zola and Balzac are most revered, scandalized in their depiction of some of the sordidness of contemporary French moral life, but it
was generally understood in their work that moral depravity was not simply to be celebrated or accepted. It was there in the work to be understood and criticized on some polemical grounds. This is especially true of Zola, the political progressive of the three, who for example defended himself from critical attacks on *L’Assomoir*’s sketches of working-class depravity by noting that "readers should not conclude that the common people as a whole are bad, for my characters are not bad, they are only ignorant and ruined by the conditions of sweated toil and poverty in which they live" (Zola [1877]1995:5). Remove the evil conditions and the depravity ceases, in other words; here is a classically formulated left critical perspective on the condition of the masses. Balzac rejected the sort of left progressivist politics we find in Zola and his work clearly demonstrates a “laissez-faire universe” in which the powerful prevail. Though some (including Marx) read this as the grounds for a criticism of such a system, Balzac never criticizes this system in his work or in his own life orientation (Clark 1973:166). Indeed, his own life was characterized by a merciless pursuit of success in the terms of this laissez-faire economic universe he describes in his work.

Flaubert even more clearly positions himself against the radical utopian anti-capitalists, but, as we have just seen, he is just as aggressively anti-bourgeois. His politics are ultimately aristocratic and retreatist, against ‘the mob,’ whether it be a bourgeois mob or a working-class mob, which is precisely why the engaged Sartre so despised him (Sartre 1981). But Flaubert does not reject values altogether. He sees an artistic elite as the only possible manufacturer of real values (Graña 1964:124). So, however much more difficult it is to place him than Zola or Balzac, Flaubert can still be mapped to a more or less conventional social position: cultural aristocrat. Houellebecq seems yet more difficult to make sense of, as he seems to reject all of the existing value systems. Indeed, his position against both sides of the conventional culture wars in the West (he opens fire on religious conservatives and neo-hippie liberals alike), coupled with his
fervent rejection of any cultural or intellectual elitism akin to that of Flaubert, is perhaps more of what makes his work so infuriating to critics who label him a nihilist. Yet nihilism is an incorrect charge. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that if we call Houellebecq’s perspective ‘nihilist,’ we shall perhaps have to do the same with that of Max Weber, August Comte and Emile Durkheim.

**Houellebecq, Sociologist?: What His Novels say about Sociology**

In what specific ways then does Houellebecq engage the sociological in his fiction? First, he is, so far as I know, the first novelist to carefully discuss the work of Auguste Comte as part of his fiction.2 The protagonist of *Plateforme*, Michel, reads Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* and finds the "boring and dense text" of some use in analyzing his own confounding "social situation" (2001:172). Precisely how is unclear, as he does not discuss this in detail. But the Michel of *Les Particules* provides more insight. This Michel is also a reader of Comte, but a serious one who is himself involved in scientific work. The culmination of his life's work, the project to restructure DNA so as to eliminate sexual division in the human species and thereby "restore the practical possibility of human relations" at the ontological level, is in fact deeply influenced by Comte's thought (1998:298). Michel, like Comte, sees the individual as a kind of "fiction," whereas the metaphysical reality to be considered in efforts to ameliorate the human condition is that of social relations or states independent of the individual. It is only this kind of relational, structural positivism that can promise improvement.

We can perhaps find still more in this example. Michel, whose contribution to the elimination of the sex difference marks the conclusion of the novel, was during the period of this work particularly interested, according to one of his few acquaintances, in “the letters to Clotilde de Vaux and the *Synthèse subjective*, the last, unfinished work” of Comte (1998:298). Why these particular works? The correspondence with de Vaux, as noted above, is a part of the Comtean legacy little known by those who would make of
Comte only the father of ‘scientific sociology.’ She was a young littératrice Comte met and fell in love with (a love that was apparently not reciprocated) in 1845, after writing the *Cours*. De Vaux died only a year later, but during the year of their acquaintance, Comte apparently became almost fanatically devoted to her and changed much of his earlier thinking, which had been dismissive of the aesthetic and the literary (Lepenies 1988:32-33). The letters give evidence to his devotion and also to his new appreciation of the inevitable intersection between the sociological and the literary. The *Synthèse subjective* was but one part of an intended larger work never produced by Comte. Its subject was a difficult mathematical philosophical logic that at first glance might seem quite in keeping with the form of the work of the early Comte. But the introduction reveals something more complex. Comte notes there in framing this work within his overall theoretical project that

although such a synthesis can only directly address the intellect, it also embraces the emotions…The second and principal part is especially dedicated to the normal preponderance of the heart…The final synthesis does not regulate the intellect or activity except according to their worthy subordination to emotion.

It is ultimately not in scientific but in “purely poetic” expression that this most important element of Comte’s grand system will be realized (Comte 1969:4).

But why this interest in Comte? It is worth reiterating the point made above that Comte can be situated as one of the foundational figures at the interstices between science and literature that the discipline of sociology has attempted to bridge. When one compares his two major works, the *Cours* and the *Système*, one finds two very different visions of the sociological enterprise, one neatly scientific and objectivizing in its
attitude to the social, the other insistent upon the importance of the realm of the affective and the literary in sociological analysis (Lepenies 1988:20-38). Houellebecq, as a French student educated in the French school system, has undoubtedly read at least some Comte, or at least some material about him, and so likely knows of the ‘two Comtes.’ In presenting this side of Comte’s work as a part of his fictional account of the denouement of modernity, Houellebecq arguably endeavors to reunite the scientific and literary discourses in the same way attempted by Comte. I will return shortly to this topic in investigating the ways in which the controversial conclusion of *Les Particules* is essentially Comtean.

Beyond the penchant for having his characters read and/or cite Comte, Houellebecq explicitly invokes sociology and its typical analyses of the problems he addresses frequently in the novels, if usually caustically. Perhaps the most direct assaults can be found in *Plateforme*. Here, one is tempted to argue that in fact the entire book is an exploration of the inadequacy of social scientific attempts to understand and properly 'treat' certain modern social problems. The sociological perspective is generally incompetent in Houellebecq’s fiction, bogged down in laughably 'scientific' terminology and hopelessly naive utopian progressivism. It is incapable of understanding even the most basic elements of how people actually make decisions in market societies. In a general sense, there is little new in this perspective on sociology; sociologists generally fare poorly as characters in novels (Bjorklund 2001). But there is something deeper about Houellebecq’s conversation with sociology and social theory than is characteristic of most literary treatments of sociology that will become apparent on closer examination.

Valerie, the tourism executive who is also Michel's lover in *Plateforme*, tells of her interest in the subject as a student and her quick discovery of the subject's "ridiculous simplicity" and its stench of "ideology, imprecision and amateurism" (2001:138). When she and her colleagues are planning new tourism strategies, they consult a "sociologue
des comportements" whose presentation to them consists of reading a few banal and incorrect phrases from an article from the *Nouvel Observateur* on the new desire for a non-egoist tourism that is "respectful of the other" and ethically based in "solidarity" instead of individual pleasure. When Valerie's colleague asks him point-blank if he has any recommendations toward a solution of the difficulties faced by the industry, this pathetic figure can only desperately stammer about the need to "identify...the causes" first. But those in the industry already know that the causes of the perturbations in tourism are beyond their ability to modify, so the only relevant question is not the purely academic one of identifying causes about which one can do nothing but rather that of how to successfully adapt to them (2001:162-4). Here, sociology is helplessly impractical.

Sociological accounts of the youth crime problem in France are per Houellebecq also typically unproductive and simple-minded, based as they are in a worldview in which the perpetrator of crime is always himself primarily the victim of some broader social injustice and therefore not really to be blamed for his actions. In *Plateforme*, Michel breaks out laughing in reading an article by Jacques Attali, a real figure on the French social scientific left, which seems infinitely distanced from the reality of life in the dirty outskirts of Paris. Attali focuses on the admirable effort to "forge new cultures and...reinvent the art of living together" of the young toughs who prey upon the elderly, the weak, and one another in a manner that is almost surreal in its lack of contact with the actual lived experience of those who live in those neighborhoods and suffer the violent depredations and other aggressions of the 'inventors of new ways of living together.'

Sociology also is criticized more broadly for providing a worldview that potentially undermines the task of producing meaning insofar as its incessant debunking stance consistently undoes all stable versions of selfhood and the social. In *Domaine*, Houellebecq has the psychoanalyst who analyzes the narrator describe his problem as
rooted essentially in the fact that he has himself taken on a scientistic sociological perspective on the world and this itself has alienated him from his own life. He sees things “too sociologically” and “in lecturing on society [he] establishes a barrier behind which [he] protects [himself]” (1994:145). He is barred from real meaningful interaction and participation with others by his ‘sociological’ perspective. This intriguing point is much like that made by Peter Berger when he notes that the sociological perspective on the world, generalized in Western societies through high school and undergraduate university educations where many youth are exposed to the demystifying perspective of the ‘science of society,’ winds up at least potentially contributing to the very same sense of meaninglessness and alienation that it endeavors to describe and explain in modernity (Berger 1963:174).

It is worth remembering that the sort of indictment of sociology, at least in its less self-reflexive and sophisticated forms, as incapable of grasping essential elements of modernity put forth in these examples by Houellebecq is also generated from within the ranks of sociologists themselves. More, the sociological critics of sociology have generally been met with the same kind of hostility directed at novelists like Houellebecq who take on sociology. Blumer was denounced as the “gravedigger of sociological research” for mounting an epistemological attack on the dominant methodological tendency toward survey research and quantitative data (Collins 1994). Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological group was roundly attacked as a cult for demonstrating how little mainstream sociology was able to actually account for elementary social rules of interaction (Flynn 1991). But just as neither Blumer nor Garfinkel meant to dismantle sociology altogether, so should we perhaps see what Houellebecq is up to here not as an utter dismissal of sociology, but rather as an attempt to suggest how sociology has gone wrong in some specific ways in its analysis of modernity. For Houellebecq does more
than merely criticize; he also tries to offer his own social theoretical account of modernity and even some suggestions for dealing with the alienation he describes.

**Sex, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Houellebecq**

Sexual/gender relations and religious/ethnic differences are an important theme in all three of Houellebecq’s major novels, and a significant amount of the scandalized reception from the Western intelligentsia focuses on these aspects of his work. In all three works, a model of stratification by sexual attractiveness is presented as a second and unacknowledged modern hierarchy that exists alongside the economic structures of stratification that generally draw the attention of social scientists. This axis of social ranking bears little relation to the axis of gender stratification that contemporary sociology spends much energy examining and criticizing. Houellebecq does not address gender stratification at all, seemingly content to accept the notion that the days when this was a significant stratifying force in the West ended with the mass entry of women into the workforce and the changes in marriage and control of reproduction brought about by the cultural and technological revolutions of the 1960s. Houellebecq argues instead that this second system of stratification ranks individuals by their ‘fitness’ in attracting sexual partners in the increasingly wide-open and individualist sexual market. More, it operates not despite the liberational aspirations and changes brought about by the sexual and feminist revolutions of the sixties and seventies but *because* of them.

Raphaël Tisserand, the co-worker of the protagonist in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), is a focal character in the exploration of this system of sexual stratification. He is described as the very prototype of the victim of "absolute pauperization" on this axis of social ranking (1994:100). A single young man who is relatively successful on the economic stratification scale, he avidly pursues women but achieves no success whatsoever due to his extreme physical unattractiveness and lack of charm, the latter of which, Houellebecq notes, can replace physical beauty, at least for men (1994:54). It is
the same kind of "law of the market" at work here as in liberal capitalist economies. In a perfectly liberal economic or sexual system, certain individuals in command of high degrees of the relevant capital (educational or work experience and skill and physical beauty) amass vast fortunes or numbers of sexual experiences/partners while others without the requisite capital fall into destitute misery. These dual hierarchies of Mars (the economic) and Venus (the sexual) are equally merciless. Houellebecq compares this situation to the counter-liberal solutions offered in the two realms: the socialist economy and the traditional model of sexual relations. If the free market of labor and sexual partnership is restricted in certain ways, e.g., prohibiting firing of workers or adultery and extra-marital relations, all members of a society are accommodated with a place in the economic and sexual systems (1994:100). This is not however how modern society works, and, indeed, one can scarcely imagine how the changes necessary to bring about greater equality on the two axes could be carried out, as the great advance of egoistic individualism in both realms has simply outflanked any efforts to place limits on or retract it. On the sexual system level, the Raphaël Tisserands are the result. Reduced to isolation and auto-erotic experience only, they can only in Houellebecq's view live lives of frustration and misery.

A similar character, Lionel, appears in Plateforme. Houellebecq describes him too as among the underclass on the sexual stratification scale; he is not "a bad guy, but he has no personality" and he is not wealthy or famous, so he has no capital with which to successfully enter the sexual playing field. In this merciless world of sexual competition, physical ugliness is destined always to defeat any 'human right' to sexual satisfaction or any other ethic that the political movements of the 1960s might have mistakenly seen as part and parcel of the move to sexual individualism. A tragic consequence of this will be that those like Tisserand will desire what they cannot have, and indeed the least competitive among the Tisserands will be incapable even of meeting their sexual needs
with other physically undesirable individuals. More, the politics of feminist sexuality that extend from these cultural changes in sexual attraction and mating will make it nearly impossible for those destitute individuals to translate any success in the economic hierarchy into success in the sexual hierarchy, that is, to buy sex, since this is defined as exploitative and distorting of the nature of the sexual transaction. The psychological suffering will lead at least some of these Tisserands to acts of violence and rape, which will perhaps give them some degree of power in this game for which they are otherwise completely unsuited (1994:118).

Love in its normal literary forms obviously suffers from such a presentation of the situation. Sexual relations are largely a matter, in Houellebecq’s work, of competition for status. He even pretends to cite sociological research results in Domaine to make the point. Put two young lovers together in a setting in which they are seen by other members of the social group, and they give physical indications of their attraction far more readily than when they are alone (1994:87). In other words, it is a ranking game to show others where you stand more than it is about emotional intimacy and ‘togetherness’ and the rest of the romantic fiction we have come to believe through literature and poetry.

The power of this competition among men to have access to the most attractive women is in Houellebecq’s argument even at the root of what seems racial or ethnic antagonism, for which he has been roundly (and largely incorrectly) criticized. In Plateforme, Robert, an acquaintance of Michel, argues that what appears to be racial strife is in fact something we see, not uncoincidentally, most markedly in the younger males of different racial groups; this is to be expected, he notes, as part of what he frankly calls the “competition for the vaginas of young women” (2001:114). Here, Houellebecq enters a sensitive cultural debate in France (and in other parts of Europe and the Americas with significant non-white immigrant populations) on interracial dating,
suggesting that the sociologists who would see racist sentiment as the cause of uneasiness over interracial couples are in fact mistaking cause and effect. In Houellebecq's view, the competition in the sexual market is the prime mover and racist sentiment emerges as a cultural weapon only as that marketplace becomes crowded with new competitors.

In Domaine, it is significant that the youth who winds up with the young girl desired by Tisserand is a “black” (1994:118). Tisserand contemplates killing him in frustration over losing to him in the sexual marketplace. Had he done so (in the end, he lacks the will, though he is encouraged to do so by the morbid Michel), such an act in French society would surely have been seen as having some racial overtones, though Houellebecq clearly presents it as completely about competition for access to the attractive young woman. Tisserand is a loser in the sexual ranking game, but it is rather less than obvious that he is a racist. A final telling passage on race and racism can be found near the conclusion of Plateforme. A novel that some critics have taken as a racist broadside against Arabs and Islam, largely because of the powerful criticism mounted against Islam near its conclusion by a Jordanian Michel meets after the terrorist attack by Muslim extremists that kills his lover Valérie, in fact concludes with a much more complex statement on race. Michel, who wants to hate Islam and Muslims after the attack, finally becomes convinced that Islam, like all the great religions, is doomed to defeat in its conflict with the materialist worldview of capitalism. Though he is hardly cheered by this, his energy for racial/ethnic hatred dissipates at the thought. He concludes on the matter of racial animosity by noting that at the end of the day hierarchization based on physical differences among humans seems mostly to be based on “boredom” rather than any deeper antagonism (2001:344).

Real sociologists have of course taken up these same issues. The sociological treatment of marriage markets and what Willard Walker as early as the 1930s called “the
rating and dating complex” has uncovered some of the same raw insights into the market for sexual partners discussed in Houellebecq. Recently, Randall Collins (2004) has endeavored to show how stratification along lines of erotic stratification can be understood according to his theory of interaction ritual, going so far as to “suggest that the historical trend in American youth scenes has been toward reducing class and ethnic/racial lines and thus has made erotic ranking increasingly the main principle of prestige and of informal segregation (Collins 2004:254). Rarely, however, is any attempt made in that sociological literature to place such findings into the context of discussions of alienation and deprivation in the clear manner of Houellebecq’s novels.

Sociological discourses on sexual stratification and its results are not the only target in Houellebecq; he also aims at psychoanalytic discourses. This “pitiless school of egoism” removes any capacity for “innocence, generosity, purity” in relations between the sexes, transforming all into perfect players in this liberal sexual marketplace, all motivated only by their own physical gratification and merciless in competition with others (1994:103). In this sense, it is only consistent with the broader modern world of “too many discos and too many lovers...[that] impoverishes the human being” (1994:114), but its omnipresence as means to purportedly achieve sexual happiness makes it all the more dangerous and contemptuous. Both Domaine and Plateforme end, significantly, with their narrators in therapy, and in both novels the therapists prove remarkably incapable of understanding even the slightest thing about his malady.

Houellebecq’s tragic social vision has been incorrectly identified by some as a conservative and/or racialist attack on the worldview of the post-'60s cultural left. But, as already noted, he is on neither side in the conventional culture war on these issues. He traces the incoherence and anomie of the results of the triumph of the secular individualism that emerged from the wake of the counterculture, but he also very clearly notes the impossibility of a return to the cultural status quo of the pre-'60s. Where much
contemporary conservative political theory and practice calls for the reestablishment of the moral and religious norms and institutions destroyed by the counterculture, Houellebecq envisions no way to do so, nor does he even acknowledge that it would be desirable if possible. Traditional world religions (both Christianity and Islam are included here by Houellebecq) are depicted as outmoded or reprehensibly addicted to totalitarian moral strictures. Desplechin, one of Michel’s scientific colleagues in Les Particules, notes that even if religion lives on in its more "stupid...false...and obscurantist" forms, e.g., Islam à la the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and the populist Christian evangelicalism of the American Midwest and South, this is a temporary phenomenon that is doomed to defeat at the hands of modernity and the cult of materialism (1998:271). But there is no celebration of the 'progress' that lies in that defeat because materialism is itself an insufficient base for social solidarity. Elsewhere, Houellebecq has Michel rehash Durkheim's perspective of religion as fundamentally about social solidarity rather than individual experience (1998:257) in a critique of the concentration of the hippies and the cult members on the latter, but immediately Bruno, accepting the Durkheimian premise but with the Weberian historical realization of the ineffectuality of religion in the face of materialism in the modern world added on, takes this to mean that in fact society is thus no longer possible (1998:258). Michel has no reply.

The one character of an overt religiosity in the three novels is the priest Buvet, an old school friend of the narrator in Domaine. Buvet shares the narrator’s sense that the world in which they live has suffered a great diminution of vital force, but he points to the conservative past of pre-Revolutionary and courtly France to argue that this weakening has to do with the rejection in modern society of the ascetic spirituality of the past. The constant pursuit of physical pleasures leads not to greater happiness but instead to the sense that everyone is a failure because no one is able to satisfy themselves in this sensual carnival. Here, it would seem, is Houellebecq’s perfect opportunity to
polemically ally himself with the conservatives. Yet, though the narrator agrees with him on the result, he finds himself incapable, perhaps like many modern intellectuals, of making the leap into religious faith as an answer. In the end, in fact, the solution proves untenable even for Buvet. He describes to the narrator in a crushing scene late in the novel a litany of the modern world's banal wickedness: all his efforts to invigorate his parish in the crime-infested southern suburbs of Paris have proven vain, as the young are utterly indifferent to things religious; a handful of people attend Mass, one of them an aged woman from Brittany who is attacked and beaten one day by street thugs; while in the hospital recovering, she dies suddenly, arousing Buvet's suspicions; a nurse from the hospital comes to him and tells him she was euthanized without her consultation, expresses her regret at participating and asks Buvet to instruct her, a typical modern agnostic, in the ways of the Church; Buvet agrees and begins spending significant time in the evenings with the young woman, only to be told a few weeks later that she has found a new boyfriend and will not be spending more time with Buvet, whom she found interesting mainly because the forbidden notion of sleeping with a priest intrigued her (1994:138-140). When he tells the narrator "I no longer feel the presence," the latter replies "Quelle présence?" Houellebecq suggests that Buvet has no response.

This perspective on religion is comparable to the most complex of the early sociological treatments of this phenomena, namely that of Weber. Where Marx and other more straight-forward progeny of the Enlightenment found in it only something to be swept into the historical dustbin and criticized from a perspective of unrelenting rationalist progress, Weber took a more complicated position. Having rejected the historical inevitability of progress, he saw religion historically as a positive social force insofar as it provided meaning in an otherwise meaningless world, but that meaning is jeopardized by the expansion of scientific thought. Weber finds no way out of this tragic situation, as he cannot envision an intellectual return to religion any more than he can
imagine non-religious systems of meaning that will prove effective for the mass of society. As the ethic that was originally religious in origin takes on the cast of crude materialist impulses to accumulation, Weber argues, all of us become trapped in the infamous ‘iron cage.’ Houellebecq, writing a century later, envisions the death even of the materialist phase of this ethic. Jean-Yves, Valerie’s colleague in Plateforme, represents this Protestant Ethic of “working because he had the taste for work,” a position Michel and Valerie find incomprehensible. The latter summarizes effectively the total rejection of this work ethic:

Do you really want to buy a Ferrari? A weekend place in Deauville, which will be broken into, in any event? Do you want to work 90 hours a week until the age of 70? To pay half your salary in taxes to finance military operations in Kosovo or to save the ghetto?...The only thing this Western world can offer you is name brand products (2001:317).

A few pages further along, Michel reflects on the likely decline of the West precisely because these values once infused with religious meaning now lack any meaning at all and will soon no longer have any more like Jean-Yves to maintain them. The moronic desire for brand names on the part of the “dangerous classes” will go on, but without any of the commitment to labor as a practice that can provide access to them that is evident in people like Jean-Yves (2001:262).

The conclusion of Les Particules is of particular interest with respect to Houellebecq’s stance on modernity and his position vis-à-vis sociology’s typical reading of modernity. The technical, genetic solution to the social problems of modernity that emerges from the work of Michel Djerzinski seems on its face a not very implicit criticism of the utopian sociological perspective that changing social structures and
culture will be enough to put an end to those problems. “The mutation will not be mental, but genetic,” proclaims the slogan of Djerzinski’s self-appointed intellectual heir Hubcejaz (1998:312). But is sociology in its entirety being thrown out, or rather is it only a certain brand of sociology that is being rejected? Why is a technical solution the only possible solution? Precisely because the classical sociological perspective represented by Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and others (with Marx noticeably excluded) was and is correct in its description of the overwhelming importance of the sacred and in its anxiety in the face of a modernity that seemed oriented toward its total destruction. The utopian sociological dream of a perfect society once the stupidity of religion is crushed and full human rights and freedoms are extended to all is in fact itself the real stupidity, per Houellebecq, because it simply does not reckon with the immensity of the pull of the religious, which is, as Durkheim noted well, the pull of the moral and of the collective. It believes those things can be planned away with properly devised social arrangements, yet the entirety of the history of modernity is a testament to the failure of this project.

And yet, if we follow Les Particules to the conclusion, it is clear Houellebecq wishes for and expects no return to the ‘old religion.’ As I have already noted, in this, he is even clearer than the classical sociologists, all of them unbelievers who saw the power of the sacred and wondered with apprehension what would come once it was displaced, indeed, who actively attempted to theorize what new forms it might take in modernity. The New Agers who are depicted at the end of the novel are not an answer to the problem of anomie and hyper-individualism, but they are an important signal of the gravity of that problem, as is in fact recognized by those sociologists of religion wary enough to resist the seduction of the secularization thesis that for decades has represented the sociological majority position on religion. If they continue to emerge in the midst of the supposedly fully rational modern West, how can anything less than a
change of the most radical sort, a change in the very biological nature of humankind, hope to deal with the sense of disunity and meaninglessness that gave them birth? It is ironic that it is science, and not New Age beliefs, that ultimately solves the problem of the radical individuality that is itself a byproduct of the domination of society by the very reason that also gave birth to science. So Reason creates Science, which takes as given that freedom of inquiry will bring Truth, and freedom of inquiry can only be fully protected in a society of individuals unshackled by the stupidity of collectivities, and in societies of such individuals massive anomie and unhappiness emerges as a consequence of the fact that those freedoms necessarily mean competition and they impinge on deeper impulses toward collective unity, and so Science must be enlisted at the end of the day to attack a foundation of the very conditions of its own existence and proliferation. Houellebecq is in line here with the kind of argument made by Daniel Bell (1976) about the considerable contradictions created by the emergence of capitalism. Here arguably is a sociological perspective of a level of complexity that merits some respect.

The novel’s conclusion is thus in a sense a vindication of the classical sociological theoretical tradition that, as Nisbet (1966) has argued, took the sacred as its most foundational social category and approached the study of modernity with an apprehensive caution that was quite different from the utopian expectation of progress, enlightenment, and happiness we find in those thinkers less profoundly affected by the philosophical themes of the Counter-Enlightenment. These classical theorists saw the central problem of modernity as the necessity of theorizing and creating new forms of sacrality and collective effervescence, rather than merely celebrating (and perhaps aiding in) the destruction of the traditional forms of the sacred. In this, thinkers otherwise thoroughly opposed such as Comte (in his late incarnation) and Nietzsche (at least the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*) are united and both emerge as powerful critics of what
has emerged in the West as the dominant, scientistic and anti-religious voice of
sociology. The perspective in Houellebecq hearkens again especially back to Comte
here, as his narrative is intriguingly consistent with Comte’s celebrated but frequently
poorly understood Law of Three Stages. Comte had presented the teleology of
humankind in three phases, the theological, metaphysical and positive; the fundamental
distinction between the three has to do with the modes of understanding of the world
operative in each. In the first, the world is understood as the effect of the wills and
actions of supernatural beings; in the last, understanding is based in scientific
observation of the causes and effects produced in the world. But what of the
metaphysical stage? This stage is best represented by the values and principles set forth
in the French Revolution. Here, supernatural sources of meaning are replaced by the
‘natural rights of man,’ the chief of which is individualistic (and anti-social) freedom.
The full realization of the teleological path for Comte requires this stage to be
supplanted by a truly scientific perspective, which will have to account for the social and
the need for the sacred that are so deeply imbedded in the social reality of human lives, a
social reality that is metaphysically more real than the individuals who seemingly make it
up. In this sense, the culture of the 1960s against which Houellebecq polemizes is of a
piece with the French Revolutionary tradition against which Comte positioned himself
and the positivist stage of humanity he believed he represented.

Houellebecq can be read here as marking the culmination and the end of the
social sciences. Once it is fully understood that the “restoration…of the sense of the
collectivity, the permanent and the sacred” requires something significantly more
profound than a merely social change, the social sciences fall into a state of irrelevancy
and ridicule (1998:314). Their job is done. They have, at least in their more powerfully
insightful classical forms, brought home the point that the human impulse toward
sacrality and the individualizing tendencies of modernity are so deeply opposed that only
a change in the organism is sufficient to make them compatible. Any continued effort expended by sociologists in discussion of reforming social institutions is simply beside the point. Of course, this runs the danger of being rejected out of hand by those who currently earn their living by engaging in such discussions, and I do not intend to suggest that Houellebecq’s case should be grounds for a call to put an end to sociology. But this perspective, in which modernity inevitably produces social mechanisms and discourses that tend to a kind of auto-destruction, surely invites some reflection. It seems a kind of tragic sociology in which we must fully reckon with the fact that modernity produces finally, unexpectedly, “bitterness” where it promised liberation (1994:148).

References:


1 Kauppi (2000:84-92) has endeavored to demonstrate the similarities, in form as well as methodology, between Bourdieu’s vision of the French social world and that constructed by novelists such as Zola, Balzac, and Flaubert. Interestingly enough, Bourdieu has himself noted how much his early sociological predispositions were influenced by Balzac: “I identified myself naively with Balzac…to the point that it several times came to me to follow, during my Sunday outings, unknown people, in order to discover their neighborhood, their house, their surroundings, which I tried to guess” (2004:87, this and all subsequent translations from French sources are my own).

2 He in fact wrote a preface to a recent re-edition of some of Comte’s writing on religion (2005).

3 The move to turn intellectual activity or political service into a form of redemptive ascetic practice is available in Weber only to a select few, not to the masses (see e.g., Harvey Goldman 1992).