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The Sexual Political Economy of Postmodernity

An Introduction to Critical Theory in the Works of Michel Houellebecq

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1. Introduction

What constitutes alienation in contemporary Western societies? Alienation in its modern context is deeply connected to the Marxist idea of exclusion from basic necessity. In this essay I wish to raise the question of what character alienation can take in contemporary societies, and how it relates to critical concepts such as necessity, reification, and transcendence. If we, as Zygmunt Bauman (1997), assume that postmodernity does not mean a paradigmatic, civilizational shift from the project of modernity, perhaps these critical concepts are still valid analytical tools for approaching social and political reality in the contemporary Western world. Bauman notes that the modern concepts of purity and order are still at work in our societies, though they have changed form:

“In the postmodern world of freely competing styles and life patterns [...] one needs to be capable of being seduced by the infinite possibility and constant renewal promoted by the consumer market, of rejoicing in the chance of putting on and taking off identities, of spending one's life in the never ending chase after ever more intense sensations and even more exhilarating experience. Not everybody can pass that test. Those who do not are the 'dirt' of postmodern society.” (Bauman 1997 p. 14)

The “dirt”, in Bauman's view, are the alienated outcasts of today's Western world – criminals and the poor, those who cannot conform to the postmodern lifestyle of dynamic identities and lifestyle consumption. This lifestyle is that of the aesthetic. As MacIntyre (1981, p. 39) has pointed out, the aesthetic way of life is defined by the attempt to lose oneself in the immediacy of present experience. However, I believe that the trauma of modernity extended into its postmodern form reaches far beyond the implications for the ubiquitously alienated, the poor, the mad, and the criminal. It is in fact a universal concern throughout the Western world.

French writer Michel Houellebecq is known, mainly in Europe, for his controversial novels about contemporary life. Even though his writing has to be classified as fiction, I think that his works contain elements of thought and strings of ideas that are

of a highly political character and to some extent indicative of certain problems with both modernity and the postmodern response to the crisis of modernity. The aim of this short paper is to see how Houellebecq's approach to alienation can be related to critical theory. Firstly, I will try to identify the conditions of modernity according to Houellebecq. I will try to trace how Houellebecq approaches alienation in three of his works. These are "Whatever" (*Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*), "Atomized" (*Les Particules Élémentaires*) and "Platform" (*Plateforme*). Secondly, I will try to discern what possibilities Houellebecq suggests for transcending this stage of human development; what are the avenues for social and political change?

Fiction as a way of proponing philosophical and political ideas demands more from the reader than an explicitly analytical work; in a way, fiction can be the ultimate dialectical form of writing. As the protagonists speak and act in the works of Michel Houellebecq, I would argue that it is possible to see an interesting account of what modernity is and how the self in contemporary life cannot be effectively disconnected from it. However, I do not contend that my interpretation of Houellebecq's narratives is the correct one. I am convinced that there are multiple ways of reading and understanding his works.

2. Alienation

2.1 The Extension of the Domain of Struggle

According to Herbert Marcuse (1991), modern industrial society is one-dimensional. Man has contained himself in an existence of a seemingly voluntary enslavement, where there is no room for critical thought; that is, the power to see beyond modern capitalism as a natural form of existence. The welfare state, along with technological and empiricist society, though comfortable, disarms critical thought:

“Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination [...] Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain control over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation.” (Marcuse 1991 p. 7f)

This passage serves as a good introduction to Houellebecq’s conception of modern life. In the three of his novels that I set out to explore here, the protagonists are middle level officials in government bureaucracies. They all feel alienated from their work, which they find meaningless. In “Whatever”, people are reduced to means in the struggle for achievement of technocratic ends. The protagonist, a 30-something computer engineer holds a middle-level position in a consulting firm. He and a colleague are sent from the company headquarters in Paris to rural areas of France, in order to educate local agriculture officials in a computer program designed to facilitate the transfer of farm subsidiaries. It is part of the bureaucratization of agricultural work, framed in a functional discourse:

“In the afternoon I was due to see the head of the ‘Computer Studies’ department. I don’t really know why [...] Before installing myself in this office I’d been handed a voluminous report called *Directive of the Ministry of Agriculture Data Processing Plan*. There again, I couldn’t see why. The document had nothing at all to do with me. It was devoted, if the introduction was to be believed, to an

attempt at the predefinition of various archetypal scenarii, understood within a targeted objective. The objectives, which themselves warranted a more detailed analysis in terms of desirability, were for instance the orientation of a politics of aid to farmers, the development of a more competitive para-agricultural sector at the European level, the redressing of the commercial balance in the realm of fresh products...” (Houellebecq 1999 p. 27)

The protagonist in “Whatever” is locked inside a context of necessity as an abstract process, where the production of food is understood as something purely external to him. But he also feels alienated from his own role in the technocratic organization of this realm of labor. In a way, his thought penetrates the absurdities of modern society, but he performs at a minimum what is expected from him. Moreover, it is the depressive estrangement from the urban environment, the unbearable day-to-day routine, the floating together of the days that denote the absence of any meaningful life-project. Only conformity to the technocratic norm and consumption are available in Houellebecq’s description of contemporary life. In “Whatever”, the main character eventually starts to feel more and more detached from his role in society, and slides into a depression. He ends up in a mental institution, where the therapist complains about him framing his depression in societal rather than psychological terms.

“[I] don’t understand, basically, how people manage to go on living. I get the impression everybody must be unhappy; we live in such a simple world, you understand. There’s a system based on domination, money and fear – a somewhat masculine system, let’s call it Mars; there’s a feminine system based on seduction and sex, Venus let’s say. And that’s it. Is it really possible to live and to believe there’s nothing else? Along with the nineteenth-century realists, Maupassant believed there was nothing else; and it drove him completely mad [...] because he had an acute awareness of matter, of nothingness and death [...] he established an absolute separation between his individual existence and the rest of the world. It’s the only way we can conceive of the world today.” (Houellebecq 1999 p. 147)

It is the one-dimensionality of modernity which troubles him; to him modern existence forms a totality where alienation and reification of human relations are at work. He feels alienated because he cannot become a subject in this society, and because of this he is referred to see a therapist. Therapy moves within the discourse of modernity itself – it cannot see or negate the repressive totality of modernity. As Marcuse (1991 p. 64) argues, alienation is perpetuated in society by therapeutic mechanisms that “sell, comfort, or excite”.

But alienation is not only present in the automated, one-dimensional realm of technocratic society. It has become highly manifest in the interpersonal relations between human beings, in what Houellebecq refers to as the Venus-system. Houellebecq suggests that sexual alienation caused by the reification of interpersonal relations is one of the main problems with contemporary society:

“[I]n societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effect of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their lives, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It’s what’s known as ‘the law of the market’.” (Houellebecq 1999 p. 99)

Although the welfare state has the power to co-opt the working class and somewhat level economic inequalities in modern societies, it does not have the power to equalize sexual relations. People will, in this system, be sexually disenfranchised. In “Whatever”, the protagonist’s colleague, Tisserand, a 28-year old virgin with his appearance working against him, plays the part of the eternal loser on the sexual plane, even though he is financially successful:

“In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. In a totally

liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and levels of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. On the economic plane Raphael Tisserand belongs in the victor's camp; on the sexual plane in that of the vanquished [...] Businesses fight over certain young professionals; women fight over certain young men; men fight over certain young women; the trouble and strife are considerable." (ibid.)

Michel Foucault (in Rabinow 1984, p.351) has noted that art, in our society, is related to objects and not individuals. He has thus argued for "[...] making everyone's life a work of art". However, what Houellebecq does is to describe the effects of this project of aesthetization of the self in a system where art already is completely reified. Reification, according to Lukács (2002, pp. 91f), is the fetishism of commodities that in the late stages of capitalism penetrates all aspects and areas of the social world. Instead of freeing the subject, the aesthetic lifestyle extends reification to include interpersonal relations that earlier seemed to be untouched by this process. The idea of making the self into an aesthetic subject is lost on modern society, since the subject *per se* does not exist. This "extension of the domain of the struggle" stands out as a deeply troubling concept to Houellebecq. It is the penetration of reification into all spheres of human existence. When the aesthetic way of life enters the stage, modern life becomes even more unbearable and opens up for a new form of alienation.

2.2. False Needs in Aesthetic Society

To Marcuse (1991), the only permissible definition of necessity is clothing, lodging and nourishment. When basic necessity is catered for, instead of embracing the freedom this can entail, one-dimensional society creates "false" needs in order to suppress critical thought. To Houellebecq, the defining point of the postmodern human condition is when

necessity in a predominantly aesthetic society escapes its original form; it is no longer conceived of as the basic conditions for human survival; food, clothes and shelter. With such minimal requirements catered for in Western welfare bureaucracies, Houellebecq argues that necessity today denotes man's need for sexual satisfaction. Modernity has undoubtedly instituted a competitive struggle, not only over economic necessity, but over human relations commodified in sexuality, as observed by Abecassis (2000, p. 807):

“To the democratic man, so goes the myth, the great orgasm can be as commonly consumed and experienced as a can of Campbell's Soup.”

Even if this perception is a correct description of contemporary society, we need to ask ourselves the question, what makes sexual relations that important to people? How can they constitute necessity? In his explicit description of sexual activity, which some would call pornographic, Houellebecq seems obsessed with orgasms and ejaculations. The brief moment of sexual pleasure constitutes perhaps, in our technocratic and bureaucratic turned aesthetic society, the only form of temporary transcendence that seems to be within reach. However, it is also in its commodified form, the human artwork, the source of unbridgeable human inequality and alienation. Sexual consumption is a process regulated by modern conditions such as efficiency, market performance, and fierce competition between individuals. This does not only extend to the explicit trade in sexual services (prostitution), it is also paramount in the “ordinary” forming of relationships and dating.

As Marcuse noted well before Houellebecq, technological society and mechanization distorts eroticism. It is the integration of sex into the sphere of work, the “[...] systematic inclusion of libidinal components into the realm of commodity production and exchange [...]” which defuses the power of eroticism as a way of overcoming repression (Marcuse 1991, p. 77). However, as Marcuse seems to view liberalized sexuality as a non-threat to one-dimensional society, Houellebecq, taking stock with the sexual revolt of the 1960's, conceives of it as a new form of alienation since it in aesthetic society has become a discourse of necessity. In “Atomized”, the brothers Bruno and Michel, the displaced sons of a promiscuous hippie mother, both

experience the breakdown of traditional values in modern liberal society, growing up in an Americanized post-1968 France. Their responses to the reigning emotivism and consumerism differ; as Bruno tries to indulge in sexual consumption, controlled by an insatiable libido, Michel is incapable of and estranged from sexual performance. Both seem unable to experience love. Bruno embarks on a teaching career, but is transferred to an administrative post in the Ministry of Education after making sexual advances on his high school students. He is largely a sexual failure; he suffers from the most humiliating alienation possible in a society of aesthetic competition; he is a masturbator. In the case of Bruno, the aesthetic way of life as a response to the alienation of modernity only produces more alienation and feelings of inadequacy. One day he meets Christiane, who is as lonely as he is, and they form some kind of relationship based on a “swinger” lifestyle. To Bruno, Christiane serves as a means for entering into sexual liaisons with other, younger and more aesthetic female bodies. He is constantly searching for a better specimen. Christiane’s husband left her for a younger woman, and now, in her 40’s, she is well aware of her decaying body. After their first encounter, she tells Bruno:

“Just now, I could tell you didn’t really like my pussy - it already looks a bit like an old woman’s cunt. Increased collagen bonding and the breakdown of elastin during mitosis in older people means that human tissue gradually loses its suppleness and firmness.” (Houellebecq 2001, p. 168f)

Christiane has an accident during a gang bang and becomes partly paralyzed; Bruno suggests half-heartedly that they now can live together in his apartment; but Christiane replies that she does not want to be a burden to him, or anybody. No longer able to take part in aesthetic society, no longer able to constitute a means but only a human being in herself, she commits suicide. Hanna Arendt wrote in the 1950s that modern egoism lacks what a truly hedonistic system of being necessitates - a rationale for suicide (Arendt 1998, p. 311). Houellebecq’s view of aesthetic society clearly challenges this contention. Suicide is perfectly rational when the discourse of human value is centered on the body, in fact defined by its state and appearance, not only in its final stage of breakdown due to old age, but through every moment of a human life.

3. Possibilities for Transcendence

3.1 Abundance

If sexual relations constitute necessity, it is in line with Marxist thought that abundance in these will facilitate the furthering of human life – thus enabling the freedom *from* the sexual political economy (Marcuse 1991, p. 4). In “Atomized”, Bruno tries to cure his alienation by going to prostitutes. Houellebecq continues down this path in the novel “Platform”, where the main character Michel participates in a corporate venture for expanding sex tourism on a global scale. In “Platform”, Houellebecq plays with the idea of abundance in sexual relations as a reaction towards, and perhaps a way of transcendence and emancipation from, the conditions of postmodernity; and comes up with an inherently modern solution to the inequality in the selection process of sexual partners. It is a project for equalization of the Alpha and Omega male; an escape from aesthetics. Since reification already dominates the discourse and practice of sexuality, the proliferation, institutionalization of the sex trade seems as the next logical step. Even though sexuality is being commodified throughout, it is not equally distributed, but this may be remedied by doing what technical society does in terms of problem solving in other areas; by technocratic innovation and institutional facilitation.

But still, Houellebecq seems to contend, we cannot achieve emancipation from alienation by indulging in consumption. The sexually disenfranchised “proletariat” is not the historical subject. Enabling sexual consumption will not change human life in some utopian way, or make way for complete transcendence. It is sooner a measure that will make life a little less intolerable; it corresponds to the imperfect co-optation of the disenfranchised classes in modern Western bureaucracies. The proliferation of sexual contacts seems more like a hedonistic response to the defining nihilist existence in postmodernity. It is a neoliberal rather than a critical solution. However, as the Western sexual proletariat enables itself to escape from one unequal condition of postmodernity, which is the lack in physical contact with other human beings, the sex workers do not fit this description. They are still in the realm of basic, not aesthetic, necessity. They are

labor, which suggests a hierarchy of necessity in itself: firstly, basic necessity is to be secured, secondly, the void in interpersonal relations will be manifest. And that serves for Houellebecq as a major distinction between conditions of modernity and postmodernity.

Here the globalization of the economy poses an interesting problem – abundance in sexual relations is impossible in the West itself, because sex as commodity follows the laws of the market. In other words, sex as commodity is too expensive in the West. Houellebecq has to reconcile with the fact that it is scarcity of basic necessities in the rest of the world that provides an opening for the West to attempt to remedy its alienation from the aesthetic way of life; in reality, through commerce. With emotivism reigning in the West, expanding the sex trade is not necessarily morally or ethically different from other business ventures of the West into the developing world. Since human needs, according to Marcuse (1991 p. 4f), also are historical needs, the expansion of the sex tourism industry clearly serves its purpose.

The aesthetic competition in postindustrial society, when services to a large extent have come to replace goods, does not escape reification. In fact it adds a new dimension to this phenomenon; labor is a commodity as it ever was in modernity, but it caters to the changed needs of Western society. The sexual workforce is both commodified labor and the end-product in one – the aesthetic lifestyle literally means the physical consumption of human beings. Moreover, transcendence, to Marcuse (1991 p. XLIII), denotes the realistically informed possibilities to achieve a happier human existence through critical thought and action. For Houellebecq, postmodern transcendence, however, is the swiftly passing moment of ejaculation and orgasm. In a way this corresponds to other forms of contemporary escapism into the world of narcotics, “happy pills”, movies and videogames. But the power of the sexual drive still lingers as a mysterious, fascinating biological form of perceived sublimation.

3.2. Negation

When one-dimensional society is a fact and all areas of human life are penetrated by the capitalist, consumerist ethos, Marcuse (1991) suggested complete and utter negation of this system as the only viable way to further human existence. The idea of the “Great Refusal” is a measure intended to make critique possible in a system that is ideationally totalitarian and conceives of itself as natural. This idea can be traced in Houellebecq’s suggestion of complete negation of the sexual political economy of postmodernity. In the last chapters of “Atomized”, the molecular biologist Michel succeeds in inventing a cloned human being; a new, immortal species, without sexual desire or other distinctively “negative” human traits. The era of materialism and individualism will only be transcended with the death of humanity as we know it. As is manifested in Michel’s dream:

“Last, he saw the mental aggregate of space and its opposite. He saw the mental conflict through which space was structured, and saw it disappear. He saw space as a thin line separating two spheres. In the first sphere, there was being, then space, and in the second was non-being and the destruction of the individual. Calmly, without a moment’s hesitation, he turned and walked towards the second sphere.” (Houellebecq 2001, p. 282)

According to Houellebecq’s scientist, human beings are ontologically flawed and need to be replaced by genetically perfected clones. Inspired by the positivism of Comte, he believes that it is the refusal of the “ontology of objects” and the embracement of the “ontology of states”, that will enable this new species to be better than humans:

“The only entities which can be identified in such an ontology are wave functions, and, using them, state vectors – from which arose the analogous concept of redefining fraternity, sympathy and love.” (Houellebecq, 2001 p. 359)

In this passage, Houellebecq moves on the edges of science and philosophy and questions the distinction between the two imposed by modernity. We make them both and we find

in them what we are looking for, what we want to see and who we think we are. But here it is science that ultimately wins the battle over defining philosophy, and that results in a negation of ontology as far-reaching as the destruction of mankind. It seems that the aesthetic phase is the last stage of materialism (and humanity) in these Houellebecqian dialectics. Paradigmatic shifts occur through metaphysical mutations; significant changes in our value-systems, and the transcendence from this particular age, the age of materialism, will be the result of revolutionary consciousness formed on the premises of research, of a universal will to commit suicide as a species in the name of scientific rationality. Hanna Arendt (1998, p. 323) has described how modern science has permeated our self-image, an image of free particles that sustains our alienation from ourselves:

“[...] the reason, in other words, why the behavior of the infinitely small particle is not only similar in pattern to the planetary system as it appears to us but resembles the life and behavior patterns in human society, is of course, that we live in this society as though we were as far removed from our own human existence as we are from the infinitely small and the immensely large [...]”

Houellebecq's scientist also feels alienated in this world, since he is incapable of love, disinterested in sex and consumption, acutely aware of the fragility of human life but refusing to take part of it as it is organized in contemporary society. The negation of this contemporary existence, a mutated materialism, which in its present form rambles into our most private spheres and manipulates our very basic instincts, must be a powerful one. As Marx believed that the emancipation of humanity was through the proletariat's control of the means of production, it is a parallel that Houellebecq's vision of transcendence is through science and the scientist, and through positivism itself. In a way it connotes that it, in our present world, is the scientist's prerogative to connect theory to praxis: to redefine the floating concept of philosophy to the ultimate point of it being rendered obsolete in a world without real human beings. Thus, Houellebecq describes a world where we have attributed to science, here symbolized by the scientist, the declassified role of the historical subject. Although the negation of ourselves as a species stands out as a frightening scenario to most people, the formation of the idea itself is perhaps not very

surprising given our lack of intersubjectivity; our estrangement from being, symbolized by the scientist. As with the rationalization of the sex industry in “Platform”, this type of rationalization seems like a logical and efficient solution to many of the problems with the contemporary world. The scientific negation of ourselves bares resemblance to the assertion that MacIntyre (1981 p. 111) credits Nietzsche with: that modern morality can be explained in a set of rationalizations which effectively conceal its non-rational character. In the laboratory, where solutions to ontological problems are sought, the scientist can pass his judgment on humanity by engaging in empiricist and positivist operations that seem perfectly rational within their context.

But there are certainly other ways of interpreting Houellebecq’s approach to negation; perhaps science, positivism and genetic engineering are the only avenues towards emancipation from a society drenched in cultural conflict, consumerism and emotivism?

“It has even been known for us to refer to ourselves – with a certain humor – by the name which they [humans] dreamed of, ‘gods’ [...] the ultimate ambition of this book is to salute the brave and unfortunate species which created us. This vile, unhappy race, barely different from the apes, had such noble aspirations. Tortured, contradictory, individualistic, quarrelsome, it was capable of extraordinary violence, but nonetheless never quite abandoned a belief in love [...] This book is dedicated to mankind.” (Houellebecq 2001 p. 379)

Houellebecq tells us that the world without humans is a world without cruelty, egotism, and anger. Nevertheless, there seems to be an element of Rousseau-like ambiguity over this Utopia in Houellebecq’s prose.

4. Concluding Thoughts

According to Houellebecq, the world is still very modern. The postmodern, aesthetic way of life is largely described as a reaction to the one-dimensionality of modern society. In fact, the postmodern response to modernity, the attempt to fill the gap in human relations permeating modern society, the aesthetic way of life as a search for a cure for alienation, cannot escape the process of reification. Today, human relations are defined by means to consumerist ends; ends that do not seem to lead us anywhere, but towards a more all-encompassing alienation. This alienation, in the absence of religious promises of an afterlife, makes us painfully aware of the concrete, physical nature of existence and its brief passing. Materialism has become so dominant that human relations are not mediated through external objects; humans are the *de facto* objects themselves. Thus, we are free particles, detached from the world and ourselves. Houellebecq's story is that of the lost subject.

Houellebecq seems to tell us that we can either choose between a life defined by the false consciousness or catharsis through committing suicide as a species, manifested in the characters of Michel and Bruno respectively. This can clearly be interpreted as a nihilist portrayal of a resigned human existence; however, I would carefully suggest that there is a critical dimension to such a representation. For such a ruthless description of the world is namely so disturbing that it provokes thought; it empowers the negation of one-dimensionality by uncovering the connections between science and philosophy that lies inherent in aesthetic-scientific society. I would argue that Houellebecq's framing of negation in such drastic, ontological terms can be read as a dialectical tactics to demonstrate exactly how deep he thinks the crisis of modernity goes, and what irrational form Reason may take if we let aesthetics and science dictate philosophy. But this is of course my own interpretation, which I have to assume full responsibility for.

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