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Source: *Yale French Studies*, No. 116/117, *Turns to the Right?* (2009), pp. 141-152

Published by: Yale University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25679773>

Accessed: 03-11-2016 14:49 UTC

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Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism, and Hegemonic Masculinity

The astonishing international success of the novels of Michel Houellebecq may be explained in large part by the presence of graphic, if not to say salacious, descriptions of sexual activity and by the key role that sexuality plays in the unfolding of the novels' plots. This, in any case, is what the marketing of Houellebecq's books would apparently have us believe, and possibly even more so in those countries where he is published in translation than in his native France. All of the British editions of Houellebecq's novels since *Les particules élémentaires* (1998), translated as *Atomised* (2000), have featured on the cover a photographic image of a young woman in underclothes or swimwear, sometimes with her back to the camera, sometimes gazing demurely at the prospective reader. Houellebecq's reputation as a writer concerned with sex above all was created by this book with its numerous racy scenes set in nudist campsites and swingers' clubs and the voyeuristic adventures of the hapless Bruno bringing himself off with more or less discretion to the sights of schoolgirls on trains, naked teenagers in communal showers, and couples canoodling in a jacuzzi. The multiplication of fantasy scenes culled directly from the repertoire of pornography in Houellebecq's next major novel *Plateforme* (2001) served only to consolidate this impression of a particularly single-minded author. However, anyone who has actually read a book by Michel Houellebecq will know that in fact he describes a world in which the majority of people spend most of their time deprived of sex. It would be no exaggeration to say that all of the heroes and narrators of Houellebecq's novels, at one stage or another of their narrative,

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abandon all hope of ever knowing a happy and fulfilled sex life. This article will concentrate on the absence or impossibility of sex in Houellebecq's work, focusing in particular on the first two novels (*Atomised* and its predecessor, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, from 1994, translated as *Whatever* in 1998). It will seek to bring out the political conclusions from Houellebecq's analysis of sexuality which can sometimes be obscured by the author's hasty and ill-informed rejection of feminism.

In some ways, then, it would be more accurate to say that the world of Houellebecq is a world without sex. In this sense, the opening paragraph of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* stands in a neatly metonymical relation to all the rest of Houellebecq's oeuvre. At a party among work colleagues, a young woman gradually removes her clothes while dancing, before finally getting dressed again when she realizes that no one is paying any attention: "She's a girl, what's more," Houellebecq notes, "who doesn't sleep with anyone."¹ Houellebecq seems to suggest that what the French critic Jean-Claude Guillebaud has called "le tapage sexuel"—the constant background racket of sexual representation and solicitation in our society²—may be less interesting to people than is commonly assumed. Approaching forty, Bruno in *Atomised* discovers that women of his age "aren't really into sex any more," although they may pretend otherwise.³ The narrator's priest friend in *Whatever* concludes: "we need to hear ourselves repeat that life is marvellous and exciting; and it's abundantly clear that we rather doubt this" (*Whatever*, 30). Houellebecq's world is populated by the single, the frustrated, and the reluctantly virginal; it is a world in which sex is certainly very visible but remains inaccessible to the vast majority.

In a context where the market value of sexuality is clearly displayed, sexual relations no longer appear as a natural extension of emotional attachment; nor is it even really physical pleasure that is most important in finding a sexual partner, but rather—and this is one of Houellebecq's key insights—the narcissistic gratification that accrues to the individual as a function of the desirability of the partner. Sexuality, "liberated" though it may be, no longer figures as the object of a "free" choice, but appears instead, to quote Jean-Claude Guillebaud, as

1. Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*, trans. Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 3.

2. Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La tyrannie du plaisir* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 16.

3. Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2000), 239.

“a constitutive injunction of our era,” a kind of ordinance of accepted modern behavior (Guillebaud, 136). The ruthless competition and demand for excellence that drive the labor market and economic relations have gradually encroached upon the private sphere in such a way that personal relationships and sexual practices are now subject to the same pressure. But, to paraphrase Georges Bataille, the orgy can lead only to disappointment. The sex clubs described in *Atomised* are anything but fun, marked rather by the stress and exertion of an erotic tournament:

Gaping from multiple penetrations and brutal fingering (often using several fingers, or indeed the whole hand), their cunts had all the sensitivity of blocks of lard. Imitating the frenetic rhythm of porn actresses, they brutally jerked his cock in a ridiculous piston motion as though it was a piece of dead meat. . . . He came quickly, with no real pleasure. (*Atomised*, 294)

As I mentioned above and as should already have been clear from my title, Houellebecq’s heroes are all single men. Now, as Jean-Claude Bologne has pointed out, if single people make up most of the protagonists throughout literary history, it is only because literature has traditionally described a more or less teleological trajectory toward the formation of the happy couple.⁴ And, although social and sexual habits and mores may have altered a great deal in recent decades, the priorities and the destiny of single people—in particular single women—have arguably changed very little in contemporary popular fiction and cultural production. In the recent vogue of Anglo-American novels produced about, by, and for single women—the so-called “chick lit” publishing phenomenon—, some critics have maintained that as much attention is given to the heroine’s career and to conspicuous consumption as to the male mate. It nonetheless remains the case that in most of these novels the encounter with the “right” man, even if it doesn’t provide the expected conclusion to the narrative, has a crucial role to play in defining the heroine’s aspirational psyche. In any case, even where marriage or its equivalent is no longer prioritized, as in works by contemporary French women writers such as Virginie Despentes’s portraits of unapologetic, unrepentant sex workers, or Catherine Millet’s memoir of a copious sexuality lived out with numerous anonymous partners, the focus is on women making the most of their single status.

4. Jean-Claude Bologne, *Histoire du célibat et des célibataires* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 7.

Yet the history of single people, as Bologne's study has amply demonstrated, is above all a history of discrimination and marginalization: unable to find their place in a society increasingly centered around the family, single people were derided as being unfit for marriage, hit with punitive taxes to correct their apparently selfish lack of contribution to society, and always the first to be sent to war. Indeed, until very recently, the single life has been a largely thankless one. The true originality of Michel Houellebecq in contemporary literature, I want to argue, lies in portraying the single life as unenjoyable and unwanted, even as it becomes increasingly unavoidable. So, for all of the high-profile sex in Houellebecq, most of his characters spend most of their time alone. For instance, the relationship between Bruno and Christiane in *Atomised* lasts for around a hundred of the novel's three hundred pages, but much of that is taken up with retrospective accounts of Bruno's miserable student years. Even at the height of his relationship with Christiane, Bruno cannot help but suspect that it might just be "a bad farce, one last sordid joke that life had played on him" (*Atomised*, 295). The same would be true of *Platform* and *The Possibility of an Island* (2005): brief, if sometimes ecstatic, sexual relationships appear only as short-lived anomalies in the endless plain of monotony and disappointment that characterizes these men's lives. Houellebecq's single male perhaps finds his hideous apogee in the character of Raphaël Tisserand in *Whatever*. Cursed with "the exact appearance of a buffalo toad" (*Whatever*, 54) and further lacking in charm or social graces, Tisserand provokes an involuntary disgust among women, and is condemned to live as though "protected from the world by a transparent film, inviolable and perfect," feeling increasingly like "a shrink-wrapped chicken leg on a supermarket shelf" (98). To Houellebecq's credit, we are a very long way here from what R. W. Connell has called "hegemonic masculinity," that which occupies a position of power within a given order of gender relations and which "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."⁵ Even if hegemonic masculinity in the West today relies less on paternalistic authority and more on a physical beauty that borrows from characteristics once reserved for femininity, it continues to be the capacity to attract sexual partners that shores up masculine power.

5. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 77.

The novels of Michel Houellebecq are above all narratives of sexual frustration. The single man may live alone, but his solitude is crowded by an unwelcome double of himself. This is clearly the experience of Raphaël Tisserand, as it is cruelly summed up by the narrator: "The sexual failure you've known since your adolescence . . . , the frustration that has followed you since the age of thirteen, will leave their indelible mark. . . . You will always be an orphan to those adolescent loves you never knew" (*Whatever*, 116). On several occasions in Houellebecq's work, sexual frustration threatens to spill over into physical violence toward other people. The narrator of *Whatever* encourages Tisserand, admittedly without success, to take out his disappointment in murdering a young stud and his beautiful girlfriend. Brigitte Bardot, the heroine of one of the embedded narratives within this novel, and whose corpulent physique lends a cruel irony to her given name, experiences a similar welling of anger: "She could only assist, in silent hatred, at the liberation of others; witness the boys pressing themselves like crabs against others' bodies . . . ; live to the full a silent self-destruction when faced with the flaunted pleasure of others. . . . Jealousy and frustration fermented slowly to become a swelling of paroxysmic hatred" (*Whatever*, 90). In this way, the over-riding feeling in our leisure society becomes one of "an immense and inconceivable bitterness" (148). Such is also the diagnosis of the future narrator of *Atomised*: describing the era in which Michel Djerzinski lived, he concludes that "the men of his generation lived out . . . lonely, bitter lives" (*Atomised*, 3). There is, I will insist, a properly political dimension to this identification of bitterness as the main result of today's social relations.

Houellebecq's most crucial political insight, the one that provides the foundations for his entire novelistic structure, can be found in the well known thesis of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: it states that there exists a system of social hierarchy, parallel to that of personal wealth, but based on sex and, in a context where free rein is given to market logic, "sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*" among the undesirable, equivalent to long-term unemployment and economic and social exclusion (*Whatever*, 99). Indeed, *Les particules élémentaires* suggests that sexual success became the *main* criterion of social superiority some time during the 1970s, before being matched by renewed economic competition with the arrival of globalization. The discourses of work and sexuality appear increasingly inseparable, each borrowing and re-employing the key terms of

the other. Houellebecq notes that sexuality is sold, in a culture of marketing, as a kind of adventure, necessitating "originality, passion and individual creativity [all qualities also required of employees in their professional capacities]" (*Atomised*, 293). Meanwhile for Bruno, who more often than not has to pay for sex, the state of his love life is almost entirely determined by fluctuations in the market: the arrival of immigrants from Eastern Europe drives down the cost of prostitution in Paris, but he is forced to cut back when he has to pay for repairs to his car. Also commenting on the parallel evolution of economic and sexual development, Jean-Claude Bologne has suggested that our era of economic insecurity might equally be characterized as one of emotional casualization: just as workers no longer expect a job for life and are obliged to refine their personal qualities in order to be re-employable, so too marriage or long-term relationships might be seen as a sort of "active life" of the feelings, marked by periods of unemployment, changes in management and, ultimately, retirement (Bologne, 375).

For Houellebecq, sexuality in the modern world has become altogether impossible or at least unbearable. Consumer society constantly seeks to arouse desire without providing any satisfactory outlets for it, this task continuing to fall to the private sphere which is itself increasingly uncongenial. "Human relationships [are becoming] progressively impossible" (*Whatever*, 14), the fluidity of the labor market and the multiplication of leisure options meaning that "people rarely see each other again these days" (40). It is precisely the proliferation of choice that diminishes the possibility of meaningful relations. Meanwhile, love has become an outmoded sentiment, structurally incompatible with a free sexual marketplace based around narcissistic competition: "Love as a kind of innocence and as a capacity for illusion, as an aptitude for epitomizing the whole of the other sex in a single loved being rarely resists a year of sexual immorality, and never two" (113).⁶ This is already Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*: Bruno and Michel remark upon the accuracy of Huxley's science fictional predictions in which reproduction is increasingly regulated but ever more detached from sexuality; there is a diminished importance of the family as well as a reduction of the difference between ages and chemically balanced moods. Although it is hypocritically decried as a totalitarian nightmare, this is precisely the ideal world we are currently

6. The explicitly judgmental sense of "sexual immorality" is not present in the original French: "vagabondage sexuel," which merely implies non-committal promiscuity.

trying to create. Huxley was wrong on only one point according to Houellebecq: sexual competition cannot be eradicated by scientific rationalism alone, since its counterpart, individualism, leads to an increased drive for narcissistic differentiation.

With no real possibility of love in this society, there is no room for family life either. For Houellebecq, sexual liberation marked "another stage in the rise of the individual," which the family was powerless to resist. The family was "the last unit separating the individual from the market" (*Atomised*, 135–36), and, in these novels, this membrane protecting us from the brutal reality of economic relations has been definitively torn. Bologne suggests that it is the single person, rather than the married couple, that has become the key point of reference in our society, such that many couples continue to behave as though they were single, enjoying separate homes, separate cars, separate hobbies, and separate holidays in a kind of "égoïsme à deux," or juxtaposition of two single lives (Bologne, 371–72). In this context, then, marriage, and especially children, can appear as an obstacle to self-realization. In Houellebecq's world, certainly, parental responsibility is met with negligence, or indifference at best. Bruno's father "wanted to do his best for the boy, as long as it did not take up too much of his time" (*Atomised*, 53). Bruno and Michel will both be brought up by their grandparents. Bruno has a son of his own, who merits no more than one or two offhand remarks in the course of the novel and who really comes to his father's notice only when he becomes old enough to be considered a rival in the sexual marketplace.

This apparent condemnation of a society in which family ties are severed and filial relations give way to bitter sexual contest could perhaps be interpreted as a retreat into reactionary values. That would, however, be too hasty a judgment, since one would search in vain, in Houellebecq's writing, for any nostalgia attached to the image of the family. If he describes the collapse of the family, it is seemingly without regret and without any illusions regarding an idealized family life that might have existed in another era. Houellebecq can have Bruno insist that Pope John Paul II "was the only person—the only person—who really understood what was happening in the West" in the 1980s (*Atomised*, 216), but does that necessarily mean he approves of the Vatican's sexual politics? If it remains difficult to circumscribe Houellebecq's political stance with precision, it is perhaps because the sexual arena is particularly open to ambiguous political interpretation. For instance, both Bologne and Guillebaud cite the rise of a "new

chastity" movement in the USA, with organizations such as True Love Waits, which, although easily associated with the Christian right, are sometimes understood by their adherents to be a deliberate rejection of sexual consumerism, often with an explicitly asserted post-feminist agenda (Bologne, 337; Guillebaud, 137–38). In his first novel, Houellebecq borrows a vocabulary of "struggle" familiar from Marxist politics. The title *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is drawn from the key paragraph in which the narrator sets out his theory of the parallel system of sexual hierarchy: "Sexual liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society" (*Whatever*, 99). Should we then interpret this sexual struggle as an extension of that most unfashionable of concepts in our would-be post-political age, the *class struggle*? Or is this struggle rather a kind of evolutionary survival of the fittest and thereby stripped of any explicitly political meaning?⁷ We shall return to this question below, but for now, we might simply share Guillebaud's concerns about an opposition between a clamoring permissiveness, on one hand, and a nostalgic moralism on the other: the simplistic division of sexual politics into a legislative prudishness versus an irresponsible libertarianism is a false opposition that we must be willing to resist (Guillebaud, 9).

For Houellebecq, it is the so-called "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and '70s that must bear a large part of responsibility for our current sexual malaise. In Houellebecq's interpretation, this sexual revolution was essentially the invention of middle-aged men who thereby came up with a way of sleeping with a lot of much younger women. The veterans of May '68 who set up the hippie campsite called the "Lieu du Changement" ("Place of Change") in *Atomised* conceive of it according to "the principles of self-government, respect for individual freedom and true democracy"; still, the site's main purpose is "to provide an opportunity to 'get your rocks off'" (*Atomised*, 114). Houellebecq's critique of the sexual revolution finds an unexpected echo in feminist writing where it has been interpreted as an extension to the whole of society of sexual values coded as highly masculine—promiscuity, emotional detachment, objectification of the body, genital sexuality. The radical feminist critic Sheila Jeffreys accuses the sexual revolution of marking the moment when sexual activity became

7. In any case, the bizarre rendering of the title in the English translation as the dismissively postmodern *Whatever* tends to cut short the very possibility of debate.

mandatory, necessitating a certain erotic efficiency and ostracizing those who would not or could not take part.⁸ With his customary dose of exaggeration, Houellebecq too condemns a culture in which the bodies of other people are so many props to be used in the individual pursuit of novel sensations: *Atomised* relates the dark trajectory of David di Meola, failed rock star and son of a hippy patriarch, who makes a career for himself in Satanic murder:

Having exhausted the possibilities of sexual pleasure, it was reasonable that individuals, liberated from the constraints of ordinary morality, should turn their attentions to the wider pleasures of cruelty. . . . From this point of view, Charles Manson was not some monstrous aberration in the hippie movement, but its logical conclusion. (*Atomised*, 252–53)

It would, in fact, be possible to draw striking parallels between feminist discourse and Houellebecq's analyses if he were not so stubborn and misinformed in his resistance to feminism. Houellebecq actually tends to blame feminism for many of the cultural calamities he describes. Where men and sex are concerned, it seems, "feminism has hit them harder than they like to admit" (*Atomised*, 166). Houellebecq's portraits of feminists from the '68 generation are breathtaking in their cruelty, and the fact of placing such libellous words in the mouth of Christiane, herself a woman of the same generation, seems a rather facile device to evade responsibility (though it is one that Houellebecq employs frequently throughout his novels). Thus feminists, apparently, "could never shut up about the washing up" and once they had "managed to turn every man they knew into an impotent whinging neurotic. . . . They usually ended up ditching their boyfriends for a quick fuck with some macho idiot before getting someone to give them a baby and settling down to make jam" (*Atomised*, 173–74). Houellebecq is disingenuous, not to say deliberately misleading when he delightedly recounts the unhappy fate that awaited these women: "As their flesh began to age, the cult of the body, which they had done so much to promote, simply filled them with disgust for their own bodies—a disgust they could see mirrored in the gaze of others" (125). But this "cult of the body" has nothing to do with feminism—which, on the contrary, has always been responsible for its most sustained and committed criticism; nor does it have much to do with the hippie

8. Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), 110.

movement satirized throughout *Atomised*; the “cult of the body” belongs, rather, to liberal, free-market capitalism for which it figures both as a marketing device and as an aspirational model, whose attainment, needless to say, necessitates the purchase of numerous products, from sports equipment and cosmetics to surgical enhancement. While accusing feminism of responsibility for phenomena that it has itself combated, Houellebecq also allows the real victories of women’s liberation to be tarred with the same satirical brush. Thus the free indirect speech used by Houellebecq in his portrait of an abortion doctor attached to the hippie community (*Atomised*, 86–87) contains a silent but pernicious irony that risks consigning women’s control of their own reproductive systems to the rubbish heap of historical bad ideas, along with free love and flared trousers.

From time to time, in Houellebecq’s trenchant analyses of the sexual arena, there may be a passing recognition of the kind of unthinking objectification to which women’s bodies are subjected in everyday social intercourse. In an Italian restaurant, the narrator of *Whatever* complains about the waiter’s lack of attention: “Ah, if we’d been wearing slit skirts that would have been different!” (*Whatever*, 108). But Houellebecq’s own descriptions quite systematically reproduce this objectification. Observing a young woman in a nightclub, the narrator notes, “The wide hips, the firm and smooth buttocks; the suppleness of the waist which leads the hands up to a pair of round, ample and soft breasts; the hands which rest confidently on the waist, espousing the noble rotundity of the hips” (*Whatever*, 111–12). Here, then, a visual description immediately passes over into a physical, erotic appropriation. The same effect is produced, in a rather more vulgar register, when Houellebecq observes that a woman has “blow-job lips” (*Atomised*, 127–8). It is precisely this that provides the focus for one of feminism’s most fundamental objections to the patriarchal order—what Carole Pateman has called “the male sex-right”⁹: the demand by men to have access—whether physically, verbally or commercially—to women’s bodies displayed in a more or less public manner. Houellebecq’s indulgence for prostitution amounts to the same thing: the public availability of women’s bodies in order to satisfy male desire (the idea behind *Platform*—that of a generalized sex tourism whereby the inhabitants of developing countries sell their bodies on the open market to the jaded desires of Westerners—though it may be largely

9. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 199.

tongue in cheek, carries the same implication). The mercilessness of his descriptions of women—especially of older women, where the horror of flabby skin is reminiscent of Céline—also seems to demand, in much the same way as the consumer society that Houellebecq condemns, that women take a kind of public responsibility for the physical condition of their bodies.

At the same time, the appeal to a scientific or evolutionary discourse in Houellebecq's work tends to naturalize his presentation of human sexuality. Thus Houellebecq offers a detached, clinical description of the hormonal and anatomical transformations that mark the onset of puberty in teenage girls, but he betrays his own libidinal investment when he evokes, in far from neutral terms, the "round, full, pleasing aspect" of the resulting forms (*Atomised*, 66). The ultimate implication of this pseudo-scientific discourse is that biology is destiny, even if the science-fiction narrative arc of *Atomised*, as well as *The Possibility of an Island*, tend to suggest the opposite, depicting a species that struggles to escape a biological fatalism. In the meantime, though, what this means is that far more dubious assertions, such as the assumption that ugly women will necessarily be ignored while beautiful women are condemned to a tragic sexual destiny by the predatory instincts of men, are lent the spurious authority of science. In the same way, the young Michel Djerzinski, in the very early stages of a reflection on the future of his species, draws conclusions about instinctive male aggression and the nurturing qualities of women based on the observation of wildlife documentaries and his pubescent schoolmates, apparently without considering the vast cultural gulf that separates these two examples. As R. W. Connell has argued, biology today occupies a role previously filled by religion in legitimizing an ideological difference between genders. But the attempt to give a hormonal or evolutionary justification to male dominance of women generally relies on a fictitious biology that ignores the overwhelming evidence of historical and cross-cultural diversity (*Masculinities*, 47–48).

I mentioned above that Houellebecq's heroes are far from representing hegemonic masculinity. This in itself is hardly surprising, since the masculine ideal is only ever incarnated in a very limited number of individuals. However, this does not prevent representatives of more marginalized masculinities from enjoying what Connell calls "the patriarchal dividend," a set of cultural benefits resulting from the subordination of women and that includes material wealth, political

power, prestige, privilege, and the right to command. Houellebecq's analyses seem to be blind to these advantages and this is ultimately what limits the usefulness of his demonstration. It is easy to feel sorry for Houellebecq's protagonists, viciously sidelined as they are in the sexual marketplace, constantly confronted with their own sexual worthlessness even as the culture of marketing insistently calls upon them to take part in the erotic adventure, as the only conceivable way of achieving the obligatory personal fulfilment. But even as we pity them, we ought to recognize that these men find themselves in a situation that has been familiar to women for centuries: that of being reduced to an object with an exchange value within a relentless traffic where what is at stake is the right of access to bodies. It is not feminism that is responsible for this situation. On the contrary, it is feminism that allows us—that allows Houellebecq—to identify it in the first place, and to denounce it with such indignation. It is free-market capitalism—which feminism has always understood as playing an integral role in the patriarchal order—that has extended this situation to the whole of society such that men today are equally well-placed to feel its dehumanizing effects. In Houellebecq's novels, beneath the resentment directed at women and the sulks and scowls of sex-starved men, there rumbles a subterranean howl of rage inspired by our consumer society. Listen to the narrator of *Whatever*: "I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. . . . Bullshit. Pure fucking bullshit" (82). Now, there is a rallying cry we can all unite behind, whether we're getting any or not.