

Ioan Pânzaru
University of Bucharest

POST-EGO : MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AND MAN'S AUFHEBUNG¹

Keywords: Houellebecq, Raelians, ethotechnics, desire, free will, neoliberalism, cultural capitalism, cultural identity

Abstract: A very controversial writer, Michel Houellebecq has nevertheless enjoyed enormous success. The reasons of this success lay in his contestation of the neo-liberal globalized system and in a Christian moral stance condemning the sins of humanity. Suggesting that humans will be replaced by new creatures of modern technology may not be a new idea, but it still opens wide avenues for thought, particularly since it became partially feasible with the advances of nanotechnology and prosthetics.

Introduction

The progress of technology in industrial society has brought about an unexpected change: after philosophy and mathematics were for a long time the model followed by science and technology, now technology itself appears to be a model for all knowledge. Engineering and re-engineering are considered for optimizing social processes; in biology it is usual to search for „cell mechanisms” and, following William James, to speak of animals as automata². Computers are used as a source of inspiration in order to understand human minds, and now neural networks-abstract models conceived as technological devices-objectify the search for knowledge. In the postmodern world technology takes the place nature used to hold as *magistra artis* in the modern paradigm.

Machine-modeling became prominent in all human sciences during the fifties, when a claim for the foundation of «cognitive sciences» was made on the assumption that the computer provided a model to understand the human brain. One began by speaking of the brain as a Turing automaton, which is an abstract device. Turing had said that a machine thinks, if thinking is defined by parameters which transform input into output. It may have been shocking to our fathers, but it was the post-war period, and all sorts of wonder machines were deemed necessary to defeat the enemy. Everyone thought that developing technology was good in itself, as long as it gave you an edge over the Russians. (The really nasty methods would of course be used only against the others.) Moreover, the use of machine models was viewed as a historical process of liberation; countries were considered “developed” if they were in possession of advanced technology, and developed states were free states. In fact today democracy goes hand in hand with technology. Men and women everywhere accepted that the role of the human factor in social life was to be diminished for the good of all of us. Human judgement is arbitrary, it tends to give individuals excessive power and thus the violation of human rights may become inevitable. We discovered that individuals had to be substituted with committees, committees had the role to produce criteria, and real life situations had to be treated impersonally, through the

¹ A version of this paper was presented as a keynote speech at the International Conference of the English Department, University of Bucharest, in June 2008 (editors' note).

² This is the theory of Descartes first, later discussed by Thomas Henry Huxley, “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and Its History”, *Nature* 10 (1874), pp. 362-66. William James reacted to it in his paper “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?”, *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 1, 1904, pp. 477-491. He concludes to the non-existence of an ontological stuff called “consciousness”, but he thinks “experience” is the matter the world is made of. See also by James “Are We Automata?”, *Mind*, 4, 1879, pp. 1-22, where “feeling” is what makes us regard “our conscious selves as actively combating each for his interests in the arena”.

rigorous application of criteria. Strong personalities like Churchill would never more have a role to play in the world of technology.

Many of us tried to seek a consolation by believing that machines cannot really think and sooner or later the Turing test will prove that. John Searle's Chinese room experiment provided everybody with some reasons for confidence. The period of dubitation, if there was any, lasted only until a world chess champion was for the first time beaten by a computer³. Then, surprisingly, humanity seemed to passively accept its fate, to be reckoned as the precursor race, the one which was sent to pave the way for thinking machines⁴. There is a raging battle in the Parliaments of the world over legislation allowing biotechnological modification of plants and animals. But the human species still seems to be protected by a religious *fatwa*. It is relatively easy to forbid official experimentation on humans, while in practice our biological modification at mass scale began more than a hundred years ago. We may witness in our days the *Aufhebung* of man, its denial through Hegelian conservation, towards a "higher", subsequent form of "life". Mentioning Hegel's concepts is correct here, because we are in a context of historical progress; with the help of technology we can be certain that for many tasks better performances are now possible on Earth than what has been the lot of humanity, and what is sought in many contemporary utopias is precisely to overtake humans as a life form.

The prophet of the Raélians, Claude Vorilhon, addresses the students with a very simple message:

- your fathers and your teachers are lost because they are dinosaurs from the 20th century; they cannot adapt, they'll just die and be replaced by you;
- the ethical and the unethical are meaningless, they are slowing down the progress; happiness is the only meaning of life;
- science can be our religion, because it has in stock for you the suppression of death, the disappearance of work thanks to nanobots, steaks and salads out of chemicals, virtual sex on Internet, electronic drugs;
- you will become eternal through adult cloning and transfer of memory using the computer⁵.

Raël is here playing the role of the king's jester. He may well be completely ignorant of the matter, but he senses the opportunity to be credible in front of an audience which has been educated to worship technology.

Michel Houellebecq's novels, *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d'une île* had a tremendous impact⁶ because, among other reasons, the idea of renewing the human species was connected

³ Garry Kasparov lost a three-game match against IBM's Deep Blue computer in 1997. Another world champion, Vladimir Kramnik, lost a six-game match in the face of a computer in December 2006. It has been proved that machines think better than the smartest human when it comes to playing chess. The interest of programmers is switching now to games like poker and go.

⁴ "The Singularity", as Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil call it, is the appearance of a machine which is more intelligent than us, a «non-biological intelligence», and their predictions situate it between 2005 and 2030. Cf. Maestrutti (2006).

⁵ On Internet at URL: <http://fr.youtube.com/watch?v=T4Ys1jiaVTU>. Brigitte Boisselier, de Clonaid, prétend que plusieurs femmes sont enceintes de clones des membres du mouvement, URL : http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xdf2v_secte-rael-a-tt-le-mde-en-parle-par_extreme.

⁶ Against many devastating reviews, like that of Angelo Rinaldi in *Le Figaro littéraire*, 18 June 2005, Pierre Assouline on his blog *La République des livres*, 31 Aug. and 8 Nov. 2005, and Michiko Kakutani's in *The New York Times*, 10 Nov. 2000. President Jacques Chirac in person commented Houellebecq's nomination for the Prix Goncourt, saying to François Nourissier: «Mais, Nourissier, Houellebecq, c'est un écrivain de fourré, de buisson, vous ne pouvez pas le défendre» (Nourissier 2008). Houellebecq received the Grand Prix National des Lettres Jeunes Talents, 1998, and in 2002 a rather obscure international prize of 100,000 euro, the IMPAC Dublin Award, offered by the city of Dublin and the productivity improvement company, IMPAC.

for the first time with a biblical condemnation of moral evil, reiterated in a postmodern key. To replace our infelicitous, false-hearted species by new creatures, rationally designed by scientists so as to abstain from harming each other, resonates with many Judeo-Christian ideas. Humanity appears to have deserved total destruction, and the moral duty of the scientific researcher is to work towards our substitution with more sophisticated and better beings.

There is indeed no hope to eradicate the evil residing in human nature. This had been accepted long before in the Judeo-Christian culture. Saint Paul's condemnation was echoed by all modern thinkers, from Calvin and Pascal to Freud and Nietzsche. Michel Houellebecq totally endorses the charge and goes so far as to probe contemporary dispositions towards reparatory action. Having studied the Raëlian movement, he gave an ironical image of it in his last novel *La Possibilité d'une île*. The moral stance of the author is extremely apparent, in spite of the common contemporary distrust of ethics in art. In fact in this novel the protagonist is a comedian specialised in social satire, a synthesis of the controversial Dieudonné, Pierre Desproges or Jean-Marie Bigard, who have all touched the racist themes leaving behind the traditional French prudence. For Houellebecq, Palestinians and Jews, Communists and Neocons, Americans and Iraqis, French and *Beurs* are all alike, just diverse local manifestations of the universal human malignity. Following the complaint of four Muslim organisations, he appeared in front of a French Court, on the charge of incitement to religious hatred, for having called the Islam in an interview "*la religion la plus con*"⁷. He was acquitted⁸.

How could our contemporary society go beyond man? Not towards some self-disciplined *Übermensch*, of course, but towards a biotechnologically improved version of ourselves, unable to feel satisfaction in humiliating and dominating the other members of the species. Two are the main foci of interest of "ethotechnics", the production of ethical supermachines. One is to identify precisely the agglutination scheme which was so particularly unsuccessful in the creation of the human race: was it sexuality (can it be "pure" in its principle?) or sociality (can we beat the gregarious laws of bio-power and domination)? The second focus is to determine whether the creation of the new species that shall inherit the earth is going to be accomplished through the immortalization of an emended edition of our genetic code, or through the progressive interpolation of reliable inorganic mechanisms (e.g. nano-robots who could take over the digestive and respiratory functions, to start with) in the living texture of the body⁹.

Work on the first focus aims at identifying a procedure to tame or eradicate sexuality in the hope of rooting out Thanatos, the evil instinct of destruction. On this path, in science as well as in literature, one comes to grips with the problem of desire, Eros, the luminous brother of dark Death. In fact, there is one single capacity of desiring to bring about events, either for evil or for good. Eros and Thanatos are the two faces of Epithymia. We have been for centuries under the spell of Aristotle's pollyannaish belief that every being strives for knowledge – what the School has baptized *desiderium naturale* – and in this perspective all we

⁷ Entretien avec Didier Sénécal, Lire, septembre 2001. The departure point of the novel *Plateforme* was the great number of Muslim sexual tourists in Bangkok: « beaucoup d'entre eux n'ont pas la foi et vivent dans la plus totale hypocrisie. Quand ils viennent en Thaïlande, ils sont encore beaucoup plus frénétiques que les Occidentaux dans leur quête du plaisir. Ça a été le point générateur du livre ». Following in the same vein, he adds: « Et puis je me faisais une idée tout à fait fautive du tourisme sexuel. Je croyais que c'était surtout de gros Allemands âgés, et j'ai découvert qu'il y avait beaucoup d'Anglo-Saxons jeunes. J'ai eu une espèce d'intuition... à savoir que pour les Anglo-Saxons, la sexualité est une activité réservée aux vacances. Le reste de l'année ils travaillent beaucoup... ils n'ont pas le temps... et puis c'est trop difficile avec les Anglo-Saxonnes. Elles sont tellement chiantes, tellement compliquées. Si ces gens n'arrivent plus à faire l'amour, c'est parce qu'ils sont trop prisonniers de leur individualité. »

⁸ For a report on his deposition see Lichfield (2002).

⁹ Robert A. Freitas, Jr. proposes on the website of the Foresight Institute (<http://www.foresight.org/nanomedicine/Respirocytes.html>) a 1-micron nanomachine capable of delivering 236 more oxygen to the body cells. It is borne by the natural blood flow and could be used to treat anemia as well as to improve battlefield performance.

needed was time to discover nature's secrets and become the masters of the universe. But history shows beyond doubt that humanity has many other goals and that knowledge has no chance to slip into the list. Spinoza generalized desire not as a longing for knowledge, but as a general striving, the *conatus*. For Schopenhauer the *Wille* is a form of Kant's noumenon, that of which everything is a phenomenon, the real foundation of the world, a striving without goal, reason nor limits. If Spinoza, Schopenhauer and later Nietzsche are right, then desire is beyond construction and destruction. Hence the problem of improving humanity without knowing for sure what is good and evil. Until now the problem has been defined as teaching humans to desire good and hate evil. Today the problem seems to be how to get rid of desire altogether.

The second focus of work, in science as well as in fiction, tries to identify the mechanisms that make up our basic reactions: love and hate, acceptance and rejection, cooperation and strife. It appears to many that it is mainly a question of neurotransmitters: acetylcholine, adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin and so on. We already know that the electric stimulation of brain areas provides access to certain mechanisms that in a naïve old-fashioned lingo we may call psychological. Now it is the chemical control, made possible with nanotechnologies, that opens up new avenues for biopower. At a molecular scale, where Houellebecq's character Michel Dzerjinski is trying to work, or with the use of cloning techniques, the individual becomes a machine whose reactions are entirely determined. From historical determinism, a more commonly accepted idea, we move to the radical utopia of individual determinism¹⁰. Desire as a universal phenomenon has acquired through technological means a universal goal: control. When Norbert Wiener defined cybernetics as the science of control and communication, he indicated control as the expression of postmodern science. In a classical democracy, the toolbox for control consists in the communication technology. In the future world, control will be acquired through manufacturing biomolecular devices.

I am trying to show that the moral condemnation of man and the despair of improvement takes on, in Michel Houellebecq's work, the fictional form of telling stories about honest, good-natured, responsible scientists preparing the replacement of humanity. But this is not an allegory. This is a new utopian project, coming after communism and neo-liberalism. It is literally built on a critique of the "real" neo-liberal society. It plays exactly on the same mechanisms on which Orwell played against communism, but it does not defend anything that exists. Human nature, with its traditional attributes, such as freedom and dignity, is no longer a reference in this discussion and it bears no value. Human nature is nothing more than a variant of animal nature, an embodiment of nature "red in tooth and claw", in Tennyson's words. For Houellebecq, there is nothing more worthy of salvation in humans than in chimpanzees, with a possible special case to be made for dogs. Until now, critics of Freud used Marxist arguments. Against Marx, it was always possible to use Hume and Adam Smith. But now, with Houellebecq, one cannot resort to classics, because for him, the current times are the embodiment of their utopia. His critique draws on classics to destroy them. Yesterday it was still possible to think that socialism is "artificial" and market economy "natural", but today, freedom and market economy are just another utopia¹¹.

The ego as desire

We are faced in the postmodern era with a popular discourse which sees our truth in our desire¹². Setting desire free seemed to be the main goal of civilisation in the sixties and seventies. In an analogous way

¹⁰ An interesting position is still that of Eric Berne (2006, orig. ed. 1971). Reading Berne through Houellebecq's critique of the flower power paradigm may be worth the effort, even if casting doubt on human freedom.

¹¹ A reading of Kipling's *The Gods of the Copybook Headings* could refresh our ideas. Houellebecq's position is not opposed to Kipling's.

¹² Ratzinger's version of this argument is that our society emphasizes choice over truth (by encouraging religion without religions, a "basic spiritual core" without any particular commitment, Ratzinger 2004). It seems to me that the dominance of the market model gives our passive desire (choice between offers) pre-eminence over any active desire to change the world. An "individual" truth might be found in active desire, but not in the passive one, which invites control.

to the class struggle which, following the then significant Marxist doctrine, was raging everlastingly within the bowels of society, it seemed that the truth of the human being was to be sought in a subterranean struggle for the realization of our desire's *phantasmata*. Hence, if sex was what we all truly desired, sexual liberation might have been the key to a possible non-competitive society. Freud appeared to explain Marx, he extended revolutionary practice in the private sphere. For many activists of the seventies, political revolution as in Russia or China might well have been the source of many evils, but for all of them to blame was mostly the clumsy puritanism of lower-class revolutionaries. Had they built the people's republic after the fashion of Catalan anarchists, on the foundations of sexual liberation, and not in the repressed way favoured by the Russian Christian peasantry, the utopia might have endured. It is worth noting that Freud never preached any sort of revolution.

On the other hand, desire is an important political machine whose mission is to construct identities. Desire models sexuality and metaphysics. Aristotle says that matter desires form in the same way as a female wants a male. Same-sex desire, for instance, identifies and defines attitudes of self and others towards self. Desire for freedom, normality, democracy, progress, prosperity shape our political identities. In the cultural field, romantic desire, the desire for pleasure, the desire to solve the mystery of our existence play the role of tags conferring order and meaning to the variety of human endeavours.

Now Houellebecq exposes the failure of the neoliberal sexually liberated culture¹³. The failure consists in pretending that sex is a freely available merchandise on a regulated free market between producers benefiting from equal opportunities – when exactly the opposite is the case. We are not equal as subjects and objects of desire, there is no regulation of the erotical market, no freedom from desire, no control over love. Instead of the technologically developed society that shows on the screens of the London stock exchange, in love-life we live in a primitive polytheistic irrational dictatorship imposed by the unknown and mischievous gods of sex. Given the alternative between ruthless repression and total chaos that this situation offers, it is bizarre that the liberation of desire was conceived of as the path towards an equalitarian, non-competitive society. When free desire came, it was only to serve as a new product to be marketed by the neoliberal capitalism. Instead of a socially providential state, says Houellebecq, we inhabit a despondent psychological hell. It is inevitable that starting from these premises our life will sink into despair and the deepest bestiality¹⁴.

If this construction seems a little spectacular, there is another way, a more abstract and philosophical one, to explain the turnabout. Since J.L. Austin and John Searle, we have been used to the notion of direction of fit. When we say that snow is white, it is our duty to see that it is really the case that the snow is white. The burden of proof is on our shoulders. There is an ethics of truth that plunges its roots deep in the past, in a complex of religious, epistemological and scientific mix going down to the Greek civilisation. Austin spoke of the "onus of match": if a judge pronounces a sentence, the onus rests upon the judicial system to make reality match the sentence. In the most frequent cases, the onus is imposed to humans, not to the world. One of the characteristic traits of our concept of reality is corrigibility: what is real is what imposes corrections on our representations, contrary to our desires or fantasies, which never really need to be corrected. Even Freud has stated two principles, that of pleasure (*Lustprinzip*) and that of reality; in his views, we should renounce the visions of the *Lustprinzip* and camp into the rough-and-tumble reality which soon cuts the wings of our phantasy. This is consistent both with the Stoic and the Pauline ethical principles.

¹³ Varsava (2005) attacks Houellebecq for being a Marxist, an enemy of free will, freedom and democracy, mistaking his role for that of a political reformer: "Houellebecq and his personae offer a pastiche of conservative communitarian views, at once indebted to the Old Left on matters economic, to catholico-Gaullist patriarchy on gender relations, and to the xenophobia given public expression by Jean-Marie Le Pen and the National Front".

¹⁴ This trait may be inspired from Aldous Huxley's Malpais in *Brave New World*. But in Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île* there is no narrative explanation for the persistence and decline of these native communities. The old humans apparently lost their creative capacities, since they declined quickly during the desertification of the planet, but they managed somehow to survive.

The postmodern world with its triumph over survival constraints is a new kind of environment where young generations live a different existence. The neoliberal doctrine of triumphant desire has created a world where the onus of match has changed¹⁵. For the first time in history, the ethics of the direction of fit has altered: being right, seeking justification has no value in itself. The onus of match is with the world, this man-made world of ours. We know that all we have to do is express ourselves, our desires and needs, with enough expressive force, and the world will adjust to fit our desires. The state is legitimate only to the extent that it supplies the economic and technological progress to satisfy our dreams. Maybe the essence of cultural capitalism is that the market consists in embodiments of our phantasmata—the direction of fit is world-to-representation, world-to-market. The burden of proof is on the world. It is the world that has the duty to conform to our desires. Dreaming of a 3G iPod is all we have to do: the industry is working on it just now. Desire is the angel of the postmodern world, who carries the prayers of the faithful consumers to the godlike producers.

But let us come back to the sexually liberated neoliberal economy of desire. It is obvious that the whole project doesn't work. Many consumers are miserable. They are looking for a naturally produced merchandise, sex, and the producer is nature – or God. God shows no corporate responsibility to society, in fact he does not even listen to our desires. The consumers are not equal, the market is not free, a vicious policy of protectionism seems to work in favor of the young and beautiful. It is an oligopoly. What if, asks Houellebecq, the world ceases to respond to our desires as it should? The only answer is: the world must collapse. The burden of proof lay with the world. But it cannot sustain it. The natural world is no longer fit to humanity. What will happen next? Of course, the responsible scientists will make a new model of human being (version 2.0) capable to create a new, more satisfactory world. Not everybody can be saved, of course. There will be a little number of justified people, chosen to undergo the salutary transformation, and the rest of the humankind will remain in this traitorous world, becoming more and more natural, i.e., receding to the state of bestiality. The neo-humans will be designed in such a way as to have only chemical and energetic needs, no desires and no metaphysical longings.

But to abandon the postmodern economy of desire is also to abandon the self. Never again will our statements mean the same, after the deictic point of the self has shifted. “When I say ‘I’, I am lying”¹⁶, says one of the immortal creatures of the future. The unity between the self of perception and the “mediation self”, that of the body, no longer subsists in neo-humans. Natural desire is a mediator between the Cartesian Ego that operates in cognition, and the biological Ego that subsumes the needs of its body. But the neo-humans have no desires. Thus, it appears to their creators that this was a way to liberate cognition from the interference of the body. Descartes' dream has taken control over reality, by being built into the technological reason. Humans are reduced to Cartesian Egos, according to, says Houellebecq, the three Laws of Pierce: “the person is her memory”, “the substratum of memory is language”, and “an immediate language is possible”. The immediate language is that of the machine. It is not mediated through bodily experience, a process that leads to an imperfect means of expression; instead it is given to neo-humans at birth, like a software; in this way no misunderstanding is ever possible. A Cartesian Ego is then nothing else than an externally-oriented sensorium endowed with a “life story”, a narrative, the autobiography of a person that lived once, when primitive technology could not offer immortality. A post-historical neo-human is a reproduction of a human's DNA, together with his “life story” and all the personal belongings¹⁷. The clone of a dog, for instance, can survive one incarnation of his master and continue to live with a second *avatara*, and the other way around. A neo-

¹⁵ In part under the influence of Freud's arbitrary interpretation by the left-wing intellectuals enticed by the Pollyanna principle, and also following anthropological reports like those in Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), where the local culture is encouragingly presented as a sexual paradise without restrictions nor tensions. Today's America, for instance, is marketed to the peoples of the world as the country where nothing is impossible.

¹⁶ *Posibilitatea unei insule*, p. 12.

¹⁷ This vision reminds us of the utopia of the Divisionist party in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959).

human is expected by the network to read the autobiography of his human prototype, in order to acquire an identity. But, as he has no affectivity, he will have only an abstract compassion for the suffering of his predecessor. Neo-humans are the technological implementation of what science and technology see in man: DNA and language.

Unfortunately, these creatures live a monotonous and mediocre life. The disappearance of desire and suffering could not liberate cognition beyond a very modest performance. Instead, their intellectual activities, lacking motivation, remain at an inferior level and can never attain creative ecstasy.

Self-expression and desire

Michel Foucault underlined the change in the nature of political power, effected in Europe during the second half of the 18th century, from the power to give death to the power to manage good life for people. This is what he calls “biopower”, a kind of power that takes as its specific object human populations as such. Governments take upon them to maintain and improve the biological conditions of their subjects. The people's health is the people's wealth. Politics becomes demagogy in the etymological sense, because human populations are treated as flocks or herds of animals, kept in good condition for producing economic resources. Foucault underlines the fact that individual well-being is subordinated in this approach to general biological policies oriented by risks, average indicators and statistical targets.

The first half of the 20th century has produced the feeling that freedom may not be just a right among others, but the source of rights. If that is so, then there is no limit to the number of rights that can grow from this fertile soil. The people's sovereignty is the foundation of the sovereignty of governments, and with it what the government protects is the population's biological existence. War is an expression of the biological survival of one human group, threatened by another in its very existence. The biopower entrusted to governments comes to be seen as an expression of the citizens' biological rights and as the political form chosen by states as the warrant of their citizens' well-being.

The old generation values, survival values like freedom, prosperity and life, have been replaced in the civilized world with the values of self-expression. Now freedom of speech, equality of chances, cultural diversity are the test values for civilization. The Socialist doctrine of the Providence state placed happiness as a duty on the shoulders of the government. Neoliberalism instead viewed happiness as an obligation of the individual, like many other conditions. Orgasm as an indicator of happiness told unambiguously which women were liberated and which failed in this “civic duty”¹⁸. Democracy equates free circulation of persons and goods, the moral and the economic ones. The freedom to choose and to be chosen has migrated from the public sphere into the private, and it is applied to politics as well as to sex life. Thus there appears what Houellebecq calls *la compétition narcissique*, the ambition to be seen as an alpha male or a dominant female, the object of many choices. Being desired, sexually desired, has become the topmost value of self-expression. Biological hierarchy is reinstated in society as a sexual selection of the best fit, and made unforgettable by means of a ubiquitous publicity.

Self-expression naturally places the self at the centre of everything. It seems in our days that the reason why society exists is to provide the self with means for its full development from potentiality to complete actuality. Society has the onus of match for my virtual capacities to become actual¹⁹. In this way narcissism is the intersection between self-expression values and the reduction of the self to desire. Everything exists in order to long after me, to be desired by me and to satisfy my desire. The state has to give me the means to live and to consume, according to my natural rights. Natural are the rights of the citizen, not those of the state, which are derived as an instrumentality through the means of a contract. The sovereignty of the

¹⁸ This is the expression of Jack I. Abecassis (2000), to whom I owe part of this development.

¹⁹ Hence the popular blame in the mass media of the poorer societies and states (like Romania), who cannot offer their citizens the exciting existence supposedly shared by the Americans (or the Saudi Arabians, for that matter).

people is now rewritten as the sovereignty of the individual, who deigns to empower the state in order to work for his benefit.

For the same reason, I exist in order to be desired. My unique *raison d'être* is to be elected, chosen, bought, conquered, consumed. The accomplishment of an existence comes as a periodic triumph in front of mass desire, under the form of a solemnly public sacrifice of the self to the innumerable others, like in the stage appearances of the Rolling Stones. The rock star is the paragon of the alpha male. But he is also the model citizen, who has actualized his potential development as what he is, his vital instincts, the truth of his individual desire. The fact that the state has no justification except that of giving me the means to happily unfold my potentialities has as a corollary the fact that I have no justification unless I am successful, desirable, valued as a citizen of the Republic of Epithymia.

Now on the market of desire our own exchange value may happen to be rather low. This appears as an unacceptable contradiction to the postmodern ideology. I know that happiness consists in purchasing material goods and consuming them. I as consumer am the *raison d'être* for the production and distribution of everything including myself. My income and my credit are the indicators of the economic health of the nation. And of course social life exists in order for me to appear, to exhibit myself, to be noticed and admired. Since I have money and status and rights, I *must* be happy and of course there is no reason for people not to like me, there is no reason that I not be an alpha male or female. This is how it should work.

I cannot worship market values and at the same time recognize that in this world order my role is that of the lambda element, the omicron male, the underdog. I cannot actually worship self-expression values like free speech or enterprise or consumption and at the same time discover that my place in a democracy is reduced to casting one vote in millions every four years and that my place in the hierarchy of consumption is invisibly low. There must be some mistake here!

This is the point Houellebecq makes with perspicacity and for which he is rewarded with so wide a success. He answers a question everybody asks: how come I am supposed to have the central place in this world and nevertheless feel so pitiful, so despised, so unbefriended. Self-expression has finally found its way to the truth of unhappiness, against the cult of success and the hypocrisy of the mass media. And of course the market was there for this sort of desperate self-expression. Houellebecq (2001) explains that in rebelling against the *idola fori* he took a chance and he won : *L'expression de la souffrance personnelle, dans ces années où les gagners étaient idolâtrés, était obscure. J'ai brisé le tabou (...)* Je suis l'écrivain de la souffrance ordinaire.

We cannot say: be patient, be reasonable, try to go *meta*, to integrate at a bigger scale. Being patient is a value in the stoical system of morality and today there is nothing so silly as to consider even for a second the possibility of stoical acceptance of suffering, even less self-sacrifice. To be reasonable in our world is specifically not to accept frustrations, to push ahead, to be resilient. To integrate would mean to go beyond the individual values, and this cannot be part of the education of an individual. This is where Houellebecq collects, because in a culture of blame he blames everything and accepts no gradual improvement. The moral desert where his characters are travelling is virtually infinite, since there can be no reasonable and accessible way to correct the wrongs he denounces and they hit almost everyone.

Understanding the self and autoimmunity

Modern times, particularly under the influence of Victorian models, have revived the Stoic philosophy in an attempt to preserve Europe's heritage confronted with the wild diversity of the world's civilizations. Protection from cultural assimilation is embodied in a series of social functions that can be compared to health protection mechanism in the biological body. In order to protect, we have to discern the own from the alien. There has to be some distinct European signature that makes our traditions homogeneous and idiosyncratic. Of course anthropology itself is that distinct European look, the identitarian signature that makes possible to think human diversity from a unique point of view and give it sense. Europe could open to other cultures without problems for as long as it believed itself immune to their contamination. But now it is uncertain about itself,

about its own capacity of developing its identity further on toward new horizons, to go all the way from giving others a distant look to being watched by them. Our new horizons seem to incorporate Asian and African cultures, and for this reason they are not new, but they are not particularly ours. In doubt about its capacity of discriminating its own identity and thence protecting itself from cultural aggression and loss of identity, the European society has developed autoimmune mechanisms. Autoimmunity is a biological phenomenon which consists in morbid self-protection mechanisms attacking the cells of their own body, not recognizing them as part of the self. This crisis has culminated with the rejection of the European Constitution and the cultural identity symbols it proposed. Michel Houellebecq saluted the *No* in high mood. During a tour in Los Angeles, he declared that the French people are usually cowards and the rejection of the European Constitution was an unexpected defeat for the government²⁰.

Now progressive intellectuals are generally in favour of the European attempts to strengthen the Union, because it will provide a political alternative to the United States model on the world map, while probably maintaining the current social policies if not strengthening them. Houellebecq has taken reactionary positions on a number of issues, while still being linked to a utopian thinking style inherited from his former Communist milieu. His particular mix of anti-multiculturalist, anti-Islam, anti-liberal and anti-capitalist opinions is difficult to understand²¹. It may be explained using the biologic model of auto-immunity, where lymphocytes and other cells designed to defend the limits of the organism against the intruders attack its own tissues, like in Crohn's disease. Proclaiming the death of European culture and at the same time the defeat of multiculturalism and racial tolerance can be an auto-immune reaction.

The explanation of cultural auto-immunity may lie in the link between personal and socio-cultural identity. Multiculturalism preaches equal tolerance towards all cultures. Cultures are legal subjects, all equal in the face of the law. Individuals, belonging more or less to their cultures, seek to promote their own mutual equality in the face of the law, representing themselves as cultural, more than legal, subjects. Culture gives status. Thence our dependence upon asserting our cultural rights. I am more respectable as a Jew, a Muslim, a refugee from Montenegro, than as an ordinary citizen, a plumber or a teacher. The public sphere of the Enlightenment cannot survive any more, nor can the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people in the expression of its common will, since it is a common will of the many coexistent different cultures that we need in order to legitimate the action of the state. We typically disagree in the private sphere and convene in the public sphere only to proclaim our relative immiscibility.

As a self-sufficient individual, I have the right to remain silent, to reject any exchange with my neighbour. The right to reject communication has been sanctioned by the twin doctrines of individualist liberalism and cultural relativism. A radical intellectual will accept that there are no two human experiences alike²². As Ernesto Laclau puts it, postmodernity is built on anti-foundationalism and attempts to weaken the logic of construction between social and cultural identities²³. Foundationalism is the doctrine that our knowledge, or better the construction of our social reality, depends on foundational experiences which are beyond doubt, like sense-data or belief in God. Now in history the foundational experiences on which social reality was built were typically revolutions, liberation wars, the conquest of the land, as expressions of the successful common will. The foundational experience of our liberal individualist society pretends to be the recognition of the best interest of the citizen as a rational agent. But this goal cannot construct a common

²⁰ Bernhard (2005).

²¹ In the words of John Lichfield, Houellebecq may be a "prophet; pornographer; fascist; racist; trouble-maker; drunk; nihilist; moralist; self-publicist; misogynist; martyr to freedom of speech; one of the greatest living writers" (Lichfield, 2002).

²² Sarah Boyes, "What is a Radical Thinker? Pulling up the Roots", *Culture Wars*, 24 August 2007, URL: <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2007-08/radicals.htm>.

²³ Laclau (1996). Even emancipation cannot have a foundation, because it would then turn opaque to itself. "So, if it is the very notion of a social totality that is in question, the notion of 'particular' identities is equally threatened", p. 13.

social reality for all, as it cannot transcend the borders of the individual life-perspective. This is why we can say that it is an anti-foundationalist society. Emancipation is the main goal of individuals, and society is only a vast canvas on which they try to embroider their own identity. It is the molecules' perspective of an elephant roaming through the jungle.

Unfortunately, the dissolution of foundations, the deconstruction of the grand myths on which societies were built are of little help when it comes to individual identity. In terms of discourse, language is built on reference and centered on deixis. In a somewhat analogous way, societies were built on authority and centered on something transcendent, equivalent to God. I cannot speak without a deictic reference point, without a first-person perspective – not in natural language. Of course I can endorse different perspectives, each of them having their own deixis and being translatable by the transfer of the vantage point. But at a social level, constructing an individual identity is only part of the grand rituals, it flows from some aspect of the cultural identity of the society.

In deconstructing the foundations of culture, we do not emancipate men and women from the chains of domination, but we simply ask them to construct an individual identity when society itself has renounced an identity. We give them an impossible mission. We ask the individual to accomplish what we deny the society the right to finish. In fact we'll end up with men and women without an identity, ashamed of or suffering from having one, and looking for something else. In this way we have defined a politics of multitudes, we have chosen biopower as a tool for engineering of human populations, and we reject self-expression with all personal goals, which will not be allowed under the implementation of such technology, into the régime of exceptions and into the realm of cultural industries. In fact the full individual as foundational phenomenon of all society and as the source of all politics is denied the right to existence.

Identity becomes merchandise in the field of entertainment²⁴. It is part of what is called *content production* by the leading corporations. If we hold to the link between identity and desire, we will have to buy our identity and our intimate desires from the marketplace²⁵. Does this mean that we are doomed to live in some sort of a revival of ancestral tribalism in which we no longer believe, to wear the historical garb of the defunct European citizen, in meaningless rituals of participation? Houellebecq answers that the citizen, the society and the human project need to be redesigned altogether. And this reengineering must start from the biological level. We know enough today in order to understand that society and economy are built on biological bases.

Houellebecq maintains that desire is to be rooted out because it provides a handle for too simple a manipulation. Desire is the medium that allows the economic domination, since desire can easily be expressed in money equivalent. Exactly as money is the measure of all things, so the intensity of desire on a linear scale can be a political measure of popularity and power. The mass production of desire may be the most profitable industry ever. The Californian flower power communities, which Houellebecq describes in *Les Particules élémentaires*, are spaces of primitive domination, experiments staging mass control through synthesis of artificial desire. If we really want freedom and democracy, we have to get rid of artificially induced desire. This may prove impossible in capitalism, a society based on general public consumption.

There is also a strictly economic reason: the roots of desire have in fact already been weakened in the post-modern cultural capitalism. The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler has shown that capitalism tries to solve its eternal problem, overproduction, by using abnormal amounts of publicity. Publicity has expanded to form what we call today cultural industries, a network of content production that push populations to consumption. Cultural economy is the new face of capitalism. To the critique that cultural economy is useless

²⁴ We have the right to choose to be the fan of somebody else. Houellebecq's character Daniel in *La Possibilité* follows Isabelle's advice and replaces his Mercedes by a Bentley. This decision brings him a lot of money because his new look attracts a new public. Satchell (2007) shows that 3G telephones are configured so as to allow each user to personalize the device and to broadcast her own identity.

²⁵ René Girard's theory of mimetic desire has become commonplace.

and ineffective, one can answer by pointing to youngsters, who are completely dependent on music, movies, computers, videogames, portable telephones, Internet communication. Their world is entirely modelled by cultural industries²⁶. These are their actual *economic* needs, and to their satisfaction their natural rights are tied. Our youngsters' identity is produced daily by accessing these technological devices.

According to Bernard Stiegler, however, in so doing capitalism has transgressed a barrier, wherefrom its ruin might come. Our desires have natural objects, like food, sex, love, and there is a natural limit to the consumption of these goods. Cultural industries had to push to over-consumption while substituting to natural objects like bread and butter artificial objects, such as computers and iPods. To this effect, it was deemed necessary to decompose desire into smaller units, its constitutive dynamic units, drives (*pulsions*). The modern alienated subject, by analogy with those unfortunate youngsters that the Japanese call *hikikomori*, is completely dependent on the consumption of artificial objects and reduced to primitive drives. He is in fact a sociopath of a new artificial sort. While desire is constituted in society through a process of learning, drives are naturally given as primary matter. If we fail to process that primary matter by organizing it at a higher level, Stiegler claims, we will end up in psychological infirmity.

To construct an individual identity starting from our unique personal data, without taking part in the exterior social ceremonies, is today a subversive project, as much as it was in the times of the Renaissance. Michel Foucault thought it could be based on the body, as a unique event that occurred in history, in order to "think the political subject as an ethical subject"²⁷. Other answers may prefer the brain as the locus of the event. Yet others may suggest that we are a loop involving the brain, the body and the environment. There is an anecdote about the American philosopher Morris Cohen. As he once taught Descartes and his famous argument *Cogito, ergo sum*, a very serious student who had long meditated on the subject interrupted him with the question: "Professor, do I exist?" Cohen asked: "Who wants to know?"²⁸ From our topic's perspective, Cohen's answer shows the identification of the subject with her desire.

Descartes' problem has bred for long years a kind of philosophical autoimmunity in educated individuals. Now the virus has infected our societies.

Understanding control – the neohumans

For some people, especially Foucauldian followers, the task of the postmodern revolutionary is to move away from the mechanisms of biopower, based on contact and communication. We can build a virtual network which will embody the future's *body politick*, the contractual condition of our freedom. No longer in the physical promiscuity of the political masses, out of reach of direct media such as radio or television which drive us hysterical and aggregate, the virtual society will offer each of us the freedom to express and to become.

An even better solution, says Houellebecq in his novels, would be to do away with our peccable humanity altogether. We could continue as impassible creatures, clones of the last historical humans, in an intermediary era, waiting for the arrival of a truly superior race, the Futures.

Yet, the idea of improving the human species through the active intervention of biotechnologies hides a terrible flaw. While animals can be cloned without difficulty, and carry indefinitely the same capacities they had in their prototypal, historical life, post-historical humans will have lost the capacity of having desires and emotions. They are, in fact, superior to their predecessors, nevertheless they long to understand them. While

²⁶ Houellebecq (2001): «Nous vivons dans un monde où le désir est constamment suralimenté par les fantasmes (les photos publicitaires, les magazines féminins...) (...) Je revendique l'absence de fantasmes. Je refuse le fantasme, je n'en ai pas besoin. Je le refuse d'autant plus qu'il est désormais programmé par le marché, à travers l'érotisation extrême de la publicité, par exemple».

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, p. 187, quoted by Maurizio Lazzarato, "Du biopouvoir à la biopolitique", *Multitudes* Web, online March 2000, URL: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/spip.php?article207>

²⁸ Schrag (1999), p. 12.

cloned dogs can love their neohuman masters and be happy, neohumans cannot love each other and be happy, because they depend on a personal history. If human A once loved human B, the clone of A may be attracted only by her contemporary clone of B, as they inherit their stories but are not motivated to have their own. As such, they are only an experiment, the gate through which the Futures may arrive. Perhaps if they meditate enough on the life stories of their predecessors, they might find out the mechanisms of eternal beatitude that will allow the birth of the Futures.

Whatever the technical prosthetics of which neo-humans are the bearers²⁹, they will need maintenance. Of course, they are autotrophic like plants and use only sunlight and mineral salts. Yet, they cannot operate indefinitely, and have to be reproduced in a central industrial unit. Even though living in isolation, they have to be connected within a network through Internet, a little bit like automated teller machines, which need to be refilled with money every week and signal their troubles to the center of the informational matrix. The moment one of the neo-humans ceases to live, a sensor signals the fact to Central City, where the production of an exactly identical specimen starts. The unit *Proyecciones XXI, 13* from *La Possibilité d'une île* has its own power station, satellite antenna, a generator of mineral salts and its own source of drinking water. The neohumans have to avoid all contact with the few survivors of historical primates, the humans.

The machines are conceived in isolation, as Cartesian substances. This is how the notion that they need each other, that their predecessors found the meaning of their lives in the (unhappy) exchanges with others, comes to them as a historical surprise. All neo-humans have received instructions to study the lives of their own predecessors. Meditating about the biographical narrative gives them an identity by inheritance. But it also opens the door to understanding, to the communication between selves, to a simulacrum of compassion. It takes 24 generations of neohumans until one of them, Daniel 25, discovers that his solitary, perfect, and eternal existence has no meaning. He leaves the *Proyecciones* station where he was destined to live his eternity and starts a long travel in search of the ocean. In an abstract way – which is definitely not Spinoza's desire – he wishes to meet a fellow neo-human. Unfortunately his design prevents him from being happy, from feeling compassion or love, because this is the only way for him to be protected from unhappiness. All he can feel is an „imponderous sensation, obscure and nutritious”.

Houellebecq shares the postmodern theories of the self as desire and of the self as a mirroring image of the Other. He seems to be in agreement with Baudrillard's, Bernard Stiegler's and Jeremy Rifkin's analyses of cultural capitalism. Like Baudrillard, he fails to develop a theory of agency, and of resistance to evil. But on the other hand he responds to Descartes and Huxley on their theories about animals, machines, and the meaning of cruelty. If beasts are automata, then we can treat them without any regard. But if they are capable of suffering, if they actually suffer, then we owe them respect and have to consider their dignity. Thomas Henry Huxley has made an extremely acute observation to which Houellebecq seems to react 130 years later:

I confess that, in view of the struggle for existence which goes on in the animal world, and of the frightful quantity of pain with which it must be accompanied, I should be glad if the probabilities were in favour of Descartes' hypothesis; but, on the other hand, considering the terrible practical consequences to domestic animals which might ensue from any error on our part, it is as well to err on the right side, if we err at all, and deal with them as weaker brethren, who are bound, like the rest of us, to pay their toll for living, and suffer what is needful for the general good.

The love for dogs that Houellebecq displays in his life and works has no doubt a philosophical explanation. Dogs are the only animals with a respectable moral life, in that they love and suffer like humans, only with an incommutable truthfulness that puts us to shame. If humans are machines, then it may be right, from a cosmic point of view, to replace them with improved models. Would dog-parts be an untimely choice for perfecting human hypothalamus? Why can we use a pig's heart-valve and not a camel's *substantia*

²⁹ It is the Standard Genetical Rectification, to which the first neo-humans were subjects, and which, conferring them autotrophy, allowed them to survive the great desertification of the planet. Cf. *La Possibilité d'une île*.

nigra? On the other hand, if we are not automata, then there may be some reason for us to stop improving the human genus. As we are most generally of the contrary opinion, and insist for the betterment of our fellow men, then we should accept that essentially we are machines which could and must be reengineered. We still have to look for a reason to refrain from improving humanity in this practical manner, and to indicate a boundary between what can and what cannot be changed in our natural constitution.

The insurgent stance of Michel Houellebecq may perhaps be better understood within the framework of a perceptive remark made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire*³⁰. The authors draw an analogy between our globalized, neoliberal world and the end of the Roman Empire. It is due to a contestation of the values of the imperial Roman power that Christian counter-power developed in Rome. "Empire was accepted as the 'maturity of times' and the unity of the entire known civilization, but it was challenged in its totality by a completely different ethical and ontological axis". The ideas of Hardt and Negri may be familiar to Houellebecq; anyway, in an interview he says: *Les Français se comportent vraiment comme les valets d'une portion de l'Empire*³¹. The writer is of course against the „imperial” power and any form of international domination. In this way Houellebecq can appear as one of the underground protesters of a new spirituality, in search of a new religion. Is the principle of man's *Aufhebung* indispensable to this new religion?

Michel Houellebecq proposes a very relevant analysis for the condition of the self in our time. Science reduces our life to algorithmic mechanisms like cell biology, formal languages and sociobiological reactions. Pretending to set desire free in our postmodern society has led to a new slavery, for the young people confronted with an extremely dangerous cultural economy based on narcissism, sex and drugs; for the old age, banishment outside the social links is the poisoned fruit of freedom. The neoliberal economy built on artificial stimulation of desire is doomed to fail, since desire has been de-naturalised and over-exploited like any other resource. The fact that post-modern capitalism relies heavily on psychological mechanisms has eventually changed something in their nature, namely the affective limits of the self. Autoimmune mechanisms have been triggered, with the effect that a feeling of guilt and inadequacy is part of our contemporary culture. On this ground, a culture of the *Aufhebung* of man may be viewed as a possible solution to the enormous risks posed by our globalised society.

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³⁰ Hardt and Negri (2000), p. 21.

³¹ Sénécal (2001).

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