

## **“Michel Houellebecq, Meet Maximilien Robespierre”: A Study in Social Religion**

**Louis Betty**

University of San Francisco

Since the publication of Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* in 1998, his fiction has inspired an array of critical responses. Many of these responses have drawn comparisons between the author's writings and the work of various key figures in the Western literary and philosophical canons. For example, Houellebecq's fiction has been likened to the novels of Camus, Zola, Balzac, and Céline, and his poetry has evoked associations with the poetry of Baudelaire. Scholars have pointed out Houellebecq's philosophical debts to figures such as Schopenhauer, Comte, and Nietzsche, and to French non-conformist writers like Emmanuel Mounier and Robert Aron.<sup>1</sup> Insufficient attention may have been given to Kant, whom Houellebecq often refers to in his writing, or to utopian thinkers such as Fourier and Saint-Simon, who inform much of the utopian discourse in Houellebecq's fiction. Even so, given the rapidly expanding nature of what we might call *Houellebecq Studies*, these stones will not remain unturned for long.

Within this quickly growing body of critical literature, one figure remains unaddressed: Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre, the great republican ideologue, the foremost instigator of the Reign of Terror, and the eventual victim of decapitation. This is initially surprising when we consider how Robespierre and Houellebecq show agreement on the social value of religion in times of perceived growing atheism. Robespierre invoked this theme most memorably in his address to the Convention of 7 May 1794, in which he unveiled his plans for the creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being. Houellebecq, whose treatment of religion has received little attention from scholars, returns at numerous points in his writing to the question of religion's social function, often to lament religion's decline in an “age of materialism” (*Particles* 246). Crucially, Robespierre and Houellebecq both offer sustained criticism of the materialisms of their day. Robespierre viewed the atheistic and deterministic materialism of certain aspects of the Enlightenment as poisonous to the republican project. Houellebecq, in his fiction and non-fiction, bemoans the materialism produced and perpetuated by the West's culture of consumerism and

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the scholarly writing on Houellebecq can be found in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael's edited volumes *Michel Houellebecq à la une* and *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*. For Comte and Nietzsche see, respectively, George Chabert and Gerald Moore. For a discussion of the French non-conformist writers, see Seth Armus.

modern advertising. He blames the rise of the “market society” (*Interventions 2 27*) and the atomization of human relationships on this materialism.

In this article, our purpose is to show the similarities between Houellebecq and Robespierre’s views on three topics: (1) materialism, (2) secularism, and (3) religion’s social role. Crucially, we will argue that the “materialisms” that each figure condemns, respectively, can be linked to radical enlightenment elements. These elements attempt to dissociate divine will from human action (a feature of virtually all enlightenment thinking) and to erect a conception of human existence from which all divine and immaterial predicates are absent.<sup>2</sup> The materialistic legacy of particular aspects of the Enlightenment forms the basis for the complaints of both figures, even though the historical manifestations of that legacy appear markedly different (atheism and anti-clericalism for Robespierre’s society and consumerism for Houellebecq’s society). Finally, as our conclusion will bear out, Robespierre and Houellebecq, although united in their denunciation of materialism, do not to share the same confidence in the solutions to the dilemmas they spell out. As a figure of tremendous revolutionary enthusiasm, Robespierre believed that his Cult of the Supreme Being could be an effective replacement for the Catholic Church. In contrast, Houellebecq’s proposed “solutions” (i.e. cloning cults, neo-humans, etc.) offer very little hope. Houellebecq’s positioning in a post-modern context forbids him the means of radical and revolutionary social change that were, or at least appeared to be, available to Robespierre.

### **Houellebecq on Religion**

Before directly tackling the question of Houellebecq’s affinities with Robespierre, we will first discuss the parameters of Houellebecq’s view on religion. This view is manifested both in his fiction and non-fiction. Houellebecq’s treatment of theology, philosophy, and related subjects is not programmatic in the way of a theological treatise. Nonetheless, a number of clear tendencies run the gamut of the author’s work: (1) materialism, (2) secularization, and (3) new religious movements.

#### *Materialism*

In *Public Enemies*, his co-authored exchange of letters with Bernard-Henri Lévy, Houellebecq writes, “Maybe, like Lovecraft, all I have ever written are *materialist horror stories*; and given them a dangerous credibility into the bargain” (275). Just as naturalism was the guiding principle of Zola’s fiction, the ontological ambiance of Houellebecq’s novels is one of strict physicalism. In this view, human existence is reduced to a finite set of physical parameters while the domain of “spirit” (gods, souls, and other such entities) is explained away as the superstition of a pre-scientific and “pre-positivist” age.<sup>3</sup> Houellebecq explores the psychic consequences of this worldview in the following passage in *The Elementary Particles*:

Contemporary consciousness is no longer equipped to deal with our mortality. Never in any other time, or any other civilization, have people thought so much or so constantly about

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the terms “radical enlightenment” comes from Jonathan Israel’s book *Radical Enlightenment*.

<sup>3</sup> We are referring here to the “law of the three stages,” which formed the basis of Comte’s sociological theory.

aging. Each individual has a simple view of the future: a time will come when the sum of pleasures that life has left to offer is outweighed by the sum of pain (one can actually hear the meter ticking, and it ticks always in the same direction). This weighing up of pleasure and pain, which everyone if forced to make sooner or later, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide. (204)

Virtually all of Houellebecq's characters are tormented in one way or another by their physicalist outlook. Many, including Bruno, Michel in *Platform*, and Daniel1 in *The Possibility of an Island*, resort to sex as a means of subverting (albeit failingly) the pressing awareness of their own mortality. Others, such as Annabelle in *The Elementary Particles* and, again, Daniel1, commit suicide once their bodies become a source of suffering, or when they can no longer count on them to be a source of pleasure due to illness or old age.<sup>4</sup> Characters such as Djerzinski in *The Elementary Particles* and Vincent in *The Possibility of an Island*, although their journeys do not end as tragically as those of Daniel1 or Bruno, nonetheless cannot conceive of human salvation, or even human progress, in anything other than physicalist terms. Djerzinski, for example, understands "the practical possibility of human relationships" (*Particles* 249)—that is, the defragmenting of the atomized society envisioned in *The Elementary Particles*—to depend not on some spiritual, metaphysical, or psychic renewal, but on the manipulation of the human genome in order to breed out native tendencies toward "egotism, cruelty and anger" (263). Vincent, prophet of the Elohimite cloning cult in *The Possibility of an Island*, contends that human love is only possible in the context of physical immortality. He tells Daniel1,

Man has never been able to love, apart from in immortality; it was undoubtedly why women were closer to love when their mission was to give life. We have discovered immortality, and presence in the world; the world no longer has the power to destroy us, it is we, rather, who have the power to create through the power of our vision. (286)

The only catch in this case is that immortality is limited to the physical body. Whereas the survival of human consciousness in a spiritual form was the natural consequence of physical death in the Christian universe, immortality in *The Possibility of an Island* has to be produced *in vitro* through vague processes of memory transfer that Houellebecq, for obvious reasons, never fully explains (92).

Unsurprisingly, the "materialist horror stories" recounted in these novels are not the product of mere philosophical imagination. Instead, they stem from Houellebecq's explicit diagnosis of prevailing Western mentalities. For example, in the *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis*, a non-fiction work, Houellebecq writes, "Without a doubt, the twentieth century will remain as the age of triumph in the mind of the general public of a scientific explanation of the world, associated by it with a materialist worldview and the principle of local determinism" (*Interventions* 2 152, personal translation). In the Houellebecquian view, Western civilization has yielded almost completely to atheism and materialism, while traditional religious explanations of the world have been undermined by broad secularizing forces unleashed by the scientific revolution in the early-modern period. Within this framework, the ills that plague Houellebecq's characters (sexual pauperization, old age, the capitalist system of production, etc.) can be understood as developments linked with the supposed

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<sup>4</sup> See *Particles* (231) and *Possibility* (272-73, 291).

move toward materialism that the West has taken in the period following the emergence of the scientific method and the concomitant dissolution of the “medieval synthesis.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Secularization*

Until recently, most sociologists of religion worked under the assumption that religion and modernity were mutually exclusive. Industrialization, economic rationalization, and other elements of modernity gradually erode the religious worldview, and they believed that it was only a matter of time before religion disappeared altogether. Figures as diverse as Freud, Weber, Comte, Marx, and Durkheim all held to this view in one way or another. A new generation of sociologists only seriously challenged it in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

For Houellebecq, however, the much disparaged “secularization thesis” is practically unassailable, and the result is the literary production of a spiritually disenchanted West in which a once pious and Christian population has wholeheartedly yielded to atheism. For example, we read in *The Possibility of an Island*, apropos of the appearance of the Elohimite Church,

In countries like Spain, Poland, and Ireland, social life and all behavior had been structured by a deeply rooted, unanimous, and immense Catholic faith for centuries. . . . In the space of a few years, in less than a generation, in an incredibly brief period of time, all this had disappeared, had evaporated into thin air. In these countries today no one believed in God anymore, or took account of him, or even remembered that they had once believed; and this had been achieved without difficulty, without conflict, without any kind of violence or protest, without even a real discussion. . . . (245)

Houellebecq’s characters are not exactly pleased with these developments. In *Public Enemies*, Houellebecq describes his own atheism as “something cold, something desperate, lived like a pure incapacity: a white impenetrable space where one advances only with difficulty, a permanent winter” (164). Even so, he admits to feeling a “persistent intuition” that “for a society to cut itself off from the religious is tantamount to suicide” (161). Houellebecq’s personal sentiment is echoed in Djerzinski who, as he lies in bed starting at his water heater, begins to wonder,

How could society function without religion. . . . It seemed difficult enough for an individual human being. For several days he studied the radiator beside his bed. It was a useful and ingenious device—when it was cold, the pipes filled with hot water—but how long could Western civilization continue without some kind of religion? (Particles 135)

Djerzinski’s worry is something of a phantasm. Societies without religion are fictitious. Statistical surveys repeatedly show that a substantial majority of Europeans, even the highly secularized French, still believe in God or in some supernatural spirit or force, despite the fact that an even greater majority has ceased participating in religious rituals associated with Christian religion.<sup>7</sup> Houellebecq misses this subtlety in much of his fiction.

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<sup>5</sup> See Desplechin’s comments to Djerzinski in *Particles* (220-22).

<sup>6</sup> See the article of Rodney Stark. For a more moderate interpretation, see the article of Mark Chaves. Nicholas J. Demerath III reviews recent debates concerning secularization.

<sup>7</sup> For specific data, see the Special Eurobarometer Poll “Social Values, Science and Technology” (June 2005) published by the European Commission. See also Steven Pfaff.

His descriptions of the Catholic priesthood in novels such as *Whatever* (137-40) and *The Map and the Territory* (61-62) offer revealing portrayals of how religious change in certain communities (i.e. the decline of Catholic influence in twentieth-century France) can affect individuals and social institutions. However, the utopian and quasi- or pseudo-religious cloning cults of *The Possibility of an Island* and *The Elementary Particles* present a vision of European religiosity in which atheism and materialism are widespread. The disenchanted, materialistic West that Houellebecq depicts in his novels is the result of his commitment to a rigidly scientific creed,<sup>8</sup> not to social realism. Perhaps more than anything else, this bespeaks his unproblematic allegiance to nineteenth-century sociological thought about religion.

### *New Religious Movements*

According to Houellebecq, the remedy to all of this European existential malaise, either real or imagined, is not a return to traditional religion. Rather, the quest for immortality, which the rise of materialism in the twentieth century appears to have quashed, must be reformulated in terms of the *cloning cult*. The Elohimite and Azraelian sects in *The Possibility of an Island* and *Lanzarote*, respectively, along with Djerzinski's quasi-religious utopianism in *The Elementary Particles*, all represent Houellebecq's attempts to reconcile the human craving for immortality with physicalism. We read of the Elohimite Church in *The Possibility of an Island*:

As for Elohimism, it was perfectly adapted to the leisure civilization in which it had been born. Imposing no moral constraints, reducing human existence to categories of interest and pleasure, it did not hesitate, for all that, to make its own the fundamental promise at the core of all monotheistic religions: victory over death. Eradicating any spiritual or confusing dimension, it simply limited the scope of this victory, and the nature of the promise associated with it, to the unlimited prolongation of material life, that is to say the unlimited satisfaction of physical desires. (248)

In many respects, this mingling of a traditional religious concept such as immortality with a putative religious movement boasting unswerving physicalist commitments serves as a kind of advancement on Comte's *Religion of Humanity* for Houellebecq. Much like Robespierre, Comte worried that the combined upheavals of revolutionary anti-clericalism and scientific materialism would undermine the religious sentiment that lent moral unity to human, and, specifically, French, society. Sensing (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the old foundations were crumbling, Comte laid the groundwork for a new "religion." In this religion the concrete promise of immortality characteristic of traditional religion would be translated into a metaphorical yet equally satisfying form of eternal life wherein the dead would enjoy abstract survival in the memories of their descendents (346).

Comte's system failed to attract a critical mass of converts, a fact Houellebecq blames on the figurative conception of eternal life that Comte relied on. Houellebecq writes in *Public Enemies*:

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<sup>8</sup> In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Houellebecq describes himself as "a curmudgeonly pain in the ass because [he] refuse[s] to diverge from the scientific method or to believe there is a truth beyond science" ("Michel Houellebecq" n. pag.).

A religion with no God may be possible. . . . But none of this seems to me to be conceivable without a belief in eternal life, the belief that in all monotheistic religions acts as the great *introductory offer*, because once you've conceded that, and with this as your goal, everything seems possible; no sacrifice too great. . . .

Comte wasn't offering anything like that; all he proposed was one's theoretically living on in the memory of mankind. He gave the concept a slightly more high-flown twist, something like "incorporation into the Great Being," but it didn't change the fact that what he was offering was a theoretical perpetuation in the memory of mankind. Well, that just didn't cut it. (166)

Houellebecq's portrayals of post-human utopia, in which technology rather than religion steps in to satisfy the desire for immortality, are telling indicators of his own engagement with Comte's discussion of religion and its prospects in a supposedly materialist age. Of course, one can wonder whether a "religion" that replaces the supernatural with the technological really merits that appellation. After all, the preservation of human life against physical decline is as much the province of medicine as it is of spirituality. Still, since both traditional religion and the cloning cults of Houellebecq's fiction are concerned with survival though in radically different ways, it would be injudicious to insist on such a chasm between them. By broaching the question of new religious movements at a time in which Christianity in many parts of Europe has waned significantly, Houellebecq challenges his readers to imagine the future of religion in societies whose spiritual trajectory is uncertain.

Regarding religion, the Houellebecquian worldview is one in which a broad cultural acceptance of a materialist or physicalist conception of the natural world has led to a "disenchantment" of reality: a steep and irreversible decline in the legitimacy of traditional religious claims. This disenchantment is followed closely by attempts in certain sectors of Western civilization to elaborate quasi- or para-religious responses to the existential questions that religion originally served to address. Significantly, Houellebecq's novels offer a fictional rendering of theories of secularization that emerged in the nineteenth century. The fact that much of the substance of those theories has become suspect in recent work in the sociology of religion does not appear to have deterred Houellebecq in his convictions.

### **Robespierre, Religion, and Revolution**

Having established the parameters of the Houellebecquian view of religion, we can now turn to the critical question of what that view has in common with Robespierre and then to broader discussions of social reform and revolution in modern France. During his tenure as the leader of France's revolution, Robespierre was habitually confronted with Jacobin "dechristianizers" (for example, the sort of radicals responsible for defacing religious icons on the outsides of French cathedrals) who had imbibed the atheistic vitriol of radical enlightenment thinkers such as Spinoza, La Mettrie, and Diderot. The composite atheism, materialism, and mechanistic determinism that these thinkers embraced, either explicitly or implicitly, stood in contrast to the moderate "Rousseauian" version of enlightenment that Robespierre celebrated. Robespierre viewed the radical anti-religious elements among the revolutionaries as a threat.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Although Rousseau's political thought expressed a clear rejection of traditional authority and the political and social structures of pre-revolutionary Europe, two of the philosopher's beliefs distanced him

An example of one of these radical anti-religious elements is found in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's well-known work *Man a Machine*. La Mettrie claimed that "the transition from animals to man is not violent" (103), and that human beings are "machines which, though upright, go on all fours" (143). Summarizing his materialist position, La Mettrie wrote,

The soul is therefore but an empty word, of which no one has any idea, and which an enlightened man should use only to signify that part in us that thinks. Given the least principle of motion, animated bodies will have all that is necessary for moving, feeling, thinking, repenting, or in a word for conducting themselves in the physical realm, and in the moral realm which depends on it. (128)

Arguably the most significant of radical enlightenment figures, Spinoza went so far as to deny free will and intelligence to God, thus suggesting implicitly that deterministic laws requiring no divine sanction govern the universe. In Part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza claimed, "will and intellect stand in the same relation to the nature of God as do motion, and rest, and absolutely all natural phenomena, which must be conditioned by God" (86). Spinoza implied that God is indistinguishable from Nature; He is neither all-loving nor all-knowing, but is rather the simple origin of natural phenomena, and, by that right, requires no personal attributes.

Robespierre had to reconcile the desire for radical political change with his pervasive worry that a society without any religious foundation whatsoever was doomed to fail. In other words, he was forced to walk a very tenuous line between the radical enlightenment atheism of Spinoza, La Mettrie, and others, and the Old Regime conservatism that employed religion as a tool of social control. The promulgation of the Cult of the Supreme Being, a deistic construct with a somewhat vague godhead, was the logical result of this delicate maneuvering. Israel offers a helpful summary of the philosophical and ideological situation facing Robespierre at the time of the revolution:

When, in May 1794, Robespierre officially launched the Cult of the Supreme Being, as part of his counter-move against the Jacobin "dechristianizers" among his opponents, whom he saw as being under the pernicious sway of such atheistic *philosophes* as Diderot, Helvétius, and d'Holbach, he emphasized the need for a public cult, insisting on its republican functions and expressly citing Rousseau as the architect of the new civic religion. (717-18)

Therefore, although famously anti-clerical, Robespierre reserved a special place for religion within the future of the nascent republic.

The three parameters we have laid out above describing the Houellebecquian view of religion can be molded, with surprisingly little alteration, to Robespierre's own perspective on the role of religion in the state which Robespierre laid out in his speech of *18 floréal an II* (7 May 1794) to the Convention. Specifically, we find notably similar concerns with the psychic and social consequences of atheism (and by extension materialism), the secularizing forces loosed by the Revolution, and the creation of a new religious structure (the Cult of the Supreme Being) that was able to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of the Catholic Church. Robespierre's statements on these matters were so unequivocal that there

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from much of radical enlightenment thinking (Israel 714-20): (1) the existence of a Creator and belief in the immortality of the soul and (2) the absolute distinction between good and evil.

is little need to explicate them. Rather, it is simply a question of calling to mind where they find new forms of expression in the Houellebecquian corpus.

### *Materialism and Atheism*

In his address to the Convention, Robespierre called attention to the social and psychic dangers associated with jettisoning theism in favor of materialism. Insisting “the idea of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul is a continual call to justice,” which is at once “social and republican” (317),<sup>10</sup> Robespierre asked:

Who therefore gave you as a mission to announce to the people that Divinity does not exist, O you who have a passion for this arid doctrine, but who never takes an avid interest in the fatherland? What advantage do you find in persuading man that a blind force presides over his destiny, and strikes at random crime and virtue; that his soul is only a breath of air that is extinguished at the gates of death? . . .

Miserable sophist! By what right do you come stripping from innocence the scepter of reason to place it back in the hands of crime, throwing a funereal shroud over nature, pushing sorrow to despair, delighting vice, saddening virtue, degrading humanity? (316)

A person stripped of any recourse to thoughts of eternity will see his sorrow at the loss of friends and loved ones transformed quickly into despair. The man who perishes beneath the criminal’s blows can expect no justice in the next world, and he will not live to see it done in this one. The existential malaise that one faces at the prospect of extinction is a domain that many ancient and modern philosophers have treated. For example, Sartre, in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, claimed that his philosophy was none other than an attempt to draw all the logical conclusions of thoroughgoing atheism (53). Robespierre draws those conclusions for himself, and they are not happy ones. Atheism is not only inimical to human happiness; it also endangers society by undermining the bases of justice and morality.

Certainly, much in Houellebecq’s work confronts issues of immorality and existential despair in a society in which religion is not even an afterthought, and, as in *The Possibility of an Island*, a cult of youth has arisen that vilifies the old simply because they cannot join in the pursuit of *volupté* (sensual pleasure). Bruno of *The Elementary Particles* expresses his own malaise in this regard, as well as the malaise of an entire society, when he declares to Michel,

As soon as people stop believing in life after death, religion is impossible. If society is impossible without religion, which is what you’re saying, then society isn’t possible either. You’re just like those sociologists who go on about how the youth culture is just some passing fad from the fifties that had its finest hour in the eighties, and so on. Actually, man has always been terrified by death—he’s never been able to face the idea of his own disappearance, or even physical decline, without horror. Of all worldly goods, youth is clearly the most precious, and today we don’t believe in anything but worldly goods. (212-13)

Like Robespierre, Bruno views the prospect of extinction as a source of immeasurable despair. He worries that a society without a religious foundation linked to a doctrine of immortality is prey to moral and material collapse. Of course, Robespierre stood at the very

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<sup>10</sup> This and all subsequent citations of Robespierre are personal translations.

beginning of the revolutionary period in France. Although his tone is often one of alarm, he maintained a militancy in the face of atheism that can hardly be said to belong to Houellebecq or to any of his characters. Daniel in *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, is so convinced of his own atheism that concepts like soul and immortality strike him as absurd: "My atheism was so monolithic, so radical, that I had never been able to take these subjects completely seriously" (178). Both Robespierre and Houellebecq begin from a similar starting point: the worry that materialism and atheism will undermine society. However, their positioning on opposite ends of the historical spectrum results in revolutionary enthusiasm on the one hand and skepticism on the other.

### *The Road to Secularism*

Although France did not officially separate Church and State until 1905, the separation doubtlessly appeared imminent to figures such as Robespierre. Robespierre's remedy to the perceived demise of French Catholicism was the Cult of the Supreme Being. Fourier later suggested the Phalanx, Saint-Simon presented a "New Christianity," and Comte offered the Religion of Humanity. Of course, one could argue that all these improvements on the old form were just expressions of particular intellectuals' frustration with a mode of religious expression and a concomitant social organization that they found unsuitable to the modern world. On the other hand, it would be difficult to deny that these attempts did not also bespeak a fear in many quarters that atheism, and by that right secularism, represented a menacing potential development in the social structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French society. Robespierre, for example, wrote, "he who is able to replace divinity in the system of social life, is in my eyes an extraordinary genius; he who, without having replaced it, dreams only of banishing it from the minds of men, seems to me extraordinarily stupid and perverse" (318).

As it turned out, these fears were exaggerated. The world has never witnessed a period of total secularism, even if certain phenomena associated with it have occurred, such as the loss of interest in religious ritual or the handing over of Church property to the State. In any event, it is easy to recognize the ways in which atheism appeared as a viable, possible, and even imminent development in social and individual attitudes at certain moments of France's revolutionary period. Indeed, it appeared in this way to much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and various regimes of Marxist inspiration even tried to instill atheism as a staple of the public weal.

Houellebecq's co-opting of this particular discourse of secularization is curious when we consider the persistence of religion in the world at large and the continuing influence of the Catholic Church in France well into the twentieth century. Catholic elements played a role in fanning anti-Semitism during the Dreyfus affair; yet Catholics also sheltered Jews during the Nazi occupation. Even now, with the spread of Catholicism and other forms of Christianity to the Third World, it may seem that France's problem is not so much with Catholicism as Catholicism's problem is with France. On this point, Houellebecq writes in *The Elementary Particles*:

The agnosticism at the heart of the French republic would facilitate the progressive, hypocritical and slightly sinister triumph of the materialist worldview. Though never overtly discussed, the question of the *value* of human life would nonetheless continue to preoccupy

people's minds. It would be true to say that in the last years of Western civilization it contributed to a general mood of depression bordering on masochism. (59)

Houellebecq is probably right to link French laicism with the statistically more secular outlook of the French population among the rest of Europe. The radicalized doctrine of separation in France must have an effect on religious views and practices, unless political organization counts for nothing in the formation of individual and social attitudes. However none of this is as invasive or definitive as Houellebecq imagines, at least not from the point of view of demographic data. In some respects, the fact that Houellebecq so readily adopts and aestheticizes a discourse of religious decline inherited from the beginnings of the revolutionary period seems bizarre. Yet, simultaneously, he makes us wonder whether the views of figures such as Robespierre, Comte, Fourier, and others, whose concerns about atheism would appear largely dispelled by the persistence of religion and contradicted by numerous data, do not in fact maintain some real, though as yet unclear, purchase in the contemporary moment.

### *Old Cults, New Cults*

Republicanism and across-the-board laicism often appear to be mutually inclusive in twenty-first century France. In the late 1700s, however, the political target of laicism for Robespierre was the Catholic Church. As the political philosopher of religion Marcel Gauchet has pointed out, the source of laical protest and controversy during much of the history of modern France was not a generalized religious sentiment or disposition in French culture, but rather the very specific institution of Catholicism and its ability to usurp political authority. In the course of the twentieth century, that ability declined and altogether disappeared. As a consequence, laicism, now generalized in the multicultural and multiethnic environment of the contemporary West, provides a weaker ideological base on which to form a sense of French political identity. For Robespierre, however, curtailing the influence of the Church was a principal political ambition, which called for the creation of a completely new religious ethos. Priests were to be left behind, but only when doing so would allow Divinity to be embraced more fully. Robespierre wrote:

Let us leave behind priests and return to divinity. Let us attach morality to eternal and sacred foundations; let us inspire in man that religious respect for man, that profound sense of his duties, which is the sole guarantee of social happiness; let us nourish him through all our institutions; may public education be directed toward this goal. Without doubt, you will imprint upon him a great character, similar to the nature of our government and the sublimity of our Republic's destiny. (324)

His creation of a Cult of the Supreme Being was undoubtedly a response to existential worries about the effects of atheism and secularism on society and individuals. At the same time, it also served a clearly political role. Catholicism was a source of political corruption that provided perennial justification for monarchy. However, like had to be fought with like, and the Cult of the Supreme Being could bear the social and political values of the new republic just as the Catholic Church had borne those of the Old Regime. Religion was as much a political tool as it was an existential tool, since it seemed inconceivable to

Robespierre that a political arrangement capable of producing social happiness could survive in a religious vacuum.

We have already seen how worries about the fate of civilization are bound in Houellebecq's work to a parallel anxiety about the putative disappearance of religious belief in the contemporary West. Where Robespierre found himself compelled to promulgate a deistic cult boasting a vaguely defined supreme being as its godhead, Houellebecq, who naturally foregoes the deism of the Enlightenment, offers the cloning cult instead. In the case of *The Possibility of an Island*, for instance, it is precisely the new religion, Elohimism, which survives war, political upheaval, and natural disaster to maintain some sort of stable political and/or social structure. It becomes the "central city" and the network of neo-humans who remain in contact via remote link. In *The Elementary Particles*, only the race of clones survives, while the remaining members of the first race of humans slowly become extinct. Through genetic engineering, the clones overcome innate deficiencies in human nature such as selfishness and jealousy that religious morality originally combated. We read of the clones:

Having broken the filial chain that linked us to humanity, we live on. Men consider us to be happy; it is certainly true that we have succeeded in overcoming the forces of egotism, cruelty and anger which they could not. . . . To humans of the old species, our world seems a paradise. We have even been known to refer to ourselves—with a certain humor—by the name they so long dreamed of: gods. (263)

In essence, political decline and social atomization leading to the break-up of coherent political entities is intimately linked in much of Houellebecq's work to society's inability to remedy the existential dilemmas that religion once addressed. In this sense, Houellebecq's fiction can be read in part as a fictional choreography of Robespierre's anxieties about the future of the French republic in a time of growing atheism.

### **Houellebecq: Harbinger of a New French Revolution?**

In *Houellebecq au laser: La faute à mai 68*, Bruno Viard writes of Houellebecq's political commitments, "So, left or right? Impossible to say in a word. His systematic hostility to the economy would place him on the extreme left at the social level, while his critique of sexual freedom makes him a conservative at the moral level" (38, personal translation). The seeming ambiguity of Houellebecq's politics, which we discover in Viard's simultaneous repudiations of "left-wing" morality and "right-wing" economics (and which we see in comparing anti-capitalist aspects of Houellebecq's poetry with pro-family and anti-sexual freedom discourses in *The Elementary Particles*) is not without precedent in recent French intellectual history.<sup>11</sup> As Van Wesemael points out in her article "L'ère du vide," much of Houellebecq's diagnosis of social atomization and the effects of economic liberalism on moral values is found in the work of certain key intellectuals of the French 1970s and 1980s, particularly that of Gilles Lipovetsky, one of the most important interpreters of the May 1968 student revolts (86). Arguing that the events of May, which on the surface seemed to augur a new era of social collectivism and anti-liberalism, led in reality to a period of narcissism and individualism supported by the capitalist ethos, Lipovetsky asks:

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<sup>11</sup> See *Particles* (96) and "A Last Stand against the Free Market" in *The Art of Struggle* (84-87).

Who is still spared by this tidal wave? Here as elsewhere the desert grows: knowledge, power, work, army, family, Church, etc., have all ceased functioning as absolute and intangible principles, in varying degrees no one believes in them, no one invests anything whatsoever in them anymore. . . . Everywhere the wave of disaffection is spreading, stripping institutions of their former grandeur and simultaneously of their power for emotional mobilization. (50-51, personal translation)

Perhaps even more to the point is this passage from Régis Debray's *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire* referring to the 10-year anniversary of the events of May 1968:

. . . the identity claims (the right to difference) springing up in May come before the demands of functionality of the operating system. What then appeared like constraints on individual existence were, in the end, constraints on the extension of merchandise to the whole social field. (14, personal translation)

According to Debray and Lipovetsky, by criticizing and repudiating the forms of subjectivity associated with traditional moral and political institutions (such as army, family, and Church), the perpetrators of May 1968 did not free French society from ideological oppression. Instead, the perpetrators delivered it to something far worse: the atomizing forces of liberalism, which rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of the old institutions. In this context, philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut point to a philosophy of 68 emerging from the work of Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lacan. This philosophy provided the philosophical justification for the evacuation of subjectivity. They write:

From Lacanian psychoanalysis to Nietzschean/Marxian derivatives, the philosophy of 68 philosophically legitimizes the heterogeneity that emptied the fluid Ego of substance. Criticizing the goal of self-mastery and truth as "metaphysical" or "ideological," an integral part of the traditional notion of subjectivity, and multiplying the variations on the theme "Je est un autre," the philosophical sixties both initiated and accompanied this process of disintegration of the Ego, which led to the "cool and laid-back consciousness" of the eighties. (66)

Where, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Anglo-Saxon intellectual establishment was busy appropriating the alleged *philosophies of liberation* emerging from the French 1960s and adapting them to the political objectives of multiculturalism, many French intellectuals were identifying or had already identified those philosophies as anti-republican, anti-humanist, and, indeed, anti-French.<sup>12</sup> Houellebecq's seemingly ambiguous political commitments are thus explained and lent unity by the fact that his thinking about liberalism and morality finds precedent in a stream of reflection about May 1968. This stream of reflection associates the disintegration of social values and institutions (a right-wing complaint) with the victory of an economic system that is seen to be favored by conservatives. The result of this victory is our entrance into the "market society," which Houellebecq defines as "a civilizational space where the totality of human relations, and likewise the totality of man's relations with the world, are mediated by means of a

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<sup>12</sup> For a definitive exposé of this divergence, see François Cusset.

numerical calculation appealing to attractiveness, novelty, and the quality-price relation" (*Interventions* 2 27, personal translation).

How does Robespierre figure in this discussion of the "disintegration of the ego," the "market society," and the "extension of merchandise to the whole social field?" Robespierre worried that the spread of atheism would endanger the life of the republic by destroying the moral bases of society. The forces of radical enlightenment had set the stage for an evacuation of all religious content from public life, and Robespierre had to struggle to prevent the revolution from "throwing the baby out with the bath water" by expelling the salutary offerings of religion along with its more pernicious aspects. Houellebecq, in unison with the intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s that we have just mentioned, is worried that the liberalization of values, the cult of the individual, and the creation of a social market will do (or are doing) the very same thing (to Western civilization at large). Is there a relationship between these anxieties? We believe there is.

Beyond the more obvious proposition that both Robespierre and Houellebecq worry that the lack of a religious foundation will undermine social morality, we can also understand the connection between the two thinkers as describing the development of materialism from an abstract or "philosophical" form (emerging in the Enlightenment in such figures as Spinoza and La Mettrie but evident in Antiquity in the likes of Epicurus and Lucretius)<sup>13</sup> to a consumerist and capitalist instantiation. In this type of society, the market thrives on a conception of human identity that reduces us to biological machines subject to manipulation by the forces of modern advertising. In this respect, a meaningful causal link can be explored in Houellebecq's work between the atheism of radical enlightenment thought and the consumerist materialism of modern capitalism. Although their historical contexts are very different, Houellebecq and Robespierre essentially react to the same philosophical developments. Therefore, from the point of view of historical analogy, it might be possible to claim that Houellebecq, in proposing a fictional reconciliation of materialism with religious yearning in the form of the cloning cult, is doing something very similar to what Robespierre attempted to accomplish with the Cult of the Supreme Being.

However, too strict a comparison of Houellebecq and Robespierre begins to break down here. There exists, admittedly, a logical connection between the postmodern hedonism of Houellebecq's fiction and the "religious solution" to existential malaise that the Elohimite cult of *The Possibility of an Island*, for example, proposes. In its embrace of the cult of youth, the religion caters to the hedonistic preoccupations of the times, but it also makes a concrete promise of immortality that suggests a deeper rapprochement with traditional religion. Much like the Cult of the Supreme Being, Elohimism can be seen to fill a religious vacuum left by the retreat of older institutions. However, we must keep the obvious in mind: Houellebecq is a novelist, and Robespierre is a revolutionary. Therefore, the two work for vastly different reasons. As a political figure, Robespierre believed in his remedy

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<sup>13</sup> Lucretius and Epicurus are both known for their emphatic denials of the existence of the soul. Different from Houellebecq, the two ancient authors encourage us not to fear extinction, since it is only the thought of nothingness that frightens us, not nothingness itself, which we naturally cannot experience. Houellebecq's characters would find little comfort in a text such as *De rerum natura*. Moreover, Houellebecq's unsympathetic treatment of the "Epicurian" excesses of post-68 French culture in *The Elementary Particles* or the cult of youth in *The Possibility of an Island* presents a clear verdict on the naiveté (perceived or real) of the comforts offered by these materialists of the ancient world.

to materialism. Houellebecq, on the other hand, is far removed from the revolutionary enthusiasm of 1789. Even if we are to insist on a prescriptive component in his writing, whereby his work might be seen to propose something in the way of solutions to the existential dilemmas he poses, it is obvious that his "utopian" remedies to spiritual decline in his more recent work fail to convince even him. We have only to consider, for example, the final segment of *The Possibility of an Island*, in which Daniel25 abandons the aestheticism imposed by the cult of the Supreme Sister and strikes out in search of his fellow clones. Daniel25 never accomplishes his mission; having finally reached the ocean, he reflects:

Organic life, anyway, a prisoner of the limited conditions imposed by the laws of thermodynamics, could not, even if it managed to be reborn, do other than repeat the same patterns: constitution of isolated individuals, predation, selective transmission of the genetic code; nothing new could be expected from it. (334-35)

In other words, no hope exists as long as materialism reigns supreme. The Elohimites' attempt to bring happiness through material perfection has failed, and Daniel25 can only add, "the sole fact of existing is already a misfortune" (334).

In the post-modern society of Houellebecq's novels, materialism is so advanced that all possibility of remedying its existential impasses must be abandoned. Frankly, no solution and no alteration to human biology or consciousness can compensate for the disappearance of belief in God and eternal life. For his part, Daniel25 can only elect to live out the rest of his "obscure existence as an improved monkey" bathing in a pool of warm salt water, where he experiences "nothing other than a slightly obscure and nutritive sensation" (*Possibility* 36). Is this all Houellebecq has to offer Western civilization? The life of a clam? In Robespierre's time, belief remained a viable horizon. Traditional theism may have been on the chopping block, but deism nonetheless stood out as a reasonable replacement. We find nothing like this in Houellebecq. We find only a sense of despair in the face of the worldview of materialism, which offers no spiritual resources to those who must live under its weight. Thus, Houellebecq and Robespierre may point convincingly to the same dilemmas, but the confidence in their solution, which is strongly present in the revolutionary, is altogether lacking in the novelist.

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