

Houellebecq and Call

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (August 2016)



Bernard Maris was a well-known French economist of independent turn of mind who, before his death, wrote in (among other places) *Charlie Hebdo*. He was murdered in the attack on the magazine in 2015. But it was not from any sympathy for his legatees that I recently bought a little book of his titled *Houellebecq Économiste*, which hardly needs translation.



Michel Houellebecq is possibly the best-known living French novelist, a man detested by many but not easy to ignore. His theme is the emptiness of modern life in consumer society, an emptiness which he describes with an unparalleled acuteness. He puts his finger precisely on the sore points of our existence, or at least on those points that seem merely anaesthetised until someone like him presses on them. He reminds me of the surgeon in Eliot's poem:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel

That questions the distempered part;

Beneath the bleeding hands we feel

The sharp compassion of the healer's art

Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

In Houellebecq's world people buy without need, want without real desire, and distract themselves without enjoyment. Their personal relations reflect this: they are shallow and no one is prepared to sacrifice his or her freedom, which is conceived of as the ability to seek the next distraction without let or hindrance from obligation to others. They are committed to nothing, and in such a world even art or cultural activity is just distraction on a marginally higher plane – though it is a natural law in this kind of society that the planes grow ever closer, ever more compressed.

For Houellebecq, the institution that best captures the nature of modern existence is the supermarket, in which people wander between stacked shelves making choices without discrimination or any real consequences, to the sound of banal but inescapable music. This music is like the leprous distilment that Claudius pours into the ear of Hamlet *père* as he sleeps in his garden once of an afternoon. The shoppers in the supermarket are not asleep, of course, but they are sleepwalking, or behaving as quasi-automata. At any rate, they are certainly not alert (most of them don't even have a list of what they need, or think they need), and the drivelling music makes sure that they do not awake from their semi-slumber.

The whole of modern life is an existential supermarket, in which everyone makes life choices as if the choices were between very similar products, between *Bonne Maman* jam, say, and the supermarket's own brand (probably made by the same manufacturer), in the belief that if they make the wrong choice it can simply be righted tomorrow by another choice. Life is but a series of moments and people are *elementary particles* (the title of a book by Houellebecq).

One certainly knows what Houellebecq means. Children are now adults and adults children. Once-serious newspapers review cartoon strips with the same solemnity

as works of scholarship, rock music is reviewed far more than any other even though the average age of the population has risen and there are as many geriatrics as infants, and relationships between human beings are analysed for their ingredients as if relationships were ready-made salad dressings. (The very existence of ready-made salad dressings, when it takes about two minutes to make a good one yourself, would be grist to Houellebecq's mill.)

If you watch crowds shopping in any consumer society you cannot help but think that they represent the sated in search of the superfluous. I once spent an afternoon watching shoppers – mainly women – in Beverly Hills, who almost certainly had all the possessions anyone could reasonably desire, and who exuded a kind of bored dissatisfaction with everything that they no doubt mistook for sophistication. As far as I could tell, they had not that connoisseurship that is the only justification for searching for yet more possessions when one is already overloaded with them, for connoisseurship requires discipline and knowledge and not just the exercise of whim to ward off boredom.

The decline of the west into narcissistic consumerist nihilism is, according to Houellebecq, not of recent date, if by recent date one means a decade or two. For example, the novel *Plateforme* begins with the narrator and protagonist in the flat of his recently dead father who was in his seventies when he died:

In the kitchen cupboards I found mainly Weight Watchers' individual packet meals, tins of flavoured protein, and energy bars.

This disgusting diet was, of course, in pursuit of fitness and longevity, clearly futile in the event, and a very shallow and undignified way of dealing with Man's mortality.

Finding in another room his deceased father's exercise and body-building machine, the narrator writes;

I rapidly saw in my mind's eye a cretin in shorts – with a wrinkled face, in other respects very like mine – swelling his pectorals with a hopeless

energy.

This is a very succinct and painfully exact delineation of a generation (born in the 1930s) that refused to believe that it would ever age, which believed in nothing but sensual pleasure and laughed at religious consolation. In a few very painful lines, then, the author portrays the denouement of such a life.

Houellebecq has been accused of being a nihilist and cynic, but far from that, his work is an extended protest against nihilism and cynicism. It is true that he offers no solution to the problem, but it is not the purpose of novels, but rather of tracts, to offer solutions to such problems. For him to tell his readers to take up basket-weaving or some such as the answer to existential emptiness would in fact be an instance of that very existential emptiness.

But where does it come from, this existential void (if voids can be said to come from anywhere)? Bernard Maris in his little book suggests an answer, which he also claims is Houellebecq's: economic liberalism, the subjection of everything to market relations.

Maris begins his book in true Houellebecquian fashion, excoriating economics as a discipline (though he was a sometime visiting professor at an American university).

In a few decades, or a century, perhaps sooner, it will seem incredible that a civilisation could have accorded so much importance to a discipline that is not only empty, but terribly boring, just like its zealots, experts and journalists, graphomanes, barkers, barons and debaters of for and against (the opposite always being possible). The economist is one who is always able to explain, *ex post facto* why once again he was mistaken.

I doubt that this is something that none of us has ever thought for himself. Maris continues:

A science in name only... economics will be revealed as incredible ideological charlatanry which also served as the morality of its period. You don't understand any of it? Rest assured: there's nothing to understand, no more than there were any sumptuous robes to be seen on the naked king. That an international prize, with the usurped name of Nobel... had been awarded for chatter enamelled with equations to searchers after chimeras will one day seem as strange...as that a book translated into two hundred languages should have had as the inscription on its cover a record of the greatest opener of beer cans with his teeth [presumably the *Guinness Book of Records*].

This is all good clean knockabout stuff, and it is true that economic concepts seem (as the author says) both vacuous and abstract. But then the problem starts: can we really do without them? How are we to talk of the economy other than in the language of economics, and in abstractions to boot? Maris makes a mock of the law of supply and demand, calling it empty; and no doubt is a gross oversimplification of economic reality, which depends on many other factors. But it is not quite empty, otherwise the constant attempts to evade, avoid or abrogate it would not be made, nor would the results of such attempts surprise anyone minimally conversant with it or who believed it to have some (but not total) validity. The President of Venezuela today insists that the law explains nothing in his economy, that the shortages and high prices on the open market have nothing to do with price controls. As many a demagogue before him, and no doubt many a demagogue to come after him (if the history of the world so far is anything to go by), he prefers to blame the saboteurs and speculators.

Besides, before long Maris drops his objection to the abstractions of economics and uses them himself, moreover in quite a loose fashion. For example, no one with a respect for terminological exactitude could call western economies liberal, much less ultra-liberal. Even the United States, said to be the most liberal of western countries, is not very liberal. Anyone who doubts it should take a look at the Medicaid and Medicare regulations, which are so many, dense and complex that no person could master them in the span of a mere human lifetime. And that is only one aspect of American governmental regulation. Western economies are not so much liberal as corporatist, placing as they do

many obstacles in the path of entry to the market.

Maris uses many of the tropes commonly used by intellectuals. When he says that Houellebecq detests liberalism, he is probably correct, but to say of liberals – Adam Smith, for example – that theirs is ‘an ideology of free individuals struggling against each other’ is a caricature worthy of the late and unlamented Julius Streicher. Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy and believed that men had a natural sympathy for one another, instilled by nature, as it were (and I think he was right, though the sympathy can be overridden). Smith was therefore far from a red-in-tooth-and-claw man; he did not believe that men acted ruthlessly only in their own economic interests, and that a person smiled or was kind only because it was economically advantageous for him. This is more a Marxist belief than a liberal one: and intelligent Marxists don’t believe it either.

The heart of both Maris’ and Houellebecq’s complaint against the modern world is revealed by the following passage in Maris:

Advertising is violent. Advertisements for brands are the tinnitus of a violent world that is never silent. Advertising aims to arouse, to provoke, to be desired. It puts in place a hard and terrifying superego, much more pitiless than any law or custom that ever existed, that sticks to the skin and repeats without let-up, ‘You must desire, you must be desirable. You must take part in the struggle, in the competition, in the life of the world. If you stop, you no longer exist.’ Advertisement is the goad that pushes the cattle and the sheep, obliging them to move.

Now surely this is overstating the case? It is, moreover, somewhat derogatory towards the common man. It sees him as a passive beast, or the mere dupe of advertisers. The advertisers say ‘Buy this’ or ‘Wear that,’ and the common man is like Luther, in that he can do no other. No doubt the common man often obeys, but is this really because he can do no other?

I am no great fan of advertising myself, and do my best to avoid or take no notice of it. I am not anxious to impress anyone with the logos on my clothes or the horsepower of my car (I don't even know whether horsepower is still a measure used, to say nothing of brake horsepower). Most of my friends, I think, are likewise impervious to the siren-song of advertisers, though I admit that book reviews are different.

I also freely admit that my friends and I may not be fully representative of the population as a whole. The point is, however, that whatever happens must be possible: if we, my friends and I, are not much influenced by advertising, then it must be possible for people not to be much influenced by advertising. And the fact (if it is a fact) that they *are* so influenced speaks to a kind of shallowness in humanity that disappoints both Houellebecq and Maris. But where Maris cannot bear to blame humanity, but only the liberal or advertising part of it, Houellebecq draws out attention to our own weaknesses, which is why he is so salutary though uncomfortable a writer.

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