

Flaunting rottenness: Plateforme, by Michel Houellebecq

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French novelist Michel Houellebecq has acquired celebrity status in France and, increasingly, abroad as a well-established literary shock jock. His latest novel, *Plateforme*, has the merit of clearly exposing this outlook's artistic emptiness and repugnant social content. From glorifying sexual oppression and mass murder to embracing the glossy emptiness of travel brochures, Houellebecq stirs up all that is horrifying, diseased or sterile in modern life.

Houellebecq was born in 1958. His parents left him to be raised by his grandmother, a member of the Stalinist French Communist Party. He obtained a degree in agronomic engineering and passed through a period of unemployment and psychiatric trouble. He then served as an administrative secretary at the National Assembly. He participated in poetic circles in Paris during the 1980s and convinced editors at Flammarion, a big publishing firm, that he was going to write the scandalous "great novel of post 1968." Houellebecq received the task of cataloging and promoting the inward turn, the sexual and financial preoccupations, and the identity politics which have been the fate of a section of the intelligentsia since the French Communist Party betrayed the workers' and students' uprising of 1968.

His first novel to receive widespread attention in literary circles was *Extension of the Domain of Struggle*, published in 1994. It focused on the human material that has become Houellebecq's trademark subject: the love lives of sex-starved, bored, middle-aged mid-level bureaucrats. He has published several novels since then, receiving a number of awards, including a 1998 Grand Literary Award for Young Talent, based on "the totality of his work." *Plateforme*, published in 2001, is Houellebecq's latest novel.

Plateforme's narrator, Michel, is a 40-something government official well used to the complacent life of comfortable officialdom. He says: "I lived in a country

marked by a benign socialism, where the possession of material goods was guaranteed by a strict legislation ... In short, I didn't have much to worry about anymore."

After the murder of his 70-year old father by the brother of a young Frenchwoman of Arab origin who was having sexual relations with his father, Michel goes to Thailand for a bout of sex tourism. He has run-ins with Europeans who disapprove of his activities—he calls them "bitches" and "humanitarian Protestant assholes"—but he also meets a pretty young Frenchwoman, Valérie, who agrees to sleep with him. He, she, and her boss in a tourist business decide to try to organize a series of world sex tours, taking their own sex tours to Cuba and Thailand to help them with their planning. In Thailand, a Muslim terrorist sets off a bomb in a Thai brothel, killing Valérie. Lacking a regular sexual partner, Michel aimlessly stays in Thailand to visit prostitutes and occasionally give racist speeches against Muslims, waiting for death.

Plateforme offers no real ground for artistic analysis. Houellebecq's style is that of a food processor, not that of an artist—haphazardly mixing partially digested sociological and econometric analyses, tacky travel narratives in the style of a tourist brochure, boring conversations or romantic encounters, and long pornographic interludes. Despite the author's repeatedly expressed confidence in the power of his vision of sexuality, these interludes are largely anatomical. The multitudinous, seemingly random statements of fact with which he tries to throw the reader off balance are unreliable—for example, most Thais burn the bodies of deceased loved ones and do not bury them, as Houellebecq's narrator claims, in "mass graves."

Critics initially claimed that Houellebecq's power was his ability to convey the disaffection and boredom of middle-class existence, but it is obvious that other things are also at work here. Other works have explored these questions with far more power—*Madame Bovary* comes

to mind—and without *Plateforme*'s malignant misanthropy. Houellebecq's success comes from the big publishing houses, which have taken him up because he has dared to express petty or debased urges, and to glorify the most depraved feelings these urges elicit.

Recent decades have seen the rapid widening of the social gulf between the working class and the “benign socialism” of the trade union tops and government bureaucracies, and the growth of a substantial and largely super-exploited Muslim section of the French working class. Governments of the right and left have enacted cuts in social spending and increased police repression, bolstered with more or less open appeals to anti-Muslim racism and hysteria over “security” issues.

These policies' anti-democratic content has been reflected in the moods of the ruling elites—the growth of anti-democratic right-wing movements of the monarchist, Christian extremist and neo-fascist varieties, and growing demoralization, frustration and dependence on illegal or semi-legal government payoffs in trade union circles and their political allies. Faced with a retreat from official public life by workers—high electoral abstention, falling viewer ratings for television shows, etc.—ruling circles have beat a general cultural retreat into sensationalism and obscurantism.

Houellebecq's novel reflects all of these moods. It openly flaunts a visceral contempt for the popular masses. In Cuba, the narrator enjoys listening to a pro-Castro engineer who, not unlike a discouraged trade union bureaucrat, blames his problems on workers: “When they found nothing to steal, the workers worked badly, they were lazy.... I spent years trying to talk to them ... I only knew disappointment and failure.” Despite his appreciation of the sexual talents of Thai prostitutes, the people of Bangkok seem to him “a herd of lemmings.”

Plateforme depicts people devoid of any higher intellectual or emotional functions. Its narrator and main characters enjoy a life that goes little beyond the desire for warmth and sex, a few TV game shows, and the hatred of those who would get in the way of satisfying these needs—principally, for the narrator, Muslims. The narrator likes tourist agencies that help him avoid “difficulties and language barriers” and reduce “all the world's places to a limited sequence of possible joys and fees.” Houellebecq is at pains to stress the narrator's fixation on sex—while visiting Wat Arun, one of the most beautiful temples in Bangkok, he is obsessed by the idea of purchasing the sexual stimulant, Viagra.

The pleasure taken in the deaths of innocents is

particularly repugnant. At the beginning of the novel the narrator enjoys feeling hatred wash over him as he looks at his father's murderer. Despite his emotional deadening after Valérie's death, he still feels a “shiver of enthusiasm” each time that he hears that “a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child, or a pregnant Palestinian woman, was shot dead in the Gaza strip.”

Plateforme also reserves a boundless hatred for any ideological challenge to its outlook. Michel hates Islam not principally because of fundamentalist terrorism, but because Islam represents for him an ideological opponent of capitalism and sex. He rages against an editorial that suggests that, for the poor Muslim youth of the Parisian suburbs, luxury products in fancy shop windows are “so many obscene provocations.” Significantly, his hatred for Islam subsides somewhat after Valérie's death, when a Jordanian banker on a sex tour in Thailand tells him that “the Muslim system is doomed; capitalism will be stronger. Already, young Arabs dream only of material consumption and sex.”

In his September 2001 *Lire* interview, Houellebecq asserted his personal distaste for those who oppose the capitalist order, and his willingness to side with anyone who attacked them. In a remarkable statement of political support for Stalin's mass purges directed at the Trotskyist movement, he remarked: “Well, it's true, I really like Stalin. [Laughter] Because he killed plenty of anarchists. [Laughter].”

When *Lire* asked if *Plateforme* was an apologia for prostitution, Houellebecq replied: “Yes! That I am willing to defend completely because I know I am right. I think that prostitution is a very good thing. It's not so poorly paid, as jobs go.... In Thailand, it's an honorable profession.” Of course he is shamelessly hiding the terrible exploitation and intense social pressures facing real prostitutes, whom *Plateforme*'s narrator has in any case already dismissed as “lemmings.” His comment, devoid of any concrete social content, simply defends the willingness to sell oneself for money and the trappings of an “honorable profession.” Even Houellebecq somehow realizes that what he is doing is indefensible.



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