

The Case Against Freedom: Michel Houellebecq and the Charlie Hebdo Attacks

On the morning of January 7th, 2015, two Islamist gunmen opened fire in the Paris offices of French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, killing eleven members of the weekly's staff, including several of its cartoonists. The shooters, two brothers affiliated with the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda, claimed the murders were revenge for *Charlie Hebdo*'s frequent and often blasphemous cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammed.

On the same day—and in a markedly less brutal context—the Parisian literary milieu was being roiled by what has lately become something of a French cultural institution: the appearance of a new novel by Michel Houellebecq, currently Europe's bestselling author and the most successful French literary export in decades.

The timing of the two events gave rise to one of the most peculiar if not sickening coincidences in recent literary history. Not only had a cartoon Houellebecq appeared on that morning's cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, but his novel *Soumission* (Submission), which imagines France's election of a Muslim president in the 2022 elections, had been published the same day. Many commentators expected a piece of Islamophobic pamphleteering worthy of Charles Maurras and Louis-Ferdinand Céline; President François Hollande, in a display of literary largesse, promised to read the novel.

However, in the aftermath of both the shootings and *Soumission*'s publication, a strikingly different interpretation of the novel's handling of Islam emerged. *Soumission* was not only *not* Islamophobic—it was in many respects an *apology* for Islam as an antidote to Western and specifically French economic, moral, and existential malaise. Houellebecq's previous novels had all explored, in varying ways, the “disasters” produced by the liberalization of values in the West—social atomization, sexual misery, empty consumerism, and joyless agnosticism, among others—and *Soumission* was poised to extend Houellebecq's vilifying treatment of liberalism to perhaps its most logical conclusion: the happy capitulation on the part of an unhappily free West to the values of an illiberal social, moral, and epistemological order. The vitriol of the novel was, in other words, aimed at France rather than Islam, with the latter serving as a provocative remedy to Western spiritual malaise that Houellebecq's previous works had tracked.

In this seminar, we will explore the “case against freedom” that *Soumission* and Houellebecq's other novels implicitly and at times explicitly lay out—that the flourishing of liberal notions in the wake of the Enlightenment that gave us free markets, moral and sexual liberty, and postmodern relativism has been a disaster for the West. Rather than ask, “shall we be free?” Houellebecq's novels instead wonder about the *benefit of being free*. Do human beings necessarily profit from the economic, moral, and epistemological freedom that modernity has given us? Does a polity that guarantees us the liberty to buy whatever we want, sleep with whomever we want, and believe whatever we want really have humanity's best interests at heart? Are autonomy and happiness in some ways at cross purposes with each other? These questions, which strike at the very heart of Western assumptions about the “good life,” are precisely those that Houellebecq's

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novels, and especially *Soumission*, dare to ask. Beyond offering an introduction to Houellebecq's work, this seminar will thus also make room for a discussion about fundamental legal and political values that have shaped the West.

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