



The Failed Asabiyya and Cultural Suicide in Michel Houellebecq's Submission

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Introduction

Since 1994, contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq has been offering projections for the future where the European culture and way of life come to an end. The aim of this article is to analyze his 2015 novel *Submission* using concepts developed by Ibn Khaldun and to show what kind of a political project Houellebecq's novel serves. Europe, or the Occident as Houellebecq likes to put it, as described in his novels is always being threatened by barbarians at the gates, and these barbarians almost always come from the Mediterranean. With refugee crises, Europe has indeed become wary of Mediterranean passages, and Houellebecq describes how the sea has become an uncontrollable border. Houellebecq's novels always invite us to question the borders of the Mediterranean. This article studies the novels of a French author who claims the Greeks and the Romans as his heritage through the work of Ibn Khaldun, another author of Mediterranean heritage this time from Andalusia. In this sense, studying Houellebecq with Ibn Khaldun contributes to the discipline of provincializing Europe.

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Europe Provincialized

Provincializing Europe, can this mean thinking of Europe through a Mediterranean perspective and in the same cultural milieu? In his 2007 book *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty speaks of considering Europe not as a center but as one province among many that make up the world (Chakrabarty, 2007, p. 78). The first step in decentralizing Europe is to consider non-European cultures through the concepts that have been developed in those very geographies, and the second step is to analyze Europe through concepts that have been developed elsewhere, in other provinces. This article engages this project by studying Europe through a Mediterranean and Islamic paradigm. Houellebecq's novels in particular invite this way of studying as his novels often deal with white/Western Europe's relationship with the Mediterranean.

The Khaldunian concept that most concerns this paper is *asabiyyah*, the sense that Houellebecq keeps talking about in *Submission*, a sense that has been depleted in French society- something that held it together. As *asabiyyah* is not within Houellebecq's lexicon, he sets out to write a novel to discover what this missing element is. Ibn Khaldun had spoken about the functions of *asabiyyah* seven centuries before Houellebecq, and Islamic tradition identifies it in several levels as "community spirit, social solidarity, group feeling, tribalism, and blood ties" (Çağrı, 1991, pp. 453–455) Tribes use the defensive and offensive elements of *asabiyya* to gain *mülk* (power) in a given geography, and their *mülk* is only as strong as their *asabiyya* (Ibn Haldun, [1982] 2007, I, p. 350). These are all themes Houellebecq grapples with in his novel.

France, 2022

Submission is a novel that contains dystopic elements and gives voice to certain French people's anxieties about the future. While dystopic novels contain projections of the distant future, Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Submission* depicts France in 2022. Accordingly, *Submission* can be classified as more a speculative novel rather than a dystopian one. The novel describes how a politician of North African descent becomes the president of France following the failures of several politicians active in France today and how the narrator perceives the developments. Houellebecq's novel embodies Ibn Khaldun's concept of senility for describing dynasties (Ibn Haldun, 2007 [1982], I, p. 350) in the narrator François. Anti-intellectual white men who become more irritable and crasser as they grow older are a metaphor for what Houellebecq likes to call 'Occidental' dynasties (i.e., states).

Submission is not so much about the onslaught of Muslim refugees today as it is about the Muslims that have already been settled in Europe for a couple generations. It is already too late: critical mass has been reached and second and third generation Muslims have taken over the government. The success of the Muslim candidate Ben Abbas is made possible by the leftists opting for the Muslim rather than the conservative candidate at the end of a prolonged and tortuous election period. In Houellebecq's novel, socialists along with women are the elements that have weakened France's solidarity, or more precisely, *asabiyyah*. Both Adam Gopnik (2015, p. 52) and John Rosenthal (2015, p. 59) point out that François's criticism is aimed more at White French intellectuals than Muslim immigrants.

Algeria, 1375

When we consider the historical facts, we see the conditions that led Ibn Khaldun and Houellebecq to write about the state of things to coincide. In Ibn Khaldun's text the barbarians at the gates are Bedouins or Berbers; in Houellebecq's, they are Muslim immigrants. Ibn Khaldun, who had spent quite a bit of time in Europe, is a specter in this sense that haunts Houellebecq's writing. The Andalusian dynasties of Arab descent had preferred derogation to helping one another (Ibn Khaldun, [1982] 2007, I, p. 194) and appear as the precursors of the 21st-century French intellectuals and politicians who have enabled a Muslim to become president. In Ibn Khaldun, the Arabs had lost their Arab-ness; in Houellebecq, the French have lost their French-ness.

Historical Memory

François flees Paris and goes to the city of Martel in order to escape the riots following the election of a Muslim president. Clearly, Houellebecq has chosen this town in order to remind the reader of the Muslim forays deep into the European continent. Charles Martel is the Frank general that stopped the Muslim advance in 732, in a battle somewhere between Poitiers and Tours. François's friend, Tanneur, tells him that the days of Martel are over and that now is the time for appeasement with the Muslims. Tanneur does not explicitly say that he believes Ben Abbas to know this history, but he does say that Ben Abbas has "historical vision" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 154). Moreover, Tanneur explains that appeasement with the Muslims is not that difficult, as many French Muslims of North African descent already speak French, much better than the languages of North Africa,

and this adoption of French culture is in Khaldunian terms, a sign that Maghrebi immigrants have inscribed themselves in the genealogy of the ruling dynasty even though they are not of the same family (Ibn Haldun, [1982] 2007, I, p. 344). The prospective prominence of the French language is a silver lining that Tanneur points to in his projections for the future. If France becomes a Muslim country that speaks French and manages to get EU to accept North African countries into the EU – of which Morocco has already applied for entry– then French, and not English, could easily be the *Europa lingua*.

The Habits of the Old Dynasty

In the *Muqadimmah* Ibn Khaldun does speak of the Franks and how the Muslim dynasties of Andalusia had employed them as mercenaries in the wars against one another (Ibn Haldun, [1982] 2007, I, p. 534). In 13th Europe, urban Muslim dynasties had employed Franks in order to inject vigor into their state, which was on its way to becoming “senile” (Ibn Haldun, [1982] 2007, I, p. 391); in 21st century Europe, the French employ a Muslim president to make France the center of a French-speaking European commonwealth whose center is the Mediterranean. François starts to observe the Muslims around him more closely and sees that they have already adapted to the capitalist, consumerist way of life (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 225–226) as much as, if not more than, white French citizens. The one difference he observes is the way women are treated; however, his observations do not add up because on the one hand, he reports that women are now expected to stay home and do the housework, and yet everywhere he goes he seems to encounter officiaires in hijabs. This is one of the indices that, for Houellebecq’s narrator, show the Muslim presence to remain a specter that crumbles when he tries to depict it rather than a reality.

Conclusion

Submission has been received and discussed at length as an important political text in France and Europe at large, including by reviewers who fall into the categories that Houellebecq’s narrator dislikes. The author himself has admitted to not liking several groups of people from different genders and from different national and religious persuasions. What then, are the moral issues concerning the discussion of the work of such an author? According to readers and reviewers on the right of the political spectrum, Houellebecq is voicing a legitimate concern. The several liberal

readers and commentators this paper draws on, on the other hand, point to the inconsistencies in the novel and categorize it as a manifestation of Houellebecq's well-known Islamophobia. When one considers the unrelenting discourse and prohibitions that constrain Islam in France, one can understand what kind of "fear for the future" novels such as *Submission* fuel and, in turn, are fueled by. Like Ibn Khaldun, Houellebecq has also made a long historical projection, attempting to see how ruling dynasties are able to lose their power and the ways in which history are able to repeat itself. Accordingly, this article points to the possibilities of reading Houellebecq's novel through Ibn Khaldun's concepts.

When one carries Ibn Khaldun's concepts from economics and sociology over to a literary analysis, one can see how the waxing and waning of *asabiyya* of different groups has engineered the very plot. Houellebecq builds the plot and his narrator's psychological development in accordance with the political changes that take place in the future that *Submission* depicts. The trajectory of the plot obeys the schema that Ibn Khaldun had drawn out for the mechanism of *asabiyya*. Like Ibn Khaldun, Houellebecq intimates that, after a while, the new dynasty will repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. Global capitalism had already co-opted Muslims even before they took over political power. Then perhaps this is the true dystopic nature of the novel. A story that is supposed to be about the end of one era and the beginning of another is in fact a story about how we are stuck in a vicious circle whose main feature will remain: capitalism.

When we analyze *Submission* through Ibn Khaldun's concepts that lend themselves to interdisciplinary readings, we see that history, more precisely power relations, behave similarly in different periods and over wide geographies. These similarities become more pronounced in the context of the narratives and concepts that have been produced in the Mediterranean. As this article attempts to show, the Islamic heritage that is repressed along the shores of the Mediterranean, including the ways of reading history as outlined by Ibn Khaldun, helps us understand the Mediterranean and Europe of today in its literary manifestations. This reading contributes to questioning where the center and the periphery lie, as in the manner of Chakrabarty's practice of "provincializing Europe." The novel offers a vision of how the center and periphery relations transform, reminding us within the narrative how this has always been a circular relationship.

The cyclical nature of how dynasties gain and lose power as laid out by Ibn Khaldun holds true for political camps; elements of this cycle such as *asabiyya* and *mülk* and their increase and decrease explain the mechanism that is usually

perceived as historical determinism. The fate of dynasties and civilizations are determined not by their being Maghrebi or French but by what they do to stay in power once they attain it. What seems most important in the way dynasties govern after they've attained power –both in Ibn Khaldun's theory and the future world Houellebecq has depicted– appear as the attitude of the intellectuals and the advisors of the heads of state. That the successors will in time resemble their predecessors and lose their *mülk* because of similar reasons is laid out both in the historical examples quoted in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, and the future depicted in Houellebecq's *Submission*.

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