

Social and Discursive Capital as Illiberal Enabler: A Tale of Two Far-Right Fictions in France

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Abstract

There is a growing body of scholarship examining the circulation of illiberal ideas. While the majority of approaches have centered on political culture, we instead explore how such ideas manifest themselves in domains not traditionally viewed as overtly political, such as novels and works of fiction. We take two examples from the French literary scene: *The Camp of the Saints*, written by Jean Raspail in 1973, and *Submission*, written by Michel Houellebecq in 2015. Both works incorporate great replacement theory into their narratives, but while Raspail’s novel generally belongs to fringe far-right literature, Houellebecq’s has achieved widespread media and commercial success, establishing the author as a leading figure in contemporary French literature. We hypothesise that this discrepancy can be explained through the differing levels of social and discursive capital employed by the two authors. We argue that practices of illiberal diffusion encompass the entirety of the author’s “posture,” which includes both rhetorical or intra-textual practices (that is, how ideas are formulated within the text to align with prevailing norms), as well as instrumental or extra-textual practices (that is, how authors secure favorable reception by controlling external factors, such as media coverage or institutional networks). This broader lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how political ideas circulate within society.

Keywords

cultural circulation; France; great replacement theory; illiberalism; Jean Raspail; Michel Houellebecq

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of scholarship examining the circulation of illiberal ideas—between Central and Western Europe, to and from Russia, and across the Atlantic (Behr, 2021; Laruelle, 2015, 2018). Works in

this vein predominantly focus on how illiberal ideas and narratives travel within political arenas—between political parties, political leaders, and think tanks, among others. In this article, we shift the cursor of illiberal diffusion to consider where else these ideas might spread within society. While previous approaches have centered on political culture, we instead explore how such ideas manifest themselves in domains not traditionally viewed as overtly political, such as novels and works of fiction.

We take two novels from the French literary scene: *The Camp of the Saints* (*Le Camp des saints*), written by Jean Raspail in 1973, and *Submission* (*Soumission*), written by Michel Houellebecq in 2015. Both works incorporate great replacement theory into their narratives, but while Raspail's book generally belongs to fringe far-right literature, Houellebecq's has achieved widespread media and commercial success, establishing him as a leading figure in contemporary French literature. In this article, we examine why such a divergence occurred and, more importantly, how Houellebecq has managed to gain mainstream public acceptance and bypass gatekeepers despite engaging with the same range of ideas as Raspail.

Putting aside intrinsic literary value, which we do not comment on here, we hypothesise that this discrepancy can be explained through the differing levels of social and discursive capital employed by the two authors. French sociologist Bourdieu (1986) advanced the concept of social capital to describe “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). We argue that Houellebecq's significantly greater social capital accounts for this mainstream acceptance, while Raspail's comparatively lower social capital has relegated his work to the margins.

What we refer to as discursive capital is a revised version of Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital: i.e., a mastery of the legitimate language recognized and valued by institutions, such as schools, universities, and the media (Bourdieu, 1982). Discursive capital is a writer's ability to reformulate a particular type of idea—such as those deemed socially unacceptable, like racist or sexist ideas—into expressions that are more palatable or at least tolerated within the boundaries of mainstream discourse. It implies an understanding of the implicit rules governing what can and cannot be said in a particular context, thereby encompassing both linguistic and ideological resources. Here again, Houellebecq demonstrates a remarkable use of discursive capital that Raspail lacks.

We consider this strategic manipulation of discursive and social capital as a practice of illiberal promotion and diffusion. By employing the concept of practice, we shift the focus away from the ideas diffused in a given novel—content such as great replacement theory—and toward the practices involved in content diffusion. We argue that these practices of illiberal diffusion encompass the entirety of the author's “posture,” as defined by Jérôme Meizoz's sociological approach to literature. This includes both rhetorical or intra-textual practices—i.e., how ideas are formulated within the text to align with prevailing norms—as well as active or extra-textual practices—i.e., how authors secure favorable reception by controlling external factors such as media coverage or institutional networks (Meizoz, 2011).

We use the term “illiberal” here in the sense defined by Laruelle (2023), who describes it as a response to the major socio-cultural transformations that have taken place in the Global North, including Western Europe. The first transformation, from the 1960s to 1970s, saw the rise of cultural progressivism as the dominant ideology, promoting the recognition of diverse identities but also leading to the fragmentation of collective

identities. The second, from the 1980s to the 1990s, saw the rise of neoliberalism, leading to the technocratization of politics and the depoliticization of public decisions. Illiberalism thus emerges as a solution to these impasses, advocating for a revival of collective identities based on racial and sexual criteria, and repoliticizing debates by shifting them to the moral and cultural realms, while defending authoritarian and anti-egalitarian solutions.

In this light, while conservatism opposes liberal ideas of progress, illiberalism opposes a certain type of progress, that which is represented by the liberal–progressive consensus. Whereas conservatism seeks to slow down or reverse social changes to preserve traditional values, illiberalism rejects the inclusive model of liberalism, which it sees as a threat to collective identity, advocating for a hierarchical vision that is often ethnically or religiously marked.

This article is grounded in the social history of political ideas (Matonti, 2023), which aims to define political ideas much more broadly to include representations, attitudes, beliefs, and narratives within a dynamic and fragmented social structure. This approach enables us to detect politics in unexpected places (Gaboriaux & Skornicki, 2017, p. 13)—in this case, within works of fiction such as novels. The central tenet of the social history of political ideas is that such ideas are not limited to political programs, leaders’ speeches, or political essays, they can also be expressed through everyday actions and attitudes, including those of fictional characters. This broader lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how political ideas circulate within society.

2. Far-Right Fiction in Parallel

Both *Submission* and *The Camp of the Saints* share similar narratives. Houellebecq’s *Submission*, written in 2015, is set in 2022 against the backdrop of a “collapsing Western world” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 13). The political scene is marked by a “declining social democracy” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 15) and a potential “civil war between Muslim immigrants and the native population” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 59). In Houellebecq’s projection of the 2022 political landscape, two forces oppose each other: on one side, the far right, and on the other, a fictional Muslim Brotherhood Party led by a “moderate Muslim” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 161)—although what is depicted looks more like a fundamentalist Islam. In the second round of the presidential elections, the left and mainstream right rally behind the Muslim candidate to prevent the extreme right from winning. The result is a government led by “Islamism” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 289)—a portmanteau expressing the supposed alliance of leftist multiculturalism and Islamism, implying that the French radical left, both in the political realm and in the intellectual and academic world, has defended positions close to those of Islamism (Taguieff, 2024)—with the new Muslim president described as possessing a “hypnotic magic” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 221) over the population. This leads to minimal political resistance and France ultimately coming under Sharia law.

Raspail’s (1985) *Camp of the Saints* tells the story of “800,000 Indian migrants peacefully besieging the West” (Raspail, 1985, p. 19), with the narrator recounting this tale for his grandchildren and seeking to tell them “the truth” about the “incompatibility of races” (Raspail, 1985, pp. 363–364). The novel builds tension through the slow arrival of migrants, describing their invasion as a “peaceful conquest of the West” (Raspail, 1985, p. 80)—even though the description makes it look pretty violent—that leads to the “destruction of the white race” (Raspail, 1985, p. 215). The migrants are aided in their project by “the well-intentioned left” (*la gauche*

bien-pensante; Raspail, 1985, p. 72), who are presented as “accomplices of the invader” (Raspail, 1985, p. 227). They indeed instill a sense of “remorse, self-accusation, and self-loathing” in the white race (Raspail, 1985, p. 87), which then became “emasculated from its instinct for self-preservation” (Raspail, 1985, p. 104).

Houellebecq’s *Submission* and Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints* both engage with the so-called great replacement theory (Taguieff, 2022), albeit in different ways. In Raspail’s account, this takes shape through a dramatic influx of immigrants from Asia and Africa, accompanied by racial mixing, which he depicts as an existential threat to France’s white Christian identity. While *Submission* does not explicitly adopt the theory’s framework of a deliberate and coordinated replacement, it envisions a gradual transformation of France’s demographic and cultural identity, ultimately leading to similar anxieties about the displacement of the white race and its traditional culture. Their narratives extend this invasion beyond the borders of France, suggesting that all of Europe will be overtaken. Both novels blame left-liberal parties for facilitating the invasion. Additionally, the two works overtly engage with racial themes, with Raspail frequently evoking the idea of a white race while Houellebecq focuses more on Western civilization. While both authors address similar anxieties, our analysis seeks primarily to explain the diffusion and reception of Houellebecq’s ideas. Raspail serves more as a counterpoint, illustrating the differences in approach that have allowed Houellebecq to bypass cultural gatekeepers and achieve mainstream success, rather than a subject of an equally in-depth examination. Despite these narrative and thematic similarities, the two books have faced substantially different public reception. This asymmetry stems from differences in their respective levels of social and discursive capital, as well as the distinct positioning of their works within the literary and political fields.

Houellebecq has achieved widespread acclaim, winning an array of prestigious literary prizes, including the Goncourt in 2010, France’s most renowned literary award, and being considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2022 (Corty, 2022). He has also garnered significant recognition in academia: several influential professors of literature consider themselves to be Houellebecq specialists, numerous colloquia on his writings have been organized in France and abroad, and many doctoral theses use Houellebecq’s texts as a corpus for research. He is often seen as a voice for his generation, capturing the spirit of the age with a deep understanding of human nature. Ben Jeffery (Harper-Schmidt Fellow, University of Chicago) highlights Houellebecq’s ability to articulate unspoken thoughts, while Agathe Novak-Lechevalier (Paris X Nanterre) notes that his works provide a comforting refuge from contemporary anxieties (Jeffery, 2011; Novak-Lechevalier, 2018). However, other academics present a more circumspect view. Denis (2007), for example, has critically examined the limitations and contradictions in Houellebecq’s portrayal of modernity, noting that his works often reflect a highly subjective perspective rather than a universal zeitgeist.

Like the author himself, *Submission* has enjoyed immense commercial success, a phenomenon involuntarily amplified by its seemingly prophetic dimension, as the novel was released in bookstores on the day of the deadly terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015 (Lapaque, 2016). Within five days of its publication, the book sold 120,000 copies, a figure that rose to 800,000 within three months (Bajos, 2019). It also topped sales charts in Italy and Germany during the first half of 2015 (“Houellebecq numéro un,” 2015).

In contrast, Raspail has remained a relatively fringe author, predominantly associated with far-right ideologies. Raspail has been quoted by well-known far-right political figures like Marine Le Pen in France (Albertini, 2015), Steve Bannon in the US (Blumenthal, 2017), and Tom Van Grieken of the far-right Vlaams Belang party in

Belgium (Arnoudt, 2018). His novels are also among the favorites of white nationalists in the US (Peltier & Kulish, 2019). The book experienced a resurgence in sales during its eighth edition in 2011, selling 20,000 copies between February and April of that year (Dupuis, 2011). This resurgence was driven by the inclusion of a new preface and a promotional interview in the French far-right weekly *Valeurs Actuelles* (de Cessole, 2011).

3. Discursive Capital in Intra-Textual Practices

We now turn to specific examples in which Houellebecq leverages discursive practices and intertextual strategies to navigate and stretch the boundaries of acceptable mainstream discourse, ultimately promoting illiberal ideas within cultural circles—an approach Raspail was unable to achieve.

3.1. The Use of Far-Right Interdiscourse

Foucault's notion of interdiscourse posits that any discourse inherently contains traces of other discourses. As he states, these "words have already been spoken elsewhere, as they are part of a repertoire of socially shared symbolic forms" (Foucault, 1969, p. 71). Each new work is informed by a corpus of pre-existing texts and circulating doxa, engaging in dialogue with them. In *Submission*, Houellebecq reproduces the same cognitive structures first articulated and disseminated by the far right, but avoids using politically charged terms such as "invasion," "replacement," or "death of the white race," as doing so would make him legally liable and hinder his books from bypassing liberal gatekeepers and achieving a wide circulation. Although Houellebecq does not directly cite far-right theories, his statements align with and evoke ideas that have already been articulated within these circles. This indirect referencing draws on notions and arguments initially formulated and popularized by the far right, making them recognizable even when they are not explicitly mentioned.

In the case of replacement narratives, the narrator of *Submission*, François, refers to a fictional document given to him by a colleague, titled "PREPARING FOR CIVIL WAR" (in all caps), which describes the "atheistic humanism" underlying the concept of living together (*vivre ensemble*) between peoples as "doomed," with a growing percentage of the population becoming monotheistic, especially Muslim. For "European identitarians," a civil war between Muslims and the rest of the population is considered "inevitable" (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 74–75). In these passages, the foundational ideas of replacement narratives—the death of European civilization and its replacement with Muslim culture, or what the far right would call "Islamization"—are present but implicitly expressed. Houellebecq avoids using the overly polemical idea of a forceful "grand remplacement," preferring instead to create an atmosphere of gradual "submission," whereby societal changes unfold through conformism, fatigue, or personal opportunism. He, therefore, does not directly reference far-right discourse but rather far-right interdiscourse.

Additional far-right themes in this interdiscourse include the concept of so-called "Islamism-leftism." In another passage, a colleague of the narrator, Robert Rediger, exposes Islamism-leftism as "a desperate attempt by decomposing, decaying Marxists, in a state of clinical death, to climb out of the trash of history by clinging to the rising forces of Islam" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 289). Here again, the passage repeats all the commonplaces of the far right, particularly the criticism of a progressive intelligentsia that is accused of complacency towards Islamism. Interestingly, the author even takes the liberty of using the neologism "islamogauchisme," which, while widely used in far-right conspiracy rhetoric, did not originate there (Taguieff,

2002). These two examples clearly demonstrate Houellebecq's mastery of discursive capital and his knowledge of the stigma and potential social and legal repercussions of using each term.

However, Houellebecq's strategy in *Submission* extends beyond merely avoiding ideologically charged terms. For instance, he presents the Islamist political party as "moderate," despite its fundamentalist nature, which is evident in its promotion of gender segregation, the imposition of Islamic law in schools, and the relegation of women to traditional roles. This framing seems designed to make the reader believe that practices already implemented today, such as halal certification requirements in public institutions or the normalization of wearing the Islamic veil, are themselves signs of creeping fundamentalism that society naively chooses to overlook. However, this interpretation is deeply problematic and reductive, as it conflates cultural or religious practices with extremism, erasing important nuances. Similarly, the protagonist's eventual conversion to Islam in the final chapter—whose narration is entirely written in the conditional tense in French, likely to protect the author—appears crafted to suggest the inevitability of Islam's dominance. Houellebecq thus employs these narrative strategies to lead the reader toward politically charged conclusions that would demand critical examination rather than uncritical acceptance.

According to Raphaël Baroni, "the text thus provides form, but the thought seems like an epiphany to the reader, who feels they could be the author, or at least, could assume responsibility for the statement, as it resonates with their world" (Baroni, 2022, p. 50). Indeed, Houellebecq's novels transcend individual perspectives because they import an already ubiquitous far-right ideology embedded in political and media contexts. Readers rooted in such contexts find Houellebecq's works to be an extension of their own echo chambers (Sunstein, 2002); they encounter in the writer a like-minded individual who reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Houellebecq does not simplify an otherwise complex world; rather, by reinforcing pre-existing views, he lends them greater legitimacy, granting readers a sense of political competence.

By contrast, Raspail lacked the opportunity to draw upon an already ubiquitous far-right ideology embedded in political and media contexts. When he published *The Camp of the Saints* in 1973, immigration had begun to emerge as a theme in far-right discourse, particularly through the newly founded National Front party (the predecessor of the current National Rally). While immigration became a central pillar of the party's platform in the 1980s, particularly during the 1983 municipal elections in Dreux, it was already an important component of its nationalist rhetoric in the early 1970s (Mayer & Perrineau, 1996).

At the same time, racism during this period was deeply intertwined with colonial issues, especially in the aftermath of the bloody decolonization war with Algeria. These themes permeate *The Camp of the Saints*, with immigrants symbolizing the "Third World" (Raspail, 1985, pp. 113, 309) and the author referencing far-right opposition to Algerian independence, specifically mentioning the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS). He also evokes Edith Piaf's song *Non, Rien de Rien*, which served as the anthem for the 1st Foreign Parachute Regiment, involved in the 1961 Algiers coup that rejected de Gaulle's proposal for Algeria's independence (Raspail, 1985, p. 332). These references unmistakably align with far-right discourse, which—alongside the many direct racial implications—prevented Raspail from achieving broader recognition.

3.2. Depoliticizing Racism

Another example of the use of discursive capital is the strategic depoliticization of racism. In *Submission*, the character Rediger speaks of “his former traditionalist and identitarian comrades” and their “irrational hostility toward Islam” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 290). The expression “irrational hostility” supposes that Islamophobia (Geisser, 2003; Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013) is an emotional, individual, and even excusable phenomenon (a fear of the unknown). This is an example of the psychologization of racism, which tends to minimize the social structures and power dynamics that perpetuate it on a larger scale. Such a framing tends to obscure the political dimension of racism, rendering invisible the influence of institutions in the reproduction of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Feagin, 2006; Lipsitz, 1995; Omi, 2014).

Submission’s banalization of racism echoes the psychologization of racism present in Houellebecq’s media appearances following the trial related to his earlier book *Platform* (2001), for which he was sued by several Muslim and antiracist associations. One of the incriminating passages in *Platform* featured the narrator, Michel, who, after his companion died in a terrorist attack, expressed his hatred of Palestinians:

Islam had broken my life, and Islam was certainly something I could hate; in the following days, I committed myself to hating Muslims...every time I heard about a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child, or a pregnant Palestinian woman being shot in Gaza, I felt a thrill of enthusiasm at the thought that there was one less Muslim. (Houellebecq, 2001, p. 338)

In an interview with Lire, Houellebecq responded:

Revenge is a feeling I have never had the opportunity to experience. But in the situation he finds himself in, it is normal that Michel [the grieving character] would want as many Muslims killed as possible...yes, yes, revenge exists. Islam is a dangerous religion, and it has been since its inception. (Sénécal, 2001)

Here, Houellebecq asserts that Michel’s violent statements should be interpreted within the context of the fictional events surrounding his narrative—i.e., the desire for revenge grows out of grief, which, in turn, justifies racism. In the novel’s logic, Islam is largely equated with Arab identity, making the hostility toward Muslims inseparable from racialized assumptions. Using grief to excuse racism reduces racism to an individual problem rather than seeing it as a system of institutional and historical discrimination. Psychologization frames it as a set of individual behaviors stemming from factors such as personal suffering. This perspective focuses on the psychological or emotional dimensions of individuals rather than on the systemic, cultural, or historical aspects of racism. In doing so, Houellebecq suggests that racism is a natural and inevitable behavior we have to accept.

This psychologization is also accompanied by a trivialization and normalization of racism (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991). In the first part of *Submission*, the author describes the existence of an “extreme right” marked by “antisemitism” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 55), which brings “a forgotten thrill of fascism” into debates (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 54–55), and even mentions “far-right militants” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 58) who have committed violent acts. However, this label seems reserved solely for the most extreme elements of the far-right movement and not for the National Front, despite its official classification as part of the extreme right by the French Constitutional Council—a body that reviews the legality of

elections and political designations in France (Libération & AFP, 2024). In *Submission*, Marine Le Pen is referred to only as the “national candidate” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 117) or “the national leader” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 121), National Front supporters are called “national activists” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 127), and Identitarians are described as being “neither racist nor fascist” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 268).

Another example of the banalization of racism is Houellebecq’s deliberate choice to attribute a positive ethos to a character clearly aligned with the far right. A former member of the Identitarians and the author of a philosophy thesis titled “Guénon, Reader of Nietzsche” (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 258, 268), Rediger is consistently portrayed in a positive light, as a figure “of good taste [and] extremely reassuring” (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 254–255), making him ideologically reliable.

Houellebecq’s banalization of racism is also evident beyond his texts. In a 1999 interview promoting *Platform*, the writer told the Austrian magazine *Profil* that: “It’s not so bad to be racist...everyone is racist” (Krug, 2023, p. 99). In 2002, he wrote a short text, “Europe Endless,” and sent it to Les Amis de Michel Houellebecq, his fan club, to be published on their website. In this text, he writes: “There is nothing easier to combat than racism,” and “the real goal [of the French ‘moral left’] is not to ‘fight against racism’ but to create a new kind of racism...anti-white racism” (Krug, 2023, p. 97). The notion of anti-white racism shifts the focus of conversations about discrimination, creating an equivalence between the systemic racism faced by racialized groups and the frustrations or grievances that some white individuals may experience.

Conversely, in Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints*, racism is not trivialized but rather assumed and legitimized as a necessary measure to protect the “white race,” given its “extreme vulnerability” (Raspail, 1985, p. 112), from “destruction” (Raspail, 1985, p. 315). Raspail evokes the notion of “a Western lifestyle among people of the same race” (Raspail, 1985, p. 364), which he argues would be under threat from an “inexpiable racial war that nothing could stop” (Raspail, 1985, p. 173). He also addresses the theme of antiracism, particularly denouncing the decolonizing mindset within French society and the exposure of the racist foundations of France’s colonial policy. Raspail describes this as a “racial problem” that has been “created out of nothing in the heart [of] the white world to subjugate this white world to the will of ‘moral leaders’” (Raspail, 1985, p. 42). This reflects a familiar tactic of denying accusations of racism, but in Raspail’s view, it serves to amplify the power of these left-wing moral leaders, which further intensifies the conspiratorial tone of his remarks. Whereas Houellebecq implicitly denies the societal and systemic nature of racism, Raspail outright denies the existence of a “racial problem” (Raspail, 1985, p. 42) altogether.

3.3. Political Gaslighting

By presenting himself—and being presented by critics—as an author who has most successfully captured the zeitgeist of an era, Houellebecq veils any explicit critique of political or social structures behind general reflections on the human condition. By focusing on what are presented as universal themes, he deflects attention from the political implications of his work, encouraging readers to view his insights as timeless truths rather than commentary on specific societal issues. In doing so, Houellebecq leverages his discursive capital to engage in a form of political gaslighting (Beerbohm & Davis, 2023; Rietdijk, 2024), denying any political agenda in his works and thus destabilizing readers’ perception of his texts’ implicit political messages.

His statements in the media, such as “I am not an ideologue” (Kaprièlian, 2021), or describing *Submission* as mere “speculative fiction” (Lancelin, 2015) rather than a critique of societal transformations, reinforce this apolitical guise. Through these disclaimers, Houellebecq manipulates public perception, prompting readers to question whether they are overinterpreting any potential political undertones. This tactic exemplifies political gaslighting: by disavowing a political stance, Houellebecq encourages readers to dismiss critical interpretations as personal misreadings rather than deliberate commentary. This strategy is further embedded within *Submission*, wherein the narrator denies political alignment altogether. In response to a question on patriarchy, the narrator states: “I am not for anything at all” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 43), and even likens his level of political engagement to that of a “towel” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 54)—a blatant declaration of indifference. Houellebecq also absolves himself of any responsibility for the impact of his words, saying: “In France, intellectuals are not meant to be responsible” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 286).

This rhetorical strategy that hinges on provocation to maintain ambiguity can be compared with another well-known tactic common in far-right circles: online trolling. Through ambiguity, Houellebecq forces readers to grapple with moral complexity, questioning whether he is endorsing or critiquing his character’s viewpoints. His narratives often unfold in morally ambiguous worlds where readers must continuously reassess their interpretations. This ambiguity keeps readers engaged, leaving them unsure whether Houellebecq is serious or satirical. Similarly, ambiguity is a central strategy in far-right trolling. Common phrases like “just joking” (Miller-Idriss, 2020; W. Phillips, 2015) or “playing devil’s advocate” allow trolls to maintain plausible deniability (Hochschild & Panetta, 2021). When challenged, trolls may claim their offensive statements were satirical or ironic, shielding themselves from criticism and keeping their true intentions opaque.

In contrast to Houellebecq’s denials, which seek to obscure the political nature of his work and shift responsibility for interpretation onto the reader, Raspail’s statements clarify his intent, ensuring that the audience perceives his critique as explicitly political. His effort to politicize his book and tie it to contemporary political events is especially evident in the updated prefaces of various editions. For instance, in the preface to the 2011 edition, he declares, “This prophecy, we are now living its beginnings” (Raspail, 2011, p. 11). This explicit connection to current events extends to his public statements, such as his interview with the center-right weekly *Le Point* in September 2015 during the height of the European migrant crisis, when he asserted that his book is “inherently part of what is happening” (Mahrane, 2015). Raspail leaves no room for ambiguity, positioning his work within the current political reality and rejecting any claim of neutrality.

Through this juxtaposition, we observe how political gaslighting functions in literature: Houellebecq destabilizes his readers’ interpretations by blurring the lines between description and critique, while Raspail’s openness leaves no room for ambiguity, positioning his work as an unequivocal political statement. This parallel highlights contrasting uses of political messaging in literature. Houellebecq’s subtle evasion complicates readers’ interpretations, effectively dissociating his texts from specific ideologies, while Raspail reinforces his intended message. This divergence underscores the interplay between authorial intent and public perception, suggesting that writers’ extra-textual actions and self-representations can shape the political readings of their works.

This double-coded communication resonates with Houellebecq’s tactic of leaving his readers uncertain about his true stance. However, unlike internet trolls, whose aim is to maintain doubt about the

interpretation of their discourse, Houellebecq has an additional tool to guide this interpretation: his social capital in literary circles. The role of this academic network is to impose a tacit norm regarding the correct interpretation of Houellebecq's works, which almost achieves the status of exegesis. This univocal interpretation can be summed up as follows: Houellebecq's controversial statements and themes are provocations meant to disturb rather than convey any particular political agenda, thereby questioning the separation of his provocations from their social and political implications.

4. Social Capital in Extra-Textual Practices

Houellebecq has indeed carefully crafted his public image, strategically managing his media presence to obscure his political leanings. This tactic has enabled him to maintain a sense of ambiguity between left and right-wing ideologies, which has been crucial for his commercial success and intellectual credibility. He has further bolstered his legitimacy through active engagement in influential circles, such as the media, public intellectual networks, and political spheres, playing an ambivalent game of a supposed "marginalized" voice that is simultaneously welcome in many influential media circles (Harris, 2022).

4.1. The Use of Political Ambiguity

On October 9, 1991, Houellebecq published his first article in the far-right journal *L'Idiot International*, ultimately contributing five press reviews to the publication by February 1992—though these pieces went largely unnoticed at the time. Later, after becoming a more celebrated author, he published several collections of his articles from the 1990s under the title *Interventions*. These collections included his contributions to the communist literary journal *Les Lettres Françaises*, the left-wing cultural weekly *Les Inrockuptibles*, the women's magazine *20 Ans*, and the mainstream celebrity-focused magazine *Paris Match*; however, as Krug (2023, p. 41) points out, *Interventions* makes no mention of his contributions to *L'Idiot International*.

Houellebecq's first essay and collection of poetry were published by Éditions du Rocher, a publisher primarily associated with right-wing and far-right authors. In 1991, at a cocktail party held in honor of Marc-Édouard Nabe's anti-semitic book *Au Régat des Vermines*, Houellebecq met Dominique Noguez, who would become a close friend and a key supporter. With Noguez's assistance (Krug, 2023, p. 15), Houellebecq published his first novel in 1994 with Maurice Nadeau, who was known for publishing left-wing authors. Once Houellebecq had one foot out of right-wing circles, he was picked up by Raphaël Sorin of Flammarion, with whom he published *Les Particules Élémentaires* in 1998. After this initial critical success, Sorin promised him commercial success.

From then on, Houellebecq's public image underwent a radical transformation, thanks to the meticulous marketing strategy implemented by Sorin and Flammarion. The media promotion of Houellebecq's subsequent books adhered to a strict formula: prioritizing extensive interviews in left-wing media while limiting appearances in right-wing media to an absolute minimum. The promotion of *Submission* followed the same rule, with Flammarion engaging several left-wing outlets, such as public radio broadcaster France Inter's morning show, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and interviews in *Les Inrockuptibles*, and only one right-wing press outlet, *Le Figaro Magazine* (Krug, 2023, p. 179).

Sorin himself was adept at navigating murky waters, successfully publishing both leftist authors and, later, those associated with far-right ideologies. Since 2012, he has served as the literary director of Le Ring, a far-right website-turned-publishing-house, which has sparked controversy over its far-right authors, such as the racist and sexist comic strip Marsault and the far-right YouTuber Papacito. Through this strategic choice of publishers and media appearances, Houellebecq has managed to shape his perception among different segments of the public.

The left-wing literary magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* has played a key role in shaping Houellebecq's public image, acting as a useful ally by offering him a leftist stamp of approval, often without reading between the lines. The editors saw in Houellebecq only what they wanted to see—primarily his critique of economic liberalism and global capitalism. It was this economically anti-liberal Houellebecq that initially captivated left-wing readers, especially at *Les Inrockuptibles*. Houellebecq long maintained this aura of a left-wing author (Cruikshank, 2009), even after publishing the translation of what was intended to be his last interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, framed as “Houellebecq's Final Confession,” in the far-right weekly *Valeurs Actuelles*.

Houellebecq's ambiguous aura was further diminished after receiving the Oswald Spengler Prize in 2018. The prize was given by David Engels, a regular contributor to *The European Conservative* (Engels, 2019), a journal associated with the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament, which is led by far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and includes both ultranationalist and mainstream conservative elements. Since 2021, *The European Conservative* has been published with support from the Fidesz-funded Batthyány Lajos Foundation (Rivera, 2024, p. 8). The Oswald Spengler Society lists Max Otte as its treasurer, who made headlines in 2022 when he was named as the AfD candidate for the German presidential election while still a member of the mainstream CDU party (“Germany: AfD nominates member,” 2022), which led to his expulsion from the latter (“Max Otte nach AfD,” 2022). During a trip on which Houellebecq met both Engels and Otte, he was accompanied by *Valeurs Actuelles* editor Geoffroy Lejeune, who later recounted their trip in a special issue. This issue served as an informal interview, even though Houellebecq had already claimed he would no longer speak to the press (d'Ornellas, 2017).

To maintain his ambiguous political positioning despite his increasingly visible far-right connections after 2017, Houellebecq sent mixed signals when he appeared with *Valeurs Actuelles*. For instance, in 2018, the magazine organized a European debate in which Houellebecq appeared alongside the far-right, sovereigntist (a European political stance advocating national sovereignty over supranational governance, somewhat analogous to the “states' rights” position in American federalism), and monarchist figures Philippe de Villiers and Éric Zemmour, the latter being the leader of the far-right Reconquête party. At the event, Houellebecq remarked: “Nationalism isn't my thing,” and confessed that he would have preferred desertion over fighting for France, adding with a smile to the audience, “Sorry, that's not very right-wing of me” (Krug, 2023, pp. 189–190).

However, Houellebecq's political positioning has shifted more dramatically in recent years. His participation in the royalist far-right Action Française-affiliated Cercle de Flore in July 2022 (Krug, 2023, p. 215) and his interview for a special issue of the far-right-leaning revue *Front Populaire* in December of that year demonstrated this shift. The virulence of his statements in the interview was described as “a further step in his radicalization towards the far right” (Bherer, 2022). Following this publication, the Grand Mosque of Paris announced its intent to file a lawsuit against Houellebecq for “incitement to hatred against Muslims,” which

led to his retraction and the reformulation of those passages that might have exposed him to legal liability. The shift culminated in January 2023, when the left-wing magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, which had long supported Houellebecq's political ambiguity, finally disavowed him (Kapriélian, 2023). This repudiation by a former left-wing support base, combined with the backlash from the *Front Populaire* controversy, has clarified his political positioning and sparked a debate regarding the relevance of his previously held left-wing label.

In contrast to Houellebecq, Raspail has perpetually maintained an openly far-right stance. He notably served for several years on the National Committee of the Party of New Forces (PFN), a minor offshoot of the National Front (Charpier, 2005). In 2013, he was listed as an honorary member of *Secours de France*, an association created in 1961 to support OAS detainees, alongside other members such as Jacques Isorni (Marshall Pétain's lawyer), Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour (a far-right figure and lawyer for OAS militants), and Georges Bidault and Pierre Sergent (two OAS leaders). That same year, *Secours de France* also helped organize the far-right "Manif pour tous" demonstrations in opposition to gay marriage (Mestre & Monnot, 2013b).

Raspail has also been associated with the TV Libertés project, a French far-right web TV channel launched in 2014 by Martial Bild, a former senior member of the National Front who, like Raspail, was also a member of the PFN (Mestre & Monnot, 2013a). At Raspail's funeral in June 2020, attendees included Philippe de Villiers, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (the niece of Marine Le Pen who was closely aligned with Zemmour at the time), businessman Charles Beigbeder (brother of the author Frédéric Beigbeder and patron of the far-right Identitarian movement), former PFN members such as Jean-Pax Méfret, Anne Méaux of the far-right Catholic journal *Présent*, and a delegation from *Valeurs Actuelles* (Krug, 2023, p. 81). Unlike Houellebecq, Raspail never attempted to craft a nonpartisan identity or align himself with left-wing ideas or circles.

4.2. Gaining Academic Recognition

Academic networks have played a critical role in building Houellebecq's legitimacy by interpreting his political statements as evidence of his status as a welcome troublemaker and the "bad boy" of French literature. He has been the subject of numerous conferences and colloquia, as well as special issues of respected journals such as *Études Littéraires* and *Revue des Sciences Humaines*. Several scholars have specialized in his work, including Novak-Lechevalier (2018) and Viard (2008), a professor at Aix-Marseille University. Scholars outside of France have also specialized in Houellebecq's work, such as Ruth Cruickshank of the Royal Holloway University of London, who has celebrated his "aesthetic of crisis" (Sweeney, 2011) and John McCann of the University of Ulster, who considers Houellebecq to be the "author of our time" (McCann, 2010). Scholars have even compared Houellebecq to other renowned writers, such as van Wesemael (2014) at the University of Amsterdam, who has compared him to Marcel Proust, and Morrey (2013) at the University of Warwick, who has likened him to Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

The way Houellebecq's work is interpreted seems to emerge as a collaborative construction between the author and his academic critics. In 2012, Bruno Viard organized the first French colloquium dedicated to Houellebecq's writings, with Houellebecq engaging in what Viard described as "active participation" in the three-day analysis of his work (Viard, 2013, p. 8). The creation of an exegesis of Houellebecq's work thus appears to involve an ongoing dialogue between him and his critics, with each party often taking up the arguments of the other. Commentators attempting to address Houellebecq's racist, sexist, or Islamophobic underpinnings have been accused of imposing moral judgements or politicizing literary art, thereby reinforcing

the idea that literature lies beyond ideological scrutiny. This framing creates a polarized reception: readers are implicitly positioned to either admire Houellebecq's worldview or risk being dismissed as proponents of political correctness (Fassin, 2009, p. 267).

Houellebecq's academic supporters often claim that his stark portrayals of Western society are not endorsements but analyses of societal undercurrents: he is not advocating but merely exploring. For instance, Novak-Lechevalier (2018, p. 52) has interpreted Houellebecq's literature as a "metaphysical questioning," and Viard (2013, p. 83) has called it an "existential critique by a philosophical moralist," rather than a prescriptive ideological stance. According to Novak-Lechevalier (2018, p. 52), an ideological reading of Houellebecq would therefore "obliterate the frontier between political discourse and fiction." However, even when Houellebecq's works are framed as explorations, the repeated portrayal of racist, sexist, or Islamophobic perspectives is never neutral; they are depicted as valid responses to societal issues rather than views to be interrogated.

Houellebecq's academic defenders have also contextualized his provocations within a tradition of French literary transgression, drawing comparisons to predecessors like Baudelaire (Noguez, 2003), Céline (Alves, 2018; Bardolle, 2004; Bellanger, 2012; Chourrout, 2022), and Genet (Mbina, 2017), who were notorious for challenging societal and literary norms. But while they were challenging prevailing norms, Houellebecq's provocations focus disproportionately on socially vulnerable rather than dominant targets—women, Muslims, and queer people—which positions his work less as an avant-garde challenge to dominant taboos and more as an attack on marginalized groups that transcends mere transgression. From this perspective, Houellebecq's shock tactics are seen as a form of literary (Demonpion, 2005)—or even marketing (Patricola & Vebret, 2005)—performance, integral to his constructed artistic persona rather than as serious ideological stances. However, such arguments overlook the fact that literature can both challenge norms and be politically impactful and they dismiss the responsibility an author holds as a public figure.

On January 6, 2015, following the publication of *Submission*, Houellebecq appeared on national television to be interviewed by famous news anchor David Pujadas. During the interview, Pujadas repeatedly questioned Houellebecq with lines like: "Do you agree? Do you share this view? Do you feel this personally?"—a clear attempt to push the author into admitting that the narrator's voice was his own. Pujadas' insistence on interrogating Houellebecq rather than exploring the novel itself highlights a problematic approach. By focusing on the author's personal stance rather than examining the polyphonic complexity of the text, this line of questioning overlooks a crucial point: the importance lies not in authorial intent but in critically engaging with the universal "truths" Houellebecq suggests within his work.

Houellebecq's strategic deployment of political ambiguity exemplifies how controversial rhetoric can gain legitimacy within mainstream discourse. His approach, often downplayed by his defenders as either provocative or ironic, has facilitated the mainstreaming (Mondon, 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020, 2024) of exclusionary ideas through a careful blending of self-distancing irony, selective media engagement, and the tacit endorsement of an intellectual network. By presenting his ideologically charged narratives under the guise of satire, Houellebecq has crafted a literary persona that claims freedom from accountability while simultaneously asserting insights into societal issues. This ambiguity has enabled him to deflect criticisms that focus on the problematic content of his work, leading to a whitewashing of his far-right rhetoric under a veil of intellectualism and cultural commentary.

In Raspail's work, however, there is little room for ambiguity in interpretation. Although there are rare passages that call for irony, these serve primarily to emphasize the paradoxical nature of an avoidable catastrophe, as exemplified by the line: "women raped [by the immigrants]...amidst the white sheets they had spread out as a sign of welcome" (Raspail, 1985, p. 321). This irony is meant to highlight the naivety of these women, which parallels a broader naivety about the existence of a "universal conscience" (Raspail, 1985, p. 41) and an assumed natural solidarity between all people, a belief that is upheld by "the Western left" (Raspail, 1985, p. 72).

Such language ultimately reinforces the notion that the catastrophe at the heart of *The Camp of the Saints* could have been avoided if others—those aware of the "incompatibility of races" (Raspail, 1985, p. 364)—had been in power; in other words, if the far right had maintained control, which further reinforces the political interpretation of the text. This unambiguous political framing is the reason why Raspail is considered a far-right author, excluded from mainstream literature, and thus frequently overlooked in academic circles. For example, 24 doctoral theses on Houellebecq were defended between 2004 and 2024, compared to none on Raspail; there are also numerous academic articles and books on Houellebecq, compared to just one academic article on Raspail (Moura, 1988).

4.3. Celebrity Networks to Bypass Political Correctness

To deal with the scandalous atmosphere that has surrounded the publication of *Submission*, Houellebecq has relied on his extensive connections in media and literary circles to ensure that his work is received, commented on, and appreciated in a way that aligns with his own objectives. By making strategic media appearances, he has shaped the public narrative surrounding his novels and influenced how his books are discussed. The cultural reception of a book depends on how effectively the author can manipulate these forms of capital to gain legitimacy from key gatekeepers, such as publishers, critics, media outlets, and academic institutions.

Within these networks, several distinct spheres of influence can be identified. Literary circles themselves play a crucial role, particularly through prestigious literary prizes like the Goncourt, which Houellebecq received for *La Carte et le Territoire*. His publisher, Flammarion, has been instrumental in creating sophisticated marketing campaigns to promote him. He has regularly appeared on television, including notable appearances on *La Grande Librairie* on France 5, a major program devoted to literature that reaches a broad audience. He has also benefited from the support of fellow writer Frédéric Beigbeder, who founded the literary Prix de Flore that Houellebecq won in 1994, and who has regularly invited Houellebecq to *Le Cercle* on Canal+, which he anchors (Harris, 2022).

The media world has followed. Figures like Franz-Olivier Giesbert, former director of *Le Point* (a center-right publication) and *Figaro Magazine* (a right-wing one), have publicly supported Houellebecq on several occasions, writing articles about him and giving him a platform to express his views. Publications such as *Le Monde* (which is center-left) or even *Libération* (which is leftist) have also devoted numerous articles to him, and even when they are critical, they have consolidated Houellebecq's status as a leading figure of contemporary French literature. Houellebecq has also benefited from the support of Philippe Sollers, a writer and literary critic: both men have published their epistolary exchanges, positioning Houellebecq as an unavoidable figure within the French cultural field.

Even ideologically opposed figures, such as Bernard-Henri Lévy—a public philosopher known for his advocacy of hawkish liberal interventionism—have engaged with Houellebecq in intellectual exchanges. Despite their differences, both men have published their epistolary exchanges in *Ennemis Publics* (2008), in which Houellebecq states that his novels primarily aim to express “a general human truth” (Houellebecq & Lévy, 2008, p. 233), addressing “human issues—some universal, others specific to Western societies” (Houellebecq & Lévy, 2008, p. 241). This degree of recognition by Lévy thus suggests that Houellebecq is not only a writer but a figure whose works reflect a broader political and philosophical worldview.

Houellebecq has also been supported by a wide range of conservative public thinkers, such as Alain Finkielkraut, a philosopher critical of modernity and known for his long-running weekly radio show *Répliques*, which first aired in 1985. Michel Onfray, another public intellectual who founded the sovereigntist and anti-liberal quarterly *Front Populaire*, has also given Houellebecq a platform to disseminate his ideas on several occasions. For instance, in November 2022, in an interview with Onfray in *Front Populaire*, Houellebecq stated that the great replacement was “not a theory but a fact” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 40) and that “the only chance for survival” would be for “white supremacism to become ‘fashionable’ in the US” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 30). He then went on to declare: “What the native French population hopes for, as we said, is not that Muslims assimilate but that they stop stealing and attacking. Or, another solution would be, that they leave” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 31). This interview—even though he retracted some of its formulations later once the ensuing scandal erupted—sounded the death knell of Houellebecq’s two decades of political ambiguity, confirming his transformation into a beacon of far-right thinking.

Houellebecq has also benefited from direct political support, particularly from right-wing politicians, such as Éric Ciotti, the former president of Les Républicains (LR) and leader of the far-right party Union des Droites pour la République, who has cited Houellebecq as a key reference for his own critiques of France’s social decline (Sulzer & Laurent, 2023). Additionally, the rise of French tycoon Vincent Bolloré, who has transformed his commercial empire into a far-right-leaning media powerhouse similar to Rupert Murdoch’s in the US, has also played a significant role in mainstreaming Houellebecq’s worldview and promoting the far-right agenda more broadly (Lévrier, 2024).

Last but not least, Houellebecq has become acquainted with former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) and his wife, Carla Bruni. Sarkozy expressed his admiration for Houellebecq, seeing him as one of the leading poets of our time and an author with lucid insight into today’s world (Chassagnon, 2018). Bruni wrote a song based on a poem by Houellebecq, confirming how much France’s jet-set elite, of which she has been a central figure, has been drawn to provocative figures such as him (K, 2008). Another key figure in Houellebecq’s integration into these circles has been Geoffroy Lejeune, who left *Valeurs Actuelles* to become editor-in-chief of the formerly more centrist weekly, *Le Journal du Dimanche*. It was Lejeune who put Houellebecq in touch with Bruno-Roger Petit, an advisor on memory policy to President Emmanuel Macron. It was through this connection, along with his relationship with the Sarkozy couple, that Houellebecq was awarded his membership in the prestigious Légion d’honneur by President Emmanuel Macron in 2019. This award was largely attributed to his novel *Sérotonine*, which explores the suffering of rural France and resonated widely in the context of the Yellow Vests protest movement. Sarkozy, as well as several of Houellebecq’s literary friends, attended the ceremony (Faye, 2019).

5. Conclusion

These two tales of Houellebecq's and Raspail's divergent public reception reveal several changes in context. First, in the 1970s, the impermeability between the mainstream right, which was largely supportive of the liberal-democratic status quo, and the far right, which was still very much a fringe element, meant that Raspail's work was unable to reach a broad audience. In contrast, today's permeability between a weakened mainstream right and a far right that is now fully normalized has allowed Houellebecq to easily transcend the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. A second change in context relates to the boundaries between politics, media, and culture: in the 1970s, these realms were less fluid than today, a time when they have been largely blended, thus rendering France, like all other developed Western democracies, a "mediacracy" (K. Phillips, 1975). Third, the two authors did not wield the same kind of discursive and social capital: Houellebecq has mastered the fluidity and hybridity of language and public positioning, unlike Raspail, whose far-right language and stances were more rigid and explicit.

Obviously, the ideological effects of literature, particularly that produced by a single author, are difficult to conclusively prove and can only be postulated. The deflection of criticism through the use of a public persona may complicate accountability and Houellebecq has excellent skills in writing in a polyphonic way, with characters embodying different ideological stances. Whatever the author's goal, readers are never passive recipients of ideology but active interpreters of a text. As Barthes (1977) argues in *The Death of the Author*, the meaning of a text is shaped as much by the reader's interpretation as by the author's intent, thus emphasizing the active role of readers in deriving meaning from literature and therefore the role of the social and cultural context in which books circulate.

Houellebecq's successful manipulation of social and discursive capital highlights a significant mechanism through which illiberal ideas can permeate mainstream discourse while evading widespread criticism. By using his influential position and rephrasing controversial views in a more palatable language, Houellebecq has succeeded in diffusing racist, sexist, or Islamophobic perspectives that reinforce negative stereotypes without incurring the full brunt of public backlash. In contrast, figures like Jean Raspail have experienced markedly less tolerance for disseminating comparable ideas, underscoring how social and discursive capital can serve as powerful shields for controversial ideologies.

Though the Houellebecq case is far from unique, it reveals the ability of illiberal values to circulate in infra-political spaces such as the literary realm, as well as media and public intellectual circles, which act as powerbrokers between politics and culture. While the majority of academic research on Houellebecq has focused on his artistic intent—a domain wherein normative judgement is unwelcome—an approach that moves away from intent-based accusations and instead analyzes the ideologies literary works propagate appears more heuristic. Ultimately, Houellebecq's case illustrates how far-right ideas can be normalized because the boundaries between fiction and ideological commentary are inherently blurry, inviting scholarship to explore in greater depth the role of cultural ecosystems in promoting illiberalism.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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