

***(N)Ostalgie?* Communism in French Literature Since 1989**

Abstract

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In recent years, the burgeoning field of research on ‘post-communist nostalgia’ has concentrated mainly on the former Eastern Bloc, with *Ostalgie* for the GDR of particular interest. Study of the memory of communism in western countries such as France has been marginal. However, communism has left a considerable trace on French culture and politics. This article examines the memory of communism in French literature published since 1989. The novels of Bernard Chambaz, Aurélie Filippetti and Michel Houellebecq express affection and even longing for the lost world of communism, while reflecting lucidly on the failure of ‘really existing socialism’ and marking a break with previous generations. To varying degrees, these writers evoke the crisis of a France decentred and disoriented by social liberalisation, globalisation and migratory flows. Beyond any reflective nostalgia for communism, there appears, between the lines, a nostalgia for a certain France.

Key words: communism post-communism nostalgia generation literature

Word count: 6,200

In 2005, Tzvetan Todorov told *Euro-zine* of his dismay at persistent nostalgia for communism : ‘In East European countries, we were slaves. I think that today it is a much more important task to acquire a sense of lucidity about the communist ideology than about Nazism’. Apart from a few cranks in Germany and other countries, nobody extolled the Nazi ideology anymore, whereas the communist ideology continued to be extolled by significant minorities, including in Todorov’s adopted home, France. Therefore it was important to recall that ‘this ideology, which at a certain level of generality can be seductive – it will bring us all fraternity, a glorious radiant future -, is a deadly one. It is important to call in mind that nothing good can come from this ideology’ (2005a: 3). However, not much further on in the interview, Todorov remembered his first encounters with PCF activists: ‘The communists were the only ones who were ready to go from house to house, to do the shopping for an old lady who didn’t have a car, to help an old handicapped man and so on. They did what Christians do, as a rule’(2005a: 3). A self-styled victim of communism like Todorov thus himself showed the ambivalent attitude in France and elsewhere towards the ‘God that failed’.

Post-communist nostalgia, or ‘counter-memory’, has different contents and different agents. Different contexts as well. France represents a particular case: it was never part of the Soviet bloc, and the PCF only occasionally participated in coalition governments. At the same time, the PCF was viscerally attached to the Soviet Union, right until 1991, and a good proportion of its membership, and all its leadership, had regular encounters with ‘really existing socialism’. Also, as Todorov points out, Communism had a considerable impact on French culture and society. To add to the singularity of the French case, the PCF has refused to abandon its ‘discredited’ name and asserted a radical project without reference to the Soviet past. This, we argue, makes communist nostalgia in French literature since 1989 more ‘reflective’ than ‘restorative’, to use the terms of Svetlana Boym (2001a). There is a critical, if affectionate, appraisal of French communism, and a clear generational break. The ‘home’ is lost forever – though this ‘home’ may also signify a certain idea of France itself.

Adieu to all that: Bernard Chambaz and Aurélie Filippetti

In the few novels written about French Communism since 1989, there is a reflective approach to the past which, if warmed by ideological and human sympathy, emphasises generational difference and a certain lucidity in hindsight, notably on real existing socialism. Bernard Chambaz’s first novel, *L’Arbre de vies* (1992), is set in another historical period : one

evening in the autumn of 1867, Antoine Couthon recalls the afternoon of Thermidor 1794 where he learned of the death of his father (the paralytic friend of Robespierre), then during the night remembers his life, from Auvergne to revolutionary Paris to Napoleon's disastrous campaign in Russia then finally old age in Italy. But it is evident that the novel is raising contemporary issues of generational transmission and revolutionary failure.

The recent communist past is evoked explicitly in Chambaz's *Komsomol* (2000), 'Komsomol' being the name of a rock band put together by the novel's characters in the Red Belt of the 1960s. Through alternate voices, Volodia, Romain, Sarah, Mozart, Guitare, Tania, and Venise, all born at the end of the 1940s, and thus 'Stalin's children', evoke music, personal relationships, politics, and a friend Colin, recently killed in a mountaineering accident. Chambaz affectionately reconstructs his adolescence, but there is no celebration of ideological purity. By adopting the name Komsomol (after the Soviet Communist Youth), the band believe that 'On pourrait montrer que ce nom-là c'était pas seulement la routine des réunions isipides et un robinet de musique tiède' (2000 : 10). In conversation over Boris Polevoi's Soviet wartime novel *Un homme véritable, épopée soviétique*, a character 'voyait les choses autrement. D'abord, il sourit quand je lui confiai mon enthousiasme. Il affirma que bien sûr personne n'oublierait la victoire de Stalingrad, mais qu'il ne fallait pas oublier non plus les crimes du régime... tout ça le faisait rigoler. Et tant qu'à prendre un aviateur autant choisir *le Petit Prince*, c'est plus sobre. Et plus court' (2000: 18). Guitare is indignant that Venise's father, the local Communist mayor, is hesitating to allow them to play in the local hall : 'Quand j'pense qu'on crèche au cœur du bastion rouge, ben, si c'est ça les cocos, bravo' (2000: 33). At a football match between France and the USSR, Colin asks Volodia. 'Est-ce qu'il était pour la France (son pays) ou pour l'URSS (le pays du communisme) ? Il ne savait pas' (2000: 54). The lives and deaths of this generation seem to be light and insignificant next to predecessors who sacrificed their lives for the Resistance. A character describes visiting the cemetery where Colin is buried: 'A l'entrée, un gardien a consulté un registre et m'a indiqué la direction des fusains, cinquième allée sur la droite, après le carré des fusillés. J'ai dû me perdre de ce côté-là. J'ai vu des noms de gars qui n'avaient pas vécu beaucoup plus vieux que Colin. Eux ne sont pas morts pour rien, mais est-ce que ça change quelque chose à la tristesse ?' (2000 : 82). Stalin's children receive a delegation of young Soviets from their twin town of Krasnodar, but recall mainly 'des filles surtout, des très belles, comme on en rêvait avant de découvrir les musiques anglosaxonnes et comme on pouvait en rêver encore' (2000 : 113). It is 1967, and Tania remarks : 'J'ai le sentiment que c'est fini, pas seulement le concert et le groups, mais peut-être une période de notre vie' (2000 : 123). The last lines of

the novel evoke the late Colin : ‘Il rêvait de monter au sommet du pic Communisme, 7 495 mètres, l’air pur, une vue dégagée sur les alentours. On avait aussi parlé de l’année à venir. Et de la mort de Coltrane l’avant-veille’ (2000 : 126). Here, adolescent dreams could be seen to still contain a Communist utopianism, but also an attachment to a popular culture that escapes the Soviet – and political - frame. Indeed, this often contradictory encounter between communism and western pop culture echoes one of the major *Ostalgie* movies, Leander Haussmann’s *Sonnenallee* (1999).

In *Kinopanorama* (2005a), Chambaz returns to his Communist upbringing, this time recalling his father Jacques Chambaz, PCF deputy and Politburo member. In a series of chronological leaps, the son evokes the Stalinist show trials and notably the disgrace and death of Bukharin in 1938, as well as the Kravchenko trial of 1948, when French intellectuals, including his father, went on record to deny the existence of the Gulag. At the same time, he recalls the period of 1955-1958, of the Algerian War, during which his father became a target for assassination. The ‘Kinopanorama’ of the title seems to embody the ambivalence of the Communist phenomenon: it is the place where his father gives him a taste for world cinema, but when, in the seventies, it screens Costa Gavras’s *L’Aveu*, denouncing Stalinist show trials in post-war Czechoslovakia, he is instructed to boycott it. He observes: ‘Que je sache, mon enfance était désormais derrière moi, et il faut convenir qu’avec elle disparaît l’innocence ou supposée innocence à l’abri de laquelle il est si pratique de se réfugier ; nul doute que les années soixante-dix ouvrent pour ma génération une ère nouvelle où le communisme apparaît sous un jour plus âpre’ (2005a : 190). Indeed, the arrival of his own father at the head of the Institut de recherches marxistes marks a fatal freezing of the PCF’s intellectual life.

The collapse of the East arrives, but, to the author’s surprise, his parents, like other communists mentioned above, refuse the temptation of nostalgia:

Un peu avant Noël, je demandai à mes parents quel sentiment les habitait à l’égard de l’URSS. Ils étaient catégoriques, ils n’éprouvaient aucune mélancolie, pourquoi pas, mais ils n’éprouvaient aucun sentiment non plus, ni pour le mois de vacances qu’ils y avaient passé ni pour l’espace géographique et littéraire qu’elle avait représentée ni même pour l’espérance qu’elle avait suscitée. (2005a : 279)

To have insisted on this question would, Chambaz concludes, be like pissing into a violin. Towards the end of the novel, as his father is dying of cancer, the son sends a postcard from

the Stalin museum in Gori, Georgia, mentioning the corruption now rampant in the post-Soviet republic. But, as in *Komsomol*, the final memory is not a Soviet one, rather one of the day ‘où nous vîmes tous les deux – mon fils et moi son père – *Et au milieu coule une rivière* [A River Runs Through It], un film yankee au cinéma Kinopanorama’ (2005a : 312).

Indeed, in the subsequent two volumes of his trilogy, ‘Mes disparitions’, Chambaz challenges the communist orthodoxy which his father embodied. In *Yankee* (2008) he celebrates his Jewish-American grandmother and a country which, thanks to John Reed, Oppenheimer, Jack Kerouac, William Carlos Williams and rock n’roll, cannot be reduced to the PCF’s anti-American stereotypes. In *Ghetto* (2010), Chambaz evokes the final journey of his father’s corpse from hospital morgue to Montmartre cemetery, exploring the geography and history of Paris and, with that, memories of his own father, ‘Enfant de chœur puis marxiste zélé’ (2010a: 13). He recalls happy childhood memories with a father who, despite his sobriety and endless Party activity, with the ‘ghetto’ of his study as its epicentre, is capable of affection as well as curiosity in his son’s romanesque representations of him. Again, Chambaz pulls no punches on the Stalinist excesses that his father uncritically accepted, notably Maurice Thorez’s anti-Semitic portrayal of Leon Blum, but also describes with respect and humour the militantly anti-nostalgic attitude of a man who authored, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, *La Patience de l’Utopie*:

On peut s’en féliciter, le déplorer, y être indifférent, l’URSS a disparu. Au-delà de cette disparition, beaucoup de monde suppose la mort du communisme. Mon père suppose plutôt le contraire. Il estime que l’épanouissement de l’humanité reste à venir et qu’un tel axiome mérite un whisky sec et le whisky à la couleur de l’abricot. (2010a : 178)

Chambaz himself cannot write off a past that still weighs like a nightmare : ‘Mon père pense que le communisme n’est pas mort. Il plaide pour une éternelle utopie. Moi j’ai le sentiment qu’une bonne part de nous-mêmes reste prise dans les filets du passé, on a beau faire, on a beau courir, le temps qui passe accentue notre solitude’ (2010a : 16).

Indeed, in other works, Chambaz continues a critical appraisal of the communist past. *L’Humanité* (2004) begins with memories of selling the newspaper as a child alongside his father – as well as nostalgia for *Pif* comic and the sports pages -, before celebrating the progressive causes championed during its hundred years’ existence, and yet:

J'y ai vu l'union de la gauche se briser, l'eurocommunisme s'évaporer, la glorieuse Union soviétique donner de la bande, l'illusion de 1981 se dissiper, les partis communistes battre de l'aile, le chômage suivre une courbe exponentielle, l'idée de progrès se défaire, le *lider maximo* métamorphoser en triste bandit... cependant je lui reste très attaché (2004, n.p).

In his most recent novel, *Vladimir Vladimirovitch* (2015a), the French generational reference has disappeared, and nostalgia is nowhere to be found. Instead, as the Muscovite narrator obsessively reconstructs and mulls the itinerary of his namesake presiding in the Kremlin, spectres of the Soviet past return: Stalin, the Gulag, Katyn, and the poisonous legacy of the USSR's space and nuclear programmes.

A similar reflective homage to a disappeared past can be found in Aurélie Filippetti's *Les Derniers jours de la classe ouvrière* (2003), which evokes the history of her family milieu of Italian immigrants who worked in the now closed steel mills and iron ore mines of Lorraine. The novel seeks to satisfy a hunger for a history that risks being erased for ever. Filippetti is motivated by a fear of oblivion: 'Rangée au placard, la vieille rivalité des mineurs et des sidérurgistes, solidement verrouillée par l'histoire. Aux poubelles la fierté des uns de faire le travail le plus dur, et le mieux payé, salaire jaloué mais pour lequel les autres refusaient de se priver de la lumière du jour. Des histoires, tout cela, de la poussière d'histoire' (2003: 28). Hence, she imagines the way of life and political struggles, during peacetime as well as a murderous Nazi occupation, culminating in the symbolic death from cancer of her father, the Communist mayor. As with Chambaz, there is evoked the communists' attachment to and – distorted – familiarity with real existing socialism : trips to the GDR, a honeymoon in Cuba, etc. Then there is the shock of the real: 'Comment savoir que les bolcheviques, une fois au pouvoir dans les pays de l'est, étaient devenus à leur tour des exploités, des petits patrons, et étaient les nouveaux privilégiés, au nom de l'abolition des privilèges. Marx pour nous, c'était l'espoir' (2003 : 71). On his death bed, the PCF mayor tries to salvage something from the wreckage: 'Si l'on n'avait pas eu cet idéal, on aurait été lessivés par le boulot, comme beaucoup aujourd'hui, abrutis aussi par la télé. Les mines ont fermé, l'URSS n'existe plus...' (2003: 73). The once proud steelworkers and miners of Lorraine, who thought that Mitterrand's victory in 1981 might have saved their way of life, are crushed by globalisation :

Après nous les mouches. Personne n'avait imaginé remplacé des ouvriers rouges, solidaires, armés de leurs quelques droits arrachés de haute lutte... les remplacer par d'autres, là-bas en Amérique ou en Afrique du Sud, si loin, si pauvres... ? Tout ayant été pillé ici, partir ailleurs, ne laisser derrière soi que de la terre brûlée, par les déchets, par la chimie, par le souvenir. Ne laisser derrière soi que ces grandes cicatrices à vif dans le sol : trous béants, paysages défoncés, mémoire laminée. (2003: 153)

The generational gap becomes a chasm not simply due to these closures, but also by social mobility. Educational success pulls the author away from Montrouge and towards the cultural capital offered by Paris: 'Un jour trouver ridicule cet accent lorrain pas remarqué jusque-là, et sans doute reçu en héritage puis soigneusement dissimulé. Un jour honte de sa culture, et n'en plus parler, devant eux, pour qu'ils ne se sentent pas exclus' (2003 : 87).

Chambaz and Filippetti both, therefore, remember and reflect on a communist past. At the same time, such reflection marks another form of closure, excluding the temptation of melancholy. For Chambaz, what he has called *les vingt glorieuses* of 1950-1970 are a receding memory, while both the eastern bloc and his father are buried; for Filippetti, the father and his communist milieu are equally consigned to history. These homages to previous generations echo another major *Ostalgie* movie, Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) where the son uses his imagination to keep alive a communist mother that news of the disappearance of the GDR would undoubtedly kill with a heart attack. Of course, the comical fiction he creates cannot last: the mother's ashes are sent heavenwards in a rocket, while the reconciled east-western family remains on Earth. In French cinematic terms, there is an echo in the hit comedy *Tout le monde n'a pas eu la chance d'avoir des parents communistes* (1993), which the director, Jean-Jacques Zilbermann, dedicated to his mother: the film, like these novels, marks an affectionate *adieu* to all that.

One significant quasi-absence in these novels is May 68. *Komsomol* deals with the years 1950-1967, while *Kinopanorama* deals with the fifties, early sixties, seventies and nineties. In *Les Vingt glorieuses* (2007), a *beau livre* illustrated by photographer Paul Almasy, and dedicated this time to his mother, Chambaz recounts the rise of French consumer society, from the disappearance of the last rationing cards to the 'premiers signes d'essoufflement et de crise perceptibles dans les turbulences de 1968, qui révèlent pour le moins des interrogations sur la nature du progrès' (2007: 11-12). After 1968 'il y eut 1969. Un soupçon d'amertume allait de pair avec la joie de vivre quel que soit notre lot de soucis.

Le général de Gaulle se retirait de l'avant-scène et Neil Armstrong marchait sur la Lune. Le monde ne cessait de s'étendre et les jupes rallongeaient. Le prix de l'or en barre remontait' (2007: 250). In *Ghetto*, Chambaz, a PCF student activist during the events of 1968, regrets his party-sanctioned brawls with *gauchistes* whom, he discovered, did not live up to Stalinist propaganda stereotypes. There is only one reference to 1968 in *Les derniers jours*, where Filippetti's father is arrested for direct action in defence of his workers. Just as the PCF was, to a certain extent, an 'outsider' during the events of 1968, so narratives concerning a French communist past do not consider them of decisive import, let alone of nostalgia.

An Impossible Communist? Michel Houellebecq

Indeed, May 1968 can be seen as a negative reference-point for another author steeped in the communist past while abandoning it, Michel Houellebecq. In interviews, Houellebecq has repeatedly expressed affection for the communism of his grandparents' generation, while despising the more libertarian leftist movements that emerged from the 'événements'. He told *Les Inrockuptibles*:

L'image du bien, pour moi, c'était mes grands-parents qui m'élevaient. Tout le contraire : des prolétaires vertueux, évidemment communistes, ayant travaillé toute leur vie... Au lycée, il y avait toute une panoplie de mouvements incompréhensibles : gauchistes, écologistes... Tous ces gens m'inspiraient la plus profonde répulsion. (1996 : 56)

That said, Houellebecq did not mention the orthodox communist past of his mother, who was a young activist in Algeria before briefly going to Czechoslovakia after the communist takeover in 1948 to build a railway line to the USSR. Instead, Lucie Ceccaldi would become a representative of the *gauchiste* spontaneity her son so loathes.

The ideological origins of Houellebecq's entry into the literary world are seldom mentioned by critics, but he owed the publication of his first poems to Michel Bulteau and Jean Ristat, two writers close to the PCF. Houellebecq would join the editorial board of Ristat's review *Digraphe* then contribute articles to the revived – and short-lived – *Lettres françaises*. In his early writings, Houellebecq makes excoriating attacks on *le libéralisme*, calling notably for 'un dernier rempart' against the dismantling of what was left of French industry : 'Nous refusons l'idéologie libérale parce qu'elle est incapable de fournir un sens,

une voie à la réconciliation de l'individu avec son semblable dans une communauté qu'on pourrait qualifier d'humaine' (2004b : 52). At the same time, in this poem, Houellebecq was no adherent to Marxist dogma, his world-view emphasising rather ethics over dialectical materialism: 'Nous refusons l'idéologie libérale au nom de l'encyclique de Léon XIII sur la mission sociale de l'Évangile (...) Nous devons lutter pour la mise en tutelle de l'économie et pour sa soumission à certains critères que j'oserai appeler éthiques' (2004b : 53).

In 1996, Houellebecq told *Les Inrockuptibles* that in his work there was 'une nostalgie presque militante de l'élan révolutionnaire', while doubting his own aptitude for life in a communist society: 'Tout en étant hostile à l'individualisme, j'ai été fortement marqué par mon époque, aussi. Je suis aussi individualiste et indifférent aux autres que n'importe qui. Par ailleurs, j'ai peur des mouvements collectifs. Je pense qu'une bande ou une foule est toujours abjecte' (1996 : 58-59) This was further expounded in an interview with *L'Humanité*. Houellebecq was hardly a *Proletkult* author: 'Mes personnages ne sont ni riches, ni célèbres ; ce ne sont pas non plus des marginaux, des délinquants ni des exclus' (1998a : 115). What's more, he was 'communiste mais non marxiste' :

L'erreur du marxisme a été de s'imaginer qu'il suffisait de changer les structures économiques, que le reste suivrait. Le reste, on l'a vu, n'a pas suivi. Si par exemple les jeunes Russes se sont si rapidement adaptés à l'ambiance répugnante d'un capitalisme mafieux, c'est que le régime précédent s'était montré incapable de promouvoir l'altruisme. S'il n'y est pas parvenu, c'est que le matérialisme dialectique, basé sur les mêmes prémisses philosophiques erronées que le libéralisme, est par construction incapable d'aboutir à une morale altruiste. (1998a: 119-120)

Communist affinities of sorts do run through *Les Particules élémentaires*, although his refusal of freedom, movement and desire place him firmly in opposition to the *esprit de 68*. The loi Neuwirth of 1967, legalising the contraceptive pill, triggers another destructive advance for US-inspired materialist individualism: 'le couple et la famille représentaient le dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale. La libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires, les dernières à séparer l'individu du marché. Ce processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours' (2001a: 144). For the main characters, May 68 is not a time of liberation or romantic struggle on the barricades: in March of that year, Bruno Clément is brutally humiliated by his boarding-schoolmates, confirming in the eyes of hall subwarden Jean Cohen the dangers inherent in Nietzschean

hedonism; while December sees the death of Michel Djerzinski's beloved grandmother, embodiment of working-class communist and female altruism. If anything, *l'esprit de 68* is mocked in Houellebecq's description of 'L'espace du possible', a New Age campsite that inexorably sheds its revolutionary pretensions and orients itself towards training sessions for businessmen. Instead, thanks to his scientific research, Michel Djerzinski – who shares the surname of the founder of the Soviet secret police – carries out a Stalinistic transformation of mankind, opening the way to a post-human sexual communism. Marc Weitzmann wrote in *Les Inrockuptibles*:

Si le sexe a ses capitalistes, ses boursicotiers, il a maintenant ses prolétaires, ses SDF, et Michel Houellebecq est leur prophète – leur Karl Marx. Son *Manifeste* pour un communisme sexuel relève clairement de la science-fiction : il s'agit rien de moins que de modifier génétiquement l'être humain, d'imposer un contrôle technologique définitif sur l'homme et la nature afin de répartir équitablement entre tous, grâce à la gestion rationnelle des pulsions, les richesses orgasmiques communes (1998b : 14)

In a long interview with this magazine, Houellebecq seemed to share Weitzmann's interpretation. Welcoming his accidental choice of the name Djerzinski, Houellebecq displayed a particular brand of communist tradition :

On me l'a signalée, cette référence stalinienne. Je dois dire que j'ai trouvé plutôt bien : c'est un personnage assez sympathique : rajouter une petite couche stalinienne, ça peut lui donner une aura positive... Bon, c'est vrai, j'aime bien Staline (rires)... Parce qu'il a tué plein d'anarchistes (rires)... Parce qu'il a été assez sévère avec les trotskistes, deux mesures nécessaires pour éviter les déviations dangereuses. (1998b : 20)

Houellebecq also believed that history would prove right Georges Marchais, the recently-deceased general secretary of the PCF, on his assessment that 'le bilan de l'URSS est globalement positif' and his approval of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan : 'l'URSS apportait néanmoins le progrès à une civilisation moyenâgeuse. Il suffit de voir ce qui se passe aujourd'hui en Afghanistan pour constater qu'il n'avait pas tout à fait tort' (1998b: 20). That said, Houellebecq reiterated his belief that Stalin and his comrades had failed to

solve the questions of religion and morality, which remained essential to all successful societies, as his positivist hero Auguste Comte had warned.

Carole Sweeney has argued that Michel Houellebecq both describes and critiques the ‘loss of affect’ in neo-liberal late capitalism, but without offering a Marxist explanation, let alone a Marxist solution. He is rather a proponent of ‘the left-conservatism of *rouge-brunism*’ (2013a:). Certainly, the early Houellebecq was a proponent of communism that was part of the ‘stalinist’ tradition and had authoritarian, as well as *souverainiste*, tendencies – he voted against the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and supported Jean-Pierre Chevènement in the presidential elections of 2002 -, while extending to non-communist thinkers like Comte, Schopenhauer and Buddhist and Catholic religion. But he did not share in the post-89 drift of orthodox communists towards unholy alliances with the negationist, nationalist and anti-semitic right, as investigated by crime writer Didier Daeninckx.

Instead, in Houellebecq’s work after *Les Particules élémentaires*, there is a reconciliation with, or at least a resignation to, the market, which can be seen to reflect the post-communist ideological and economic settlements, as well as his own new-found celebrity and wealth. *Plateforme* explores sex tourism as a possible solution for a western civilisation riddled by sexual misery, and, as proposed in the aforementioned interview with *Les Inrockuptibles*, Houellebecq imagines Castroist Cuba as one site for a chain of erotic hotels de charme, Eldorado Aphrodite. But Houellebecq’s vision of Cuba is far from the revolutionary ideal of old. On inspecting a possible site for sex tourism, the narrator sees a gigantic and dilapidated brick factory that literally oozes Communist failure : ‘Sur le bas-côté, un panneau de métal où Che Guevara exhortait les travailleurs au développement des forces productives commençait à rouiller, lui aussi’ (2001b : 239). Deprived of the USSR’s logistical support, ‘ce régime touchait aujourd’hui à sa fin’(2001b : 246). The old manager of the hotel the narrator and Valerie plan to transform, expresses disillusionment : ‘Pauvre peuple cubain... Ils n’ont plus rien à vendre, à l’exception de leurs corps’ (2001b : 247). This broken hero of the Revolution remarks: ‘Nous avons échoué... et nous avons mérité notre échec. Nous avons des dirigeants de grande valeur, des hommes exceptionnels, idéalistes, qui faisaient passer le bien de la patrie avant leur intérêt propre’. But the workers were unworthy of these leaders : ‘J’ai passé des années à essayer de leur parler, de les convaincre de se donner un peu plus de mal dans l’intérêt de leur pays : je n’ai connu que la déception et l’échec’ (2001b : 247-8). The Cuban revolution had failed to create ‘l’homme nouveau, accessible à des motivations plus altruistes’ (2001b: 248). What remained, as in all societies, was the need for money that made people work, or at least pretend to. The narrator

tries and fails to find consoling words, but there is not even the refuge of nostalgia : ‘Son exemple ne serait ni respecté ni suivi, il serait même pour les générations futures un objet de dégoût’ (2001b : 249).

Cuba therefore illustrates Houellebecq’s general critique of real existing socialism : the failure to promote altruism and a revolutionary myth that might bring together society. Instead, capitalist materialism, here commodifying the bodies of the Third World in the form of sex tourism, seems more natural and destined for success. The only real threat to this ‘ideal exchange’ comes in the form of radical islam, responsible for the murder of the narrator’s father at the beginning of *Plateforme*, then for the massacre perpetrated at the opening of the Eldorado Aphrodite chain in Thailand. Here Houellebecq seemed to offer a new, controversial aspect of his world-view, which chimed more with the concerns of the identitarian right.

In *La Possibilité d’une île*, Houellebecq evoked a generational movement away from any opposition to market economics. If the generation of main character Daniell had been familiar with debates about the merits and demerits of the market economy, such debates had disappeared for the generation of his young Spanish lover, Esther: ‘Le capitalisme était pour elle un milieu naturel (...) une manifestation contre un plan de licenciements lui aurait paru aussi absurde qu’une manifestation contre le rafraîchissement du temps, ou l’invasion de l’Afrique du Nord par les criquets pèlerins’ (2005c: 192-193). From now on, more and more men and women were going to want to live ‘dans la liberté, dans l’irresponsabilité, dans la quête éperdue de la jouissance (...) La sociabilité avait fait son temps’(2005c: 419-420).

In his exchange of letters with fellow ‘public enemy’ Bernard-Henri Lévy, Houellebecq returned to the communist affinities of the grand-parents who had brought him up in the absence of his hippie, *gauchiste* mother and father. For Houellebecq, they voted communist for class reasons, and not due to any knowledge of Marx, Lenin or Thorez. Once his own father moved out of the working class, he lost all interest in politics, and with Houellebecq, this regrettable but inexorable process of de-politicisation had been confirmed and consolidated: ‘En ma personne nous sommes déjà en présence de la deuxième génération d’athées absolus – athées non seulement religieux, mais politiques’ (2008b: 174). Houellebecq returned critically to one of the most provocative remarks he had made around the time of *Les Particules élémentaires* :

La célèbre phrase de Staline : ‘Le pape, combien de divisions ?’ a de quoi faire ricaner si l’on considère que Jean-Paul II a, quelques décennies plus tard, joué un rôle

non négligeable dans l'effondrement définitif du communisme. Staline, en résumé, était un gros con. Puis, pour parler plus poliment : il se faisait une idée trop restreinte de la nature humaine. (2008b: 116)

Houellebecq's religious-philosophical preferences came through in his statement that 'la résistance tibétaine, depuis son origine, force le respect' (2008b: 116).

Nevertheless, as we see in the reference to his grandparents, there is with Houellebecq what Douglas Morrey calls 'a certain nostalgia for the proletariat on the part of the middle classes, the sense of two or three generations (since the baby boom) of being spectators of, rather than actors in, history' (2013b: 53). Indeed, elsewhere in his epistolary exchange, Houellebecq writes warmly of the artisan's belief in 'work well done'. In his analysis of Houellebecq as economist, Bernard Maris (2014) emphasises the author's interest in usefulness, found in Marx and Fourier, but also Saint-Simon, with his distinction between producers and parasites. Maris remarks convincingly that, in the world of Houellebecq, 'les savants ont sa préférence. Les ouvriers, les techniciens ont son respect, les communicants son mépris, qu'il offre aussi généreusement aux publicitaires, journalistes, et aux autres « métiers » de l'ère de l'information et de l'amusement' (2014a : 92). In *Les Particules*, Bruno is only capable of commenting on literary classics; *Plateforme*'s Michel 'works' in the cultural sector, organising improbable and futile spectacles; and *La Possibilité*'s Daniell is a mere jester. Rather, 'c'est devant le manuel, ou l'ingénieur, les techniciens capables de transformer la matière, que s'extasie Houellebecq' (2014a : 94). Thus, in *La Carte et le territoire*, the artist Jed Martin, in his wish to be useful, is attracted to industry and *artisanat*, and his hero (as for his architect father and Houellebecq himself) is William Morris, who sought to abolish distinctions between manual and intellectual labour. That said, capitalist reality seems to have thwarted the dream of Morris, Marx – and Keynes – of having the proletariat work and live in the midst of beauty. At the end of another long, wine-soaked conversation, it is concluded: 'A l'exception de la firme fondée par William Morris on ne peut citer qu'une succession d'échecs. Sans même parler des sociétés communistes, plus tard... Ce qu'on peut sans doute dire, c'est que le modèle de société proposé par William Morris n'aurait rien d'utopique où tous les hommes ressembleraient à William Morris'. (2010b : 264-6).

Soumission (2015) shows a further step away from Houellebecq's communist past, while showing his continuing preoccupation with religion. Here, a majority of the French electorate acquiesces to a President, Mohamed Ben Abbès, who is leader of the 'moderate

islamist' Fraternité musulmane. This organisation partly draws inspiration from what was once France's first political party: 'Sur le modèle des partis musulmans à l'œuvre dans les pays arabes, modèle d'ailleurs antérieurement utilisé en France par le Parti communiste, l'action politique proprement dite était relayée par un réseau dense de mouvements de jeunesse, d'établissements culturels et d'associations caritatives' (2015b : 51-52). But this Fraternité musulmane is 'un parti pas comme les autres' because it does not place the economy at the centre of everything. Unlike his old rival Tariq Ramadan, who had compromised himself by forming alliances with Trotskyists, Mohamed Ben Abbès had always avoided the anticapitalist left : 'la droite libérale avait gagné la « bataille des idées », il l'avait parfaitement compris, les jeunes étaient devenus *entreprenariaux*, et le caractère indépassable de l'économie de marché était à présent unanimement admis' (2015b : 153). It was on the level of values, and not the economy, that elections would be won or lost. In the presidential elections of May-June 2022, it becomes clear that the old centre-right/centre-left divide has collapsed, leaving islamists and the FN and *identitaires* as the main rivals, the Gaullists and the Communists now consigned to the distant margins. Robert Rediger, *identitaire* turned islamist President of the Islamic university of Sorbonne-Nouvelle, explains thus what is at stake :

Tout le débat intellectuel du XXe siècle s'était résumé en une opposition entre le communisme – disons, la version hard de l'humanisme – et la démocratie libérale – sa variante molle ; c'était quand même terriblement réducteur. Le retour du religieux, dont on commençait alors à parler, je le savais pour ma part dès l'âge de quinze ans, je crois. (2015b: 253-254)

In the space of a few decades, Europe, once the height of civilisation, had committed suicide. At the end of the novel, the narrator François seems to go with the flow of mass conversion to islam, although the concluding succession of sentences in the conditional tense suggests that this may well be yet another impasse.

On the novel's appearance, Houellebecq insisted that *Soumission* was not 'anti-muslim', especially in the light of the massacre at *Charlie-Hebdo* (in which his friend Bernard Maris perished). It recounts more *un grand renoncement* than Renaud Camus's *grand remplacement*. However, the seemingly irresistible rise of an islamist party, backed by a supposedly homogeneous muslim population of immigrant origin, does echo the concerns of polemicist Eric Zemmour, whom Houellebecq replaced at the top of the best-seller charts.

In *Le Suicide français* (2014b), Zemmour expresses a nostalgia for French communism, and a Red Belt now transformed into so many muslim ‘La Rochelles’, which dovetails contemporary fears of islam and echoes the discourse of what is now the main party of the French working class, the Front National.

Conclusion

The authors in this survey are certainly not uniform in their attitudes towards the communist past, and at least Chambaz and Filippetti would be indignant at keeping company with Houellebecq and especially Zemmour. But their communist memory, and even nostalgia, echoes what Paul Cooke, in his study of German cinema since reunification, has called *Westalgie*. While after 1990, the east has undergone a rapid and fundamental metamorphosis, in the west there has been a more gradual realization that the old FRG’s special status within the world’s community was no longer tenable: ‘The intellectual left-liberal consensus that dominated West German society since the student movement of the late 1960s has been increasingly eroded, as Germany becomes involved in international military operations and its Social Market Economy is dismantled in the face of globalization’ (2005d: 13). Cooke points out how, for example, in New German Comedy, the GDR seems to embody a decent world that was lost, or at least severely challenged, after reunification and the acceleration of globalisation. Similarly, these French post-communist authors have in common a certain affection for and even longing for a France now decentred and disoriented by financial and migratory flows. In *Les Vingt glorieuses*, Bernard Chambaz actively recalls ‘une certaine idée de la France, les lendemains qui chantent et l’imagination au pouvoir’ (2007 : 111). But, as Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Zille point out in their study of post-communist nostalgia, this past must be treated warily : ‘Nostalgia always involves the impossibility of return; its appearance is furthering the project of neoliberalism’ (2010c: 9).

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