

Article

Writing the History of Neoliberalism in the Contemporary French Novel: François Roux and Michel Houellebecq

Charles Rice-Davis 

School of Languages and Cultures, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington 6011, New Zealand; charles.rice-davis@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract: Structured around pivotal elections in France and the United States, recent novels by François Roux and Michel Houellebecq weave together fictional characters with their historical referents, tracing a history of neoliberal economics and its effects on political processes and personal lives. By directly staging the history of Neoliberalism, both Roux and Houellebecq are able to invoke an experience of sudden awareness in their characters—the dedicated businessman Tanguy can, for example, come to view automation as a “genocide of workers” at a climactic moment. By coupling narrative with historical fact, both authors accomplish the difficult task of producing shock at developments so widespread that they have come to be considered inevitable and immune to the influence of democratic politics.

Keywords: neoliberalism; contemporary French literature; François Roux; Michel Houellebecq

1. Introduction

The novels discussed in this article treat the historical origins and present realities of the economic changes which occurred in Europe and the Americas from the 1970s onwards. These transformations, which emphasise market competition over state protections, have been called, both by some of their early proponents, and somewhat controversially today by their critics, Neoliberalism. The four novels I treat at length, the political trilogy of François Roux (*Bonheur national brut*, *Tout ce dont on revaît*, and *Fracking*) and Michel Houellebecq’s *Anéantir*, each address electoral politics in a context where economic forces are too powerful, or politicians are insufficiently willing to challenge those forces—to make democratic politics a meaningful exercise for citizens. Through their events and characters, these novels take as a starting point the conditions described by economist Thomas Piketty, in which the 21st century’s incarnation of capitalism “mechanically produces unsustainable and arbitrary inequalities” that in turn “radically call into question the meritocratic values on which our democratic societies are founded” (Piketty 2013, p. 17).

Given their settings, which span time up to the 2010s and 2020s, these are not historical novels in the most conventional sense, though they do take a historical posture. Most evidently, they adopt a fictional pose analogous to the orientation Foucault described as writing “the history of the present” (Foucault 1993, p. 40). The novels posit broad conclusions about the current dynamic between economic and political forces, the historical claims to the changes which shaped those forces, and how individual lives are in turn affected. In so doing, they join other “neoliberal novels” which participate in “an historicisation of the economic present” (Karl 2015, p. 353). Though Roux has not yet been translated into English and has received far less academic attention, a significant critical apparatus on Houellebecq already exists in, especially regarding his earlier novels. These studies identify his preoccupation with neoliberal economic transformation via the marketisation and globalisation of specific sectors of activity, which is sufficiently prominent to give Houellebecq “more relevance to events in [his] native country” than nearly any other writer (Williams and Sweeney 2019). Such scholarly approaches identify the transformation of existing



Citation: Rice-Davis, Charles. 2024. Writing the History of Neoliberalism in the Contemporary French Novel: François Roux and Michel Houellebecq. *Humanities* 13: 81. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13030081>

Received: 29 February 2024
Revised: 5 May 2024
Accepted: 15 May 2024
Published: 27 May 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

economic activities, like tourism or prostitution (McCann 2010), but also the marketisation of traditionally non-economic activities, namely social relationships, love, and sex (Morrey 2013; Petcu 2017). Bernard Maris famously cast Houellebecq as the chronicler of neoliberal economics *par excellence*, positioning the latter's works as a contemporary epic of a new age of perpetual competition and of the capture of all human relations by the law of supply and demand (Maris 2016, p. 36).

Houellebecq's more recent novels, however, have included more anodyne topics which are also more obviously bound to neoliberal economics and politics. *Anéantir* (2022) and *Soumission* (2015) both take an upcoming election as a central plot point, though the latter does so under more burlesque parameters. *Sérotinine* (Houellebecq 2019), while maintaining the bawdiness of the earlier novels, emphasises the more germane economics of property inheritance and real estate. This grounding in the developments of the history of economics holds true in even more explicit form in the Roux trilogy, novels which I conclude hold a particularly important potential of challenging the predominant neoliberal order.

Unsurprisingly, given their status as fiction, the novels describe Neoliberalism and trace its continual development rather than formally defining it. Offering such a definition is an inherently and famously difficult task, as conceded even by texts oriented towards introducing and clarifying the ideology (or is it a movement? Or a set of historical transformations of the political economy?). These difficulties emerge in large part from the decentralised and undeclared way that central transformations occurred across nations and periods of time. Neoliberalism can, therefore, be cast as an "incoherent and crisis-ridden term, even by many of its most influential deployers" (Venugopal 2015, p. 166). Moreover, adherents to neoliberal principles eschew the term for themselves, meaning that, from an activist or opposition perspective, this "conceptual sprawl" has the result of "muddying rather than clarifying political choices" (Dunn 2017, p. 435).

It may be possible at least to trace a historical development of an early neoliberal ideology, tying the theories of the Mont-Pèlerin Society, then the later Chicago School of Economics to policies of Thatcherism in the UK, Reaganism in the US, or the "Rogernomics" of 1980s New Zealand, and then spread to the world as Mirowski et al. have laid out. But while this aids in identification and understanding, the definitional question remains evasive because the neoliberal movement has never "perdured as a canonical set of fixed doctrines" (Mirowski 2015, p. 426). Moreover, rather than seeing themselves as part of a strictly economic project, these early neoliberals "engaged with a wide range of academic disciplines" very much including "theories of state" (Mirowski 2015, p. 427). If the relationship between economy and state is already vastly variegated, attempting to synthesise, either entirely or selectively, the notable political changes (such as trade treaties, changes to employment law, and weakening anti-monopoly protections) with the commercial ones (like just-in-time production, dynamic pricing, and "Uberized" employment status) invariably complicates the picture further.

These points of difficulty push and pull between inductive and deductive definitional approaches. Alissa Karl describes Neoliberalism, therefore, as "a decontained concept, commentary on which evidences a distinct tension between diffusion and totalisation", creating the grounds for the prevailing critical tendency to "describe neoliberalism not as a comprehensive political or economic agenda or ideology, but as a series of tendencies and strategies" (Karl 2015, p. 340). It would be best identified through "interpolating between these patterns of usage to draw out inferences about what this term is used for and what implications can be drawn from it" (Venugopal 2015, p. 167). Historians and critics point to signal features which might be described as either outcomes or processes. In the first instance, readers identify Neoliberalism by transformations which result in "the expansion of commercial markets and the privileging of corporations; the re-engineering of government as an 'entrepreneurial' actor; and the imposition of 'fiscal discipline', particularly in welfare spending" (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, p. xiv). In the latter case, rhetorical features give way to a deeper understanding of tactics, for example, "Neoliberals extol freedom as trumping all other virtues; but the definition of freedom is recoded and heavily edited within their

framework" (Mirowski 2015, p. 437), granting the basic "conceptual apparatus" necessary for the appeal, to the extent there is one, "to our institutions and instincts, to our values and desires, as well as to the to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit" (Harvey 2020, p. 5).

Since this article concerns only fiction—the words and thoughts of characters, as well as their actions as fictional or fictionalised figures at key junctions in transformative economic changes—the interpolative process described by Venugopal maps usefully onto the task at hand. When a character speaks of economic and policy changes that she perceives, starting from the 1980s of her youth and progressing into the 2010s as one where "money is King" (Roux 2017, p. 44), she is by no means advancing a unified academic definition, nor even using the term "neoliberalism". She is merely describing the powerful effects on her life of dramatically increased inequality from policy decisions she may not even fully understand. When a character working as a takeover consultant declares his "sole mission in life" to be to "clean up shop, and through judicious reductions in its current expenditures, transform an already profitably company into an *even more profitable* company" (Roux 2014, p. 381), he describes the increased financialisation of all assets, without speaking definitionally in those terms. And when another character, elected to office on the right flank of the *Parti socialiste* vaunts the possibility of lucrative public–private partnerships taking the place of government ecological efforts, he invokes the defining neoliberal embrace of privatisation without explicitly locating it in an ideological project.

In a similar process to the definitional question discussed above, I argue that the novels also produce three broad conclusions about life under Neoliberalism. These conclusions are voiced by the characters but also borne out by the novels' plots. They give voice to a sense of cynicism and betrayal, even conspiracy, about the relationship between nominally democratic societies and the possibility of change. In fact (1), the characters demonstrate a near-total lack of hope in a world where electoral politics has been wholly subsumed by market economics. This follows canonical claims in support of marketisation (like Thatcher's "there is no alternative" declaration) and in opposition (Jameson's oft-repeated line that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, Jameson 2003, p. 76). The logic of this total and inevitable market means that (2a), in all facets of life, economic or otherwise, there are only "winners" and "losers". Because the gulf between these two camps is so dramatic and the stakes are so high, (2b) competition is constant, and both individuals and institutions must constantly reform themselves, such "that almost every act becomes an investable advantage in a competitive world" (Houghton 2019, p. 621). Finally, (3) while not exactly a conspiracy, Neoliberalism is not instantiated with a broad popular mandate and may, therefore, appear secretive. There are conspiracies in the fictional worlds of the novels, including those meant to convert democratic state functions into engines of profit—to operate in secret in order to "facilitate the conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital", which David Harvey advances as the definitional feature of the neoliberal state (Harvey 2020, p. 7).

2. Narrating a Hidden Revolution: *Le Bonheur National Brut* (2014)

The most thorough exposition of Neoliberalism in its most explicit iteration to be discussed here comes in the first entry of François Roux's trilogy, *Bonheur national brut*. In the novel, some already-identified signal features of Neoliberalism are given detailed treatment. Readers encounter the effects of, and also a great deal of discussion about, the reduction in labour rights; increased financialisation; vastly increased systems of measurement; distorted housing markets in France, London, and the United States; skyrocketing inequality; and environmental degradation.

The novel follows the stories of four lycée friends from Brittany, beginning with the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. The story centres on Paul, the underachieving son of a conservative petit bourgeois family who, at the opening, is only just discovering his sexuality before having his first gay experience. He is sent to a private school in Paris to

compensate for his poor academic record in order to gain entrance into medical school so that he might take over his father's practice but promptly drops out to pursue a career as an actor. Though he is the only character to speak in the first person in the novel, he is usually absent from the scene and is the only of the four friends to remain an underachiever. Disowned by his family, at least until his father's death, he periodically has drawn-out verbal altercations with his brother, a London-based hedge fund trader. One such fight, involving Paul and also Rodolphe, the politician in the group, explicitly turns on to what degree they should embrace the transformations of Neoliberalism. Rodolphe traces a now-familiar history according to which "Great Britain has become a land of pure speculation" and that the policies of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have "dilapidated" everything (Roux 2014, p. 501).

Paul's response reads like a hard-line manifesto of the new politics, declaring "I am a trader and I'm not ashamed. My job is to find the correct strategies for making money [...] the *maximum amount of money*" (Roux 2014, p. 504). And unlike the claim he mocks by former French president Nicolas Sarkozy ("We will save capitalism [...] by moralizing it"), it is the excess wealth which funds the arts on which Paul depends (503) and rightly dictates the fate of states (506). His profession of faith in unbounded capitalism ends on the idea, described earlier in this article by Mirowski, that extreme inequality is a feature, not a flaw, of the neoliberal project. And for Pierre, the production of winners and losers is not just inevitable, but natural: "it's like a war. Some die and some live. That's how the world works" (Roux 2014, p. 507). Paul concludes that Pierre is indeed the "unquestionable model" for the current economic world, and for all it stands for: "Three decades of an economic nightmare, of betrayal, of unmet dreams where even the idea of social justice was sacrificed on the altar of performance and profit" (Roux 2014, p. 508). And he recognises himself among the losers, "people of my kind, useless, broken accessories" (Roux 2014, p. 511). Pierre's claim that these discrepancies between winners and losers are not only inevitable, but natural and good, tracks closely with original theorists of Neoliberalism, whose position on the subject held that, according to Mirowski, "Inequality is not only the natural state of market economies, but it is actually one of its strongest motor forces for progress" (Mirowski 2015, p. 438).

Rodolphe, who was at least willing to stand against the spectres of Thatcher and Blair in their argument, is first introduced as a committed *Parti socialiste* member, the son of a factory worker and a *Parti communiste* member. Academically ambitious, Rodolphe gains entry into the prestigious Sciences Po, where he excitedly becomes an adherent to the syndicalist "new left" or *deuxième gauche* of Michel Rocard (Roux 2014, p. 90) and gives an interview to the student socialist radio program in which he denounces the government's soft-pedal response to the Polish Solidarity movement (Roux 2014, pp. 144–45). This kind of action, he quickly realises, is the best chance to satisfy his life ambitions, as an ugly and uncharming young man (Roux 2014, p. 98).

And so, in the wake of his interview, he attracts the attention of the fictional developer Artus Costa, the one wealthy financier of the *Parti socialiste* who had also grown up in Brittany. Artus wields the influence of his money on his political beneficiaries and spouts memorised etymologies designed to impress the intellectual elite, peppered with just enough of the language of socialism. During a party at the Costa mansion, Rodolphe meets Artus' daughter Alice, who, not only politically and financially well positioned, but also awkward and unattractive, is the perfect match for Rodolphe, and indeed they go on to marry. When Alice first meets Rodolphe's parents, the political stakes of the family boil over. Rodolphe's drift from his family's labour-oriented politics, already announced by his radio speech, foreshadows the parallel shift of the party. His own father expresses his cynicism that, despite promises, the Socialist government had already abandoned the working class: "The only class that still exists [...] is the class of the rich" (Roux 2014, p. 354). Exchanging shots of pastis with Rodolphe, his father laments that what the population seems to want, rather than improved labour conditions and social guarantees, are "built-in kitchens and hi-fi stereos", "the same furniture and advantages that the rich have" and "more free time

to spend in department stores” (Roux 2014, p. 355). Indeed, Rodolphe’s future decisions will prove this prediction to be true.

Benoît, the third of the four Breton friends, finishes *lycée* and immediately takes a job as a photographer at a local newspaper. Having grown up on his grandparents’ farm, Benoît saw a series of hippies pass through in his youth, all of whom enthusiastically expressed their commitments to their mode of life, which they abandoned after a few years. Thanks to an encounter with Alice Costa, via Rodolphe, Benoît goes on to become a star photographer, shooting high-dollar commercial jobs and celebrities, as well as various series of subaltern subjects, explicitly modelled on his hero, Richard Avedon.

Finally, there is Tanguy, whose family owns a cannery, and who expresses from the beginning an attraction to all things business, competition, and money-related. His passion for the “constant competition [*concurrence permanente*]” of his highly selective school, which gives him the opportunity to “crush others” (Roux 2014, p. 119), quickly translates to his life out of school. When his father dies, he goes through the company’s books and quickly lays off nearly half of the staff (Roux 2014, pp. 305–6). His hero at this time is Bernard Tapie, a pioneer of the leveraged buyout in France. He sees Tapie interviewed on television and becomes transfixed by Tapie’s assertion that he “dares to dare [*j’ose oser*]” (Roux 2014, p. 126). Tapie’s longer discussion serves as a kind of manifesto for the new capitalism, to which Tanguy will avidly adhere:

What drives me? A challenge. A word which has almost lost its meaning since we’ve forgotten it existed. For me, it means everything [...] I’m afraid of nothing. I dare to dare, that’s all. In France, you’re meant to shut your mouth and cower in fear. We’re chicken when it comes to entrepreneurship. The word is practically an insult here. That’s why I love the Unity States [...] The unit of measure in a capitalist system is money. That’s like saying to an athlete, forget about the stopwatch. Or to a guy who writes [un mec qui écrit]: you shouldn’t give a shit about literary prizes [...] My unit of measure is money and I undertake all my business with a fierce will to make very, very, very, very much money (Roux 2014, pp. 126–27).

The figure of Tapie haunts Tanguy—and not only Tanguy. The leveraged buyout (whereby a firm is acquired at above-market prices but with little actual capital and instead leveraged with high amounts of debt in its own name, then restructured (i.e., firings) and either merged with another firm or sold at a profit) becomes Tanguy’s existential mission: “only the data interested him, and of all the thousands of figures he manipulated on a daily basis, only one truly captivated his attention: the Profit, the ‘bottom line’” (Roux 2014, p. 381). He considers his “sole mission in life” to be one in which he can “clean up shop, and through judicious reductions in its current expenditures, transform an already profitably company into an *even more profitable* company” (Roux 2014, p. 381). And one might say the same thing for the whole neoliberal project. Tapie also, despite his hardcore capitalist proclivities, served two very brief stints as *Ministre de la Ville* under Mitterrand, and was elected *député* twice, always advocating for, not surprisingly, a new “entrepreneurial” left, and breaking with his party’s refusal to publicly debate Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen’s characterisation of his opponent, whether stated in good faith or cynical opportunism, encapsulates this apparent contradiction: “*socialo-capitaliste, il fallait oser!*” [roughly, *socialistic capitalism, now I’ve heard everything, perhaps intentionally riffing on Tapie’s “j’ose oser”*], and it does stick. All this aligns him with Rodolphe, as does Tapie’s relation to scandal—he went to prison for corruption—and his turn to acting aligns him with Paul.

Rodolphe’s own brush with scandal comes by way of his relationship with his own rich socialist connection, Artus Costa. As a marginal, recently elected deputy from Brittany, Rodolphe is looking for a way to make a splash and avails himself of his previous strategy, breaking with his own party. In an interview with the pro-Sarkozy magazine *Valeurs actuelles*, Rodolphe bemoans the fact that his party’s sclerotic tendencies have led it to ignore the fact that environmental policy is not only ecologically necessary but also economically

beneficial. It should, in fact, become “a transformational factor in the economy [. . .] and cease to be a way for self-satisfied *bobos* to stir up guilt” (Roux 2014, p. 550).

This scheme could be realised through a loose interpretation of the recent (real-life) Grenelle 2 law¹. Artus suggests, very, very strongly, that an even looser interpretation might allow part of Brittany’s protected coastline to be used as a site for an ostentatiously “eco-friendly” development carried out by the French subsidiary of British Spas. The project becomes quickly unpopular, the deal is revealed to be a shady one, Rodolphe is broadly denounced, and he publicly denounces Artus (who at this time is also revealed as a prolific money launderer). They then have a forceful confrontation before Rodolphe, inspecting the carnage that has been wrought on his long-beloved coastline, slips to his death as the ground crumbles beneath him, in a death taken to be a suicide “symbolic of the politics” of the present day (Roux 2014, p. 741).

Though he will not face the same grim fate, Tanguy, the manager, also finds himself confronted with the horrors of the economic present he has been helping to shape. Summoned to the NY office of his unnamed multinational to be dressed down by his CEO, Tanguy passes through a hall with monitors showing live video feeds of the company’s many, all-automated factories. He, who fires people constantly and takes a certain delight in doing so (Roux 2014, p. 515), only then comes to see himself as part of a broader and darker economic context. In his mind, Tanguy compares the automation of factories displayed at headquarters to “dictator’s military parades” and even a “vast genocide of workers” (Roux 2014, p. 680). After this realisation, he spends months working 16 h days to correct a marketing scandal, and then has a nervous breakdown, finally having seen in full force “the final and unspoken ambition of modern capitalism” (Roux 2014, p. 680). If the more explicit conspiracies have undone Rodolphe and his circle, Tanguy comes face to face with the vaster, more destructive truth of the financialised upheaval of the present. Though he could have found evidence in any newspaper, on any day, of such processes, his shock presents the sudden revelation as the unveiling of a conspiracy.

3. Economic Booms and Baby Boomers: *Anéantir* (2022) and *Fracking* (2018)

Real estate schemes and their devastating effects on innocent bystanders and conspirators have a venerable history in the French novel, with Balzac and Zola detailing the sweeping rises and falls of perfidious investors and speculators. In addition to the businessmen of *Bonheur national brut*, Roux populates his other novels with figures like real estate developers (*Un Homme de son temps*) and hotel executives (*Tout ce dont on revait*), while Houellebecq casts as the protagonist’s father in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) the architect of large-scale holiday-home projects. What stands out in Roux and Houellebecq is the act of writing transformational figures from the political/commercial sphere (they often bridge the two) either as characters (Artus Costa) or historical people (Tapie and Rocard) into the characterisation of historical fiction. One of the most apparent examples of such a gesture of writing the present into historical fiction (or to re-appropriate Karl’s aforementioned formulation, a fictional historicisation of the economic and political present) comes in the form of *Anéantir*’s inclusion of current French president Emmanuel Macron.² Though the president is not named explicitly, the novel takes place within a term to which Macron has already been elected, and all biographical details and policy details track with the actual figure. Macron is presented largely sympathetically and at a distance, spoken for by his highly competent economics mister, Bruno Judge (based on Bruno Le Maire; Cruickshank 2023; Amar 2023), himself the direct manager and close friend of the novel’s protagonist, Paul.

Freed from the burdens of a third campaign, in which he is constitutionally barred from entering, Macron and his team are emboldened to address the economic hardships engendered, or at least exacerbated, during his first term. Moving away from his earlier “Start-up nation” model, which produced the “underpaid and precarious, practically slave-like jobs” of service or platform-based employment, the administration embraces a return to the “charms of the managed economy *à la française*” (Houellebecq 2022, pp. 43–44). A

new age of industrial prosperity mirroring the original “*Trente glorieuses*” will replace what had previously been a time of “standardised despair” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 35).³ Artefacts of capitalism from the respective managed/industrial and neoliberal eras characterise this distinction. In the former, the iconic Citroën DS, which is imagined to be slated for a reboot, stands as a marker of power, performance, and style. Such a success makes this imagined near-future incarnation of Macron’s France “the emblematic nation of all things top-of-the-line” with the new DS as the emblem of “the union of technological intelligence and beauty” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 46). The case of the recent present (which is to say the current real-life present) offers far grimmer products and prospects. “This world” can provide nothing more compelling than “artisanal burgers and ‘Zen’ spaces” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 131) and one lives either in the planned “upbeat disorder” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 35) of a place like Paris’ Bercy Village⁴, or in the midst of an inevitable “regional housing crisis” elsewhere (Houellebecq 2022, p. 87).

In a similar vein, the prevailing structure of French party politics directly mirrors the present. The president’s party, though still in search of the ideal successor to the popular leader, is assured of a place in the second and final head-to-head vote. So too is its inevitable opponent. The candidate nominated by the far-right “*Rassemblement national* will be there in the second round [...] and will be defeated” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 46). This foregone conclusion is ultimately threatened only briefly and by the most unforeseen circumstances. This election-year surprise comes in the form of a well-funded and highly advanced clandestine terrorist network, which uses previously unseen capabilities to attack symbolic pillars of the contemporary state. Internet signals are hijacked to show deepfake images of leaders being executed, fertility centres are bombed, and a ship full of asylum-seeking migrants is massacred on video. While especially this last and most horrible incident threatens to buoy the young, polished RN candidate (unnamed, but seemingly Jordan Bardella), the ultimate disruption of the terror network serves as a rallying victory for the governing party, and the inevitable is realised. Paul comes to see his own vote, a choice between a better-managed form of capitalism over a series of false promises from a flailing party of aggrievement, as “a non-choice, a banal herding to the prevailing opinion” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 538). He compares his vote to ordering the *plat du jour* at a roadside restaurant—the default choice, the best option on a surely disappointing menu. In a seemingly unknowing nod to the first stages of the neoliberal era, supporters of the president’s chosen successor embrace the phrase “there is no alternative” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 330), echoing Margaret Thatcher’s famous real-life dictum in support of unfettered capitalism.

Reflecting this sense of inevitability, Paul describes “the sound of democracy” as having become merely a “light purring noise” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 558). True, he believes the Macronist candidate’s victory assures, in the near term, that competent management will smooth the sharpest edges of uncompromising inequalities, but there will continue to be both lost regions and lost generations. In the north, where Paul’s sister and her husband live, families face three generations of unemployment; their daughter engages in prostitution to finance her studies. Home ownership becomes an ever more remote possibility for successive generations. In *Anéantir*, the regional inequalities—deindustrialised zones mired in hopelessness, while the capital remains insulated with a surfeit of administrative and financial jobs—are taken as a given, even a commonplace, cast against national prosperity (James 2023). The theories of Christophe Guilluy, broadcast yet again after the fictional election, are “already old” (Houellebecq 2022, p. 558). And though one finds plenty of echoes of Guilluy’s basic observations of “La France profonde” in *La Carte et le territoire* and *Sérotinine* (Sweeney 2019; McQueen 2021), greater space and deeper speculation are devoted to the inter-generational inequalities in *Anéantir*. Specifically, the gulf in prospects between Baby Boomers and subsequent cohorts is offered as a central historical pivot of the state and its population. Bruno shares with Paul his impression that “people of this generation were more energetic, more active, more creative, more talented” than his own (Houellebecq 2022, p. 109). And since “the original Boomers, the real ones, creators and

captains of industry” were so responsible for forming the current political and economic reality, the only path out of the prevailing malaise will be the creation of a “new” cohort of Baby Boomers. Ultimately, the extravagant conspiracy of the terror network leaves no real impact. The familiar conspiracies (managed elections and mass financialisation) continue, unimpeded, to shape states and individual lives down to the most minute level.

Fracking, set in the United States in 2016, likewise turns on an election involving (this time named explicitly) actual participants and likewise sets into contrast the Baby Boom generation and the present-day youth. Set against the drama of the Trump–Clinton campaign of that year, and the nearby Standing Rock protest occupation, the novel centres on the family and neighbours of North Dakotans Karen and Peter Wilson. They first appear self-satisfied with a period of former, brief radicalism in the Haight-Ashbury Summer of Love (polyamory that quickly turns into conventional marriage); communal life; transitioning to their current role as inheritors of profitable land; and environmentalism that aligns exactly with the business interests of their organic farm (Roux 2018, p. 50).

Were it not for their bitterness about a parent’s leasing of drilling rights, Peter and Karen would be perfect avatars of what Piketty calls the “brahmin left” (Piketty 2020, p. 869). This is the wealthy and well-educated tranche of the population which dominates the Democratic Party in the United States and social-democratic parties around the world, embracing socially progressive values, but responsible for the break with this political tendency’s previous embrace of the working class.

True to this Brahmin-left affiliation, the couple is somewhat engaged in politics (their concerns about gas trucks disturbing and even killing their cows and the upcoming presidential campaign), but their past activism appears to have lacked substance, even sincerity. Their movements and experimental lifestyles served as a way for them “to prolong that existence full of protest, to protect themselves as long as possible from the destructive effects of the American Way of Life, from its state of mind borne of inequality and racism, from its conformism and moral diktats, its militarist and consumerist madness” (Roux 2018, p. 22). These “flower children” had no clear mission, not even a destination, from London to Amsterdam, then Istanbul, Goa, Kathmandu, and Lassa, “the crossed thousands of kilometres without ever aspiring—or even ending up—setting down roots somewhere” (Roux 2018, p. 22). Karen and Peter see the lost promises of their former activism, now confronting materialism in their own lives and in the lives of others. Their daughter, for example, participates in the Standing Rock occupation (though her Malcolm X-quoting love interest runs away).

The pivotal realisation for Karen and Peter comes as their interest is drawn dually to the ongoing presidential campaign and the prospect of reigning in the environmental abuses of the drilling concern, Global Resources. While most people they meet, as well as their town mayor, support the “pro-God, pro-family and pro-America” (Roux 2018, p. 40) Trump, their Boomer-generation activism naturally draws them to the Clinton side. But this affinity is complicated when the couple visits the home of their like-thinking but wealthier peers, who are revealed to be donors to the Clinton campaign, the Caubet family.

Previously, readers learn, the Wilsons and the Caubets had been bonded together by land and tradition, but a long-forgotten sale of mining rights gave the latter family a massive windfall at the expense of the former. This fact is revealed to be the animating force for Karen’s political disaffection. With her smouldering bitterness about the exchange at the front of her mind, Karen visits the new Caubet house, hoping the Clinton–Trump divisions will make the family more favourable to join her fight against Global Resources. This resentment only grows when she notices, among the many family portraits which adorn the high walls, a portrait of the couple with Hillary Clinton herself, posed with “a conquering air” (Roux 2018, p. 89). “We saw her speak when she came to Fargo”, Cindy explains, “She gave a truly beautiful speech. She’s truly a great person” (Roux 2018, p. 89). When Karen expresses doubts about that glorifying assessment, Cindy worriedly asks, “Are you no longer a Democrat?” (Roux 2018, p. 90). Karen then launches into her concerns for her cattle and land, accusing the Caubets of betraying their community, to which they

can only respond with vague excuses about their own needs and the inevitability of market forces; Karen then sends the framed Clinton photo to the floor, shattering its glass.

From Karen's perspective, the betrayal is double. The Caubets have betrayed their community through environmental damage and abandonment. Then, with their new wealth, they distributed their ill-gotten gains, not to the community, but to a politician whose own embrace of fracking constitutes a betrayal of what Karen believes should properly constitute that party's left alignment. So complete is this sense of betrayal towards her fellow Baby Boomers, both in her life and the upper echelons of the Democratic Party, that Karen finds that she is, despite herself, seduced by the Trump campaign. She watches the Trump nomination speech, noting in particular his promise to serve as the voice for the "forgotten, hard-working people" of the country. Though she is ultimately sickened, almost to the point of vomiting by her positive reaction, she cannot help but feel that "She too was one of this country's forgotten people. She too worked hard [. . .] and her voice, which she raised at the top of her lungs, was listened to by absolutely no one" (Roux 2018, p. 163).

As will be the case in the following novel discussed, *Tout ce dont on revaît*, a financial *deus ex machina* will solve many of Karen's problems, though crucially, it will not reverse her political alienation. After her appearance on local television brings unacceptable negative publicity to Global Resources, she accepts a settlement offer from the company to the shocked dismay of her daughter. But while watching clips of the climatic third presidential debate, she wonders whether, in a time when her "good faith" had been so broken by circumstances, "She in fact preferred the authentically loathsome character of Donald Trump to what she perceived as the false politeness and empathy of Hillary Clinton" (Roux 2018, p. 238). When commentators appear on screen to discuss the just-finished debate, she mutes them. Having bought her way out of the consequences of market-driven politics through her inherited land and settlement money, she can opt out of hope for political change to the economics-driven world her cohort created. She no longer has to worry if anyone will hear her voice—she has what she wants, and because she signed a settlement contract with a "non-disclosure clause" (Roux 2018, p. 244), joins in once again with the unannounced economic upheaval which defined her generation.

4. Neoliberal Human Capital: *Tout ce dont on revaît* (2017)

Roux turns to another generation in *Tout ce dont on revaît*—the cohort which followed the unparalleled economic advancement of the Baby Boomers and who came of age just after the prosperous "Trente glorieuses" and the Mitterrand election. As a member of this "martyred generation", Justine reflects that her own political apathy was born out of a "disenchanted, precarious and sick world, one violently exposed to divorce, unemployment, scams, the breakdown of basic values, the rise of money as king and the hatred of oneself and others" (Roux 2017, p. 44). Unlike *Fracking* and *Bonheur national brut*, explicit electoral politics will occupy a much less central role in this novel. Instead, personal economic turmoil shakes Justine's family, concurrently to but not caused by, the disconnected, chaotic events (most notably the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre) which shock the country. Politics operates merely as a kind of pro forma parliament in a regime where money is king.

This substitution of commerce for politics pervades the characters' lives, in both mundane and profound ways. Justine notices the commercial taglines and brand names have adopted the posture of a revolt of her father's May 1968 protest generation. Exhortations to "Get out there. . . Go forth. . . Be sexy. . . Be Rock & Roll. . . Be a rebel. . . Live on the edge of your emotions. . . Dare to try Addict by Dior . . . Give yourself over to Opium by Yves Saint Laurent" have taken the place, cynically but logically, of the iconic slogans like "It's forbidden to forbid [*Il est interdit d'interdire*]" and "Be realistic and demand the impossible" (Roux 2017, pp. 82–83). Justine confronts the far more serious iteration of this substitution in her career as an addiction counsellor. In her patients, she sees substance abuse as the inevitable echo of the calls to eschew personal limits and to the unbridled consumerism of contemporary economics: "[I]n an environment where everything had become an object of consumption, commerce, or currency—including sex and emotional relations—the addict represented in

certain ways the perfect (over)consumer, the one who goes to the logical ends of experience prescribed by today's savage capitalism" (Roux 2017, p. 83).

Initially, Justine's level of political engagement (she considers herself simply "re-signed"; Roux 2017, p. 44) represents within her family the midpoint between the orientations of her daughter, Adèle, and her executive husband, Nicolas. The former, a devotee of leftist economist Thomas Piketty (she asked for a copy of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* for her birthday) participates in protests and insatiably watches anti-capitalist documentaries which Nicolas considers simply "contagious pessimism" (Roux 2017, p. 89). Further afield, her father, Joseph, writes unpublished books filled with right-wing screeds; her son, showing signs of hyperactivity, barely speaks and appears absorbed by his portable Nintendo 3Ds (Roux 2017, p. 46). Finally, her brother Cédric adopts a communal lifestyle after the Global Financial Crisis, dropping out as much as possible from the market world with a conscious choice to "live better by earning less" (Roux 2017, p. 241).

This order is dramatically disrupted when Nicolas is forced to take a redundancy package and leave his formerly highly paid job. As had been the case of Tanguy's dramatic discovery of automation at the climactic moment of *Bonheur national brut*, Nicolas will be forced to discover a hidden-in-plain-sight conspiracy of the human capital transformation wrought by Neoliberalism. When Nicolas is fired (by a younger executive whom he can only compare to those "cynical and upwardly mobile antiheroes from American television" (94), he and his family will truly be forced to confront the prevailing economic reality. What employers want now, he is told, are "winners" (Roux 2017, p. 120, English in the original). Gradually, he will come to think of himself as a "loser" (Roux 2017, p. 145, English in the original).

These lessons come to Nicolas not only through his firing but especially via his engagement with a boutique, personalised, employment consultancy. This company, the *French Connection* agency, will establish a "personal marketing strategy to better sell him to future employers" (Roux 2017, p. 127). Its director, Marie-Ange explains to him "you are a *product*, Nicolas, whether you like it or not. Now, everything counts. The interior and the exterior, the packaging and the content" (Roux 2017, pp. 127–28). Unwittingly, Nicolas now finds himself in a neoliberal experience par excellence. Employment retraining in particular, and the so-called economics of "human capital", marked a new and crucial terrain for neoliberal theorists. As Foucault argues in *Naissance de la biopolitique*, unlike all previous economists, who treated the worker himself as outside their scope, human capital economists brought the worker himself into their domain (Foucault 2004, p. 227). Foucault points to these economists as the very moment where "neoliberalism extends the practices and reationality of the market to a series of hitherto 'noneconomic realms'" (Nealon 2012, p. 180). Building off Foucault's treatment of biopolitics, Houghton concludes that "the ideal subject within the neoliberal narrative will invest in themselves and their futures by acquiring the necessary levels of 'human capital' to succeed" (Houghton 2019, p. 621). Just a decade or so after Foucault and the human capital turn in neoliberal economics, Deleuze remarked that such self-reforms (and of course the re-evaluations which demand them in the first place) have become perpetual: "just as the business replaces the factory, *endless training* replaces the *school*" (Deleuze 1990, p. 243).

Starting from Houellebecq's earliest novels, Carole Sweeney argues that this "new biopolitical paradigm of subjectification that produces its subjects within a societal regime of internal control rather than external discipline" (Sweeney 2013, p. 69) finds a fictional portrayal. The character of Nicolas will ultimately engage with the processes differently, but certainly, no aspect of his human capital will be spared scrutiny. Along with a former actor retrained in "Team Building", a special "relooking" expert is enlisted to reform his "personal visual performance" (Roux 2017, p. 128). This consultant advises changing the fabric of his suits and his hairstyle (being too "plouc" or "country"). She insists that he drastically pluck his eyebrows "in order to increase the intensity of his gaze" and change his pen, which has "no stature at all, the pen of a loser" (Roux 2017, p. 129).

Unsurprisingly, Nicolas, with his years of experience as a successful executive, initially finds this advice absurd, mocking the consultants' confidence and the "laughable personality tests" (Roux 2017, p. 125) along with his family. But despite his initial doubts, Nicolas begins to assent. He finds himself bludgeoned with assertions of expertise and supposedly irrefutable hard data, experiencing what Douglas Morrey has called in Houellebecq's portrayal of Neoliberalism as "the trend for self-auditing that rules the commercial sector, together with the tyranny of statistics" (Morrey 2013, p. 20). "The recruiter's attention", Nicolas is told, "Is comprised of 58% what he sees, 36% what he hears, and 6% what he understands" (Roux 2017, p. 131). As all his job enquiries fail, Nicolas becomes increasingly discouraged and observes his applications do not even receive a rejection email. He feels that the "system is completely useless [foireux]" (Roux 2017, p. 151) and observes that he has now dropped from one side of the critical bar to the other—"from the 5% to the 95%" (Roux 2017, p. 179).

Nicolas is ultimately saved from complete financial ruin when his Lothario brother falls into a relationship with a rich American widow who has just bought a hotel needing a new director, for which Nicolas is perfectly qualified. But this comes only after his marriage is irreparably damaged and he is arrested in a protest against financial crimes. He, who considered doubts about neoliberal economics merely an elective "contagious cynicism" will never trust the system again, reaching the same despairing conclusions about politics as characters in the previous novels.

5. Conclusions: History, Conspiracy, and the Role of the Neoliberal Novel

Through his fraught experience of the human capital gauntlet, Nicolas represents what most clearly separates the characters of the Roux trilogy from the quintessential neoliberal Houellebecquian protagonist as described by Carole Sweeney. This latter figure appears, "[u]nexcited by money and work, bored to tears by the idea of free time, and utterly indifferent to exhortations to distinguish himself professionally or culturally", thereby "[f]ailing to extract any surplus value [...] by eschewing any interest in the accumulation of any cultural or material capital" (Sweeney 2013, p. 70). This renunciation occurs more out of deliberate choice than for lack of options. The Houellebecquian protagonists' motivations may be venal (*L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Soumission*) or creative (*La Carte et la Territoire*), but they all represent a certain degree of disavowal of the exigencies of human capital performance. The Roux characters, on the other hand, are dutiful neoliberal subjects, whether driven by greed and ambition or sincere familial obligation. Their attempts to play by the rules of a system so ingrained in their beliefs as to be invisible to them ultimately serve to make their shocked realisations all the more jarring.

This sense of shock hints at the role of the novel as some degree of resistance. Indeed, this very subset of novel might be well suited to offer such capacity. As Jeffrey T. Nealon has argued, in the novel, "the dramas of everyday life [...] became intense sites for a certain kind of resistance within the emergent *dispositif* of power" (Nealon 2012, p. 161). Consequently, literature can be mobilised and "again be a key component in the project that Foucault lays out for us in his late work" (Nealon 2012, p. 169), namely to deemphasise personal self-discovery in favour of refusal, and therefore, of change. All four novels discussed here, regardless of individual outcomes—some characters find a degree of reprieve from their tumults, some end tragically, and none are unscathed—reach a conclusion of deep cynicism about the prospects for affecting political change against economic tides. If one wishes to split the difference between the two authors, Houellebecq's Paul demonstrates a more detached, shoulder-shrugging assent to political inevitability, whereas the characters of the Roux novels voice an impotent rage at their deep sense of betrayal; but in the case of both authors' works, the history of their present economic world is revealed to them to be something other than it seems. They have come to see both democratic processes and matters of individual merit as illusory, or as "scams". Rather, the endless competition of "winners" and "losers" to which they are subjected (and which had always been present in

Houellebecq's novels), to which they have invested so much energy, is rigged, arbitrary, or outright false.

In relation to this pervasive sense of “rigging”, the processes described in the novels place them less in the category of the historical novel in traditional terms, and more in the category of the historically counterfactual novel, which operates to “question, undermine and problematise ‘history’” (de Groot 2010, pp. 177–78). In this case, the “history” in question is the set of legitimising narratives for the implementation of Neoliberalism itself. This in turn grounds the construction of a conspiracy novel, which serves to “suggest that the past is wrong, or at least what society has been told is wrong” (de Groot 2010, p. 181). The novels contain both conspiracies in the most familiar sense (terrorist cells and international money launderers) and realistically documented, undeniable processes of political economy. The latter set is always positioned as the more destructive force. For Roux in particular, the events and histories of these four novels are far from the conspiracy narratives Jameson identified in novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Philip K. Dick and directors like Michelangelo Antonioni and Alan J. Pakula. These fictionalised conspiracies grasp at a “system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the naturally and historically developed categories of perception” (Jameson 1992, p. 2). In the case of Roux (and the Houellebecq of *Anéantir*), the events which lead to the characters' conclusions are verisimilar; resemble those omnipresent in news media; and in some cases (like Nicolas'), near-universal to situations lived by contemporary readers (and neoliberal subjects). If they do not ultimately offer a programme of reform, at least they seem to offer informed grounds for refusal and a corresponding shock which might well motivate that refusal.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data have been created.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ (LOI N° 2010-788 Du 12 Juillet 2010 Portant Engagement National Pour l'environnement (1)—*Légifrance*, n.d.).
- ² Although, as Martin Crowley has shown, Houellebecq's representation practice for real-life figures can be far more complex than meets the eye (Crowley 2019).
- ³ Ruth Cruickshank identifies a particular “green-bashing” current here, part of a larger revisionist–revanchist strain she finds throughout this novel, which on the surface might appear less combative than Houellebecq's preceding works (Cruickshank 2023).
- ⁴ Very much a “pseudo-site” in the lines discussed by James (2023).

References

- Amar, Ruth. 2023. The Realistic and Sociological Aspects of the Contemporary French Novel. *Essays in French Literature and Culture* 60: 119–46.
- Crowley, Martin. 2019. Houellebecq's France. *Australian Journal of French Studies* 56: 24–36. [CrossRef]
- Cruickshank, Ruth. 2023. Placing lost intersectional plots in Houellebecq's *Anéantir* (2022): Race, climate and scandalous textual necropolitics. *French Cultural Studies* 34: 92–105. [CrossRef]
- de Groot, Jerome. 2010. *The Historical Novel*. Abington: Routledge.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *Pourparlers, 1972–1990*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Dunn, Bill. 2017. Against Neoliberalism as a Concept. *Capital & Class* 41: 435–54. [CrossRef]
- Eagleton-Pierce, Matthew. 2016. *Neoliberalism*. Abington: Routledge. [CrossRef]
- Foucault, Michel. 1993. *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel. 2004. *Naissance de la Biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Edited by François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana and Michel Senellart. Paris: Gallimard-Seuil.
- Harvey, David. 2020. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Houellebecq, Michel. 2019. *Sérotonine*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Houellebecq, Michel. 2022. *Anéantir*. Paris: Flammarion.

- Houghton, Elizabeth. 2019. Becoming a Neoliberal Subject. *Ephemera* 19: 615–26.
- James, Klem. 2023. Pseudo-sites and Simulacra in Houellebecq's France. *Australian Journal of French Studies* 60: 122–35.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2003. Future City. *New Left Review* 21: 65–80.
- Karl, Alissa G. 2015. The Zero Hour of the Neoliberal Novel. *Textual Practice* 29: 335–55. [CrossRef]
- Maris, Bruno. 2016. *Houellebecq Économiste*. Paris: Flammarion.
- McCann, John. 2010. *Michel Houellebecq: Author of Our Times*. Oxford-Bern: Peter Lang.
- McQueen, Fraser. 2021. Christophe Guilluy's France Périphérique and the absence of race from Michel Houellebecq's *Sérotonine*. *Modern & Contemporary France* 29: 399–417. Available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09639489.2021.188903> (accessed on 11 January 2024).
- Mirowski, Philip. 2015. Postface: Defining Neoliberalism. In *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*, 2nd ed. Edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Morrey, Douglas. 2013. *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and Its Aftermath*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. [CrossRef]
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. 2012. *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Petcu, Carmen. 2017. Democratic Sexuality and Alienated Capitalism in Houellebecq's Novels. *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 9: 81–87.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2013. *Le Capital au XXIe Siècle*. Paris: Seuil.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2020. *Capital and Ideology*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Roux, François. 2014. *Le Bonheur National Brut*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Roux, François. 2017. *Tout ce Dont on Rêvait*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Roux, François. 2018. *Fracking*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Sweeney, Carole. 2013. *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*. London: A&C Black.
- Sweeney, Carole. 2019. 'Le mot déclin est presque trop doux': Michel Houellebecq's (Euro)déclinisme. *Modern & Contemporary France* 27: 45–59. [CrossRef]
- Venugopal, Rajesh. 2015. Neoliberalism as Concept. *Economy and Society* 44: 165–87. [CrossRef]
- Williams, Russell, and Carole Sweeney. 2019. Introduction, "La France, ce n'est pas Michel Houellebecq". *Modern & Contemporary France* 27: 1–9. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.