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The Elegant Economy of Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*

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Michel Houellebecq, the preeminent author and literary celebrity from France, has a myriad of things said about him. Some feel it appropriate to call him the greatest author alive. Others call him a hack. *The Elementary Particles*, the novel that established Houellebecq's preeminence, is the subject of a lot of commentary as well. But what seems to be generally unaddressed is the novel's sheer efficiency. In 262

hysterical realist, like David Foster Wallace, for whom quantity is itself a quality which can be used to produce some sort of effect upon the reader. In Houellebecq's work, a sentence is written economically, with only the necessary words. In order to reduce the need for clarification, he avoids specificity that verges on the esoteric. Houellebecq does not write postmodern novels, and *The Elementary Particles* is accordingly a

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pages of characteristically unflinching confidence, Houellebecq manages to address the destabilization of materialist philosophy by contemporary particle physics, the cultural legacy of the Sixties, the legacy of the postmodernists, sex positivity, pluralism, academic politics, the future of marriage, reproduction, death, the beauty of life, a latent desire in Western civilization for annihilation, the human predicament, and what seems like a thousand other things. The novel also manages to tell at least two entire life stories, concisely capturing the essential dynamics of these lives with only a modest amount of detail or "data." The three main elements that I think have enabled its incredible thematic density are the quality of Houellebecq's prose, the retrospective narration by his characters, and the qualities of the main characters.

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straightforward read. What enables him to make effective use of these strategies is the fact that his prose is simply fantastic, and evidences a writer of immense natural talent. Houellebecq's writing is brutal and coldly efficient. Paragraphs cut aggressively, and the pages bleed with subtext. In an excruciatingly indifferent deadpan voice, Houellebecq delivers profound anguish, builds towering monuments of potential redemption for characters, and then decimates them without hesitation.

The efficiency of *The Elementary Particles* is greatly contingent on the reader's ability to truly understand lengthy narrative arcs with only a few points of reference. Many events in the main characters' lives are related at a point in time which in important ways affects their views of these past events, with some retrospective commentary. This mode of story-telling connects things across time and space, making possible an extrapolation of a character's development over time.

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The Logic Behind the Red-Blue Divide

By TIFFANY LOPES
STAFF WRITER

I spent my formative teenage years living in my "hometown" Brazil, a country where politics aren't simply divided into a blue-or-red category. Conversations about politics centered less on your political affiliation, and more on your stances on particular topics. So when I came back to the United States in 2017 to attend college at Hamilton, I was, to say the least, shocked by the tensions in political discourse among students and faculty. The political strain seemed to arise, at least on this campus (and I assume it is similar at most liberal arts colleges), from the lack of politically diverse discussion. I noticed this lack only when I finally realized that my opinions fell on the

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center-right side of the American political spectrum, and only when I began using the word "conservative" to identify myself did I realize the implications that my political identity had in a primarily liberal institution. Initially, I was confused about why this stance seemed to upset, irritate, or anger so many of my peers. My opinions seemed delegitimized and ignored the moment I'd say I was conservative or center-right. I didn't understand why my political affiliation caused students and faculty to, in a general sense, "take it personally."

I was astonished by the idea that your political perspective is so

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From recollections of only a few events, the principal dynamics that define a character's life can be deduced. A full human being can be understood, down to their fundamental volitions, by an examination of these very few things—many of which don't seem at all like significant landmarks in a life.

The dense intellectual dialogues in *The Elementary Particles* explore topics including quantum physics, molecular biology, the mechanics and ethics of reproduction, morality, metaphysics, scientific validity, literary studies, and

many others things. In presenting these dialogues, Houellebecq uses his two main characters, half-brothers Michel and Bruno. Both are highly intelligent and well educated. Michel is a molecular biologist, very well-versed in philosophy, with origins in physics. Bruno studied literature and the other humanities, with a focus on the existentialists. The two brothers have very interesting intellectual lives on their own. However, when they occasionally meet and have these conversations, the dialectic between them is precisely what the narrative requires. They spar as two

sides of the same miserable coin. One is confined to the murkiness, uncertainty, and multiplicity of the obsessive study of a few cultural moments, while the other scurries with a horrible diligence across the cold, gray plains of pure empiricism.

There is a lot to be said about a book that seems to say a lot of things, some of which the author may not even believe in. And my intention was never to dissect Houellebecq's novel. My aim is to point to an underappreciated characteristic that allows the novel to succeed and to reach so many people. My second wish is that you will read it.

deeply entwined with your identity as a person. But after I stumbled upon the *Wall Street Journal's* "Red and Blue Economies" (9/2019) analysis, I began to better understand why politics are taken so personally in America. The analysis points out that Republicans and

three-quarters of the jobs in digital and professional industries are situated in Democratic districts. By contrast, Republican districts hold larger shares of the nation's declining industries, including agriculture, mining, and low-skill manufacturing jobs. Many of these

they are from undeniably inform the political stances they're more likely to side with, and the data support that analysis. If you're from New Jersey or Massachusetts, your political opinions are probably informed by different financial and educational backgrounds than what inform the views of someone from rural Texas. Understanding these broad differences is crucial if we're trying to diminish political polarization and reduce tensions in discourse between Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, candidates will be using this information for a different purpose, to shape their audience outreach, and it'll probably work. Donald Trump probably won't be appealing to the same citizens as Bernie Sanders or another Democrat.

It's difficult for people to see problems in the same way when their very different backgrounds inform their reality, and given that Republicans and Democrats statistically speaking have starkly different backgrounds, it makes sense that they will have different ways of viewing issues. Before you enter discourse with someone whose political affiliation or perspective is opposed to yours, keep these data in mind. It's especially easy to take politics personally when your political orientation was probably quite influenced by your financial, educational, and geographic reality. Enter the conversation with an open mind, being aware that the other person's opinion was probably shaped by the same factors as yours, just in a different way.

People's backgrounds and where they are from undeniably inform the political stances they're more likely to side with, and the data support that analysis.

Democrats tend to live in two completely different economies--and it wasn't the one I was expecting to encounter, the stereotyped "Republicans are all old, rich men" narrative, which informs the "that's why Democrats are the only ones who care about the poor" claim. On the contrary, almost two-thirds of the nation's gross domestic product comes from Democratic congressional districts (63.6 percent). Brookings Institution data also show that the share of GDP produced in Republican districts is actually shrinking. Democrats are far more dominant in (at least by this standard) high-producing districts than Republicans. Similarly, while the median household income was about the same for each party's supporters a decade ago, it has since grown dramatically by 17 percent in Democratic districts while falling 3 percent in Republican ones. The analysis goes on to explain why this economic divide has come about, noting that "blue industries" are doing better financially than red ones. Nearly

don't require a higher-level degree and pay significantly less. And the tendency of Republican voters to be in poorer districts is a large factor in the growing divide.

The parties were historically more geographically intertwined, but the 2010 Tea Party movement more or less completed the gradual displacement of Democratic House members in rural districts in the Midwest and South, while the 2018 midterms expelled Republican members from many suburban ones. The red-blue educational disparity is another prominent factor in explaining the parties' division, as people with college degrees are far more concentrated in Democratic districts than in GOP ones.

In conclusion, this analysis paints a very realistic picture of why Democrats and Republicans have such a difficult time having civil discourse and listening to each other's opinions. They reside in very different worlds, and the financial stereotypes attributed to each party no longer reflect the reality.

People's backgrounds and where

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#TheElementaryParticles
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#RedBlueLogic