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Using Science to Justify the »Crisis of Masculinity«

According to Éric Zemmour, one of France's most successful ideological entrepreneurs, French society is dominated by »feminine values« – in violation of alleged natural differences. To present his anti-feminist theories as objective, Zemmour draws on numerous scientific fields ranging from genetics to anthropology to literature.

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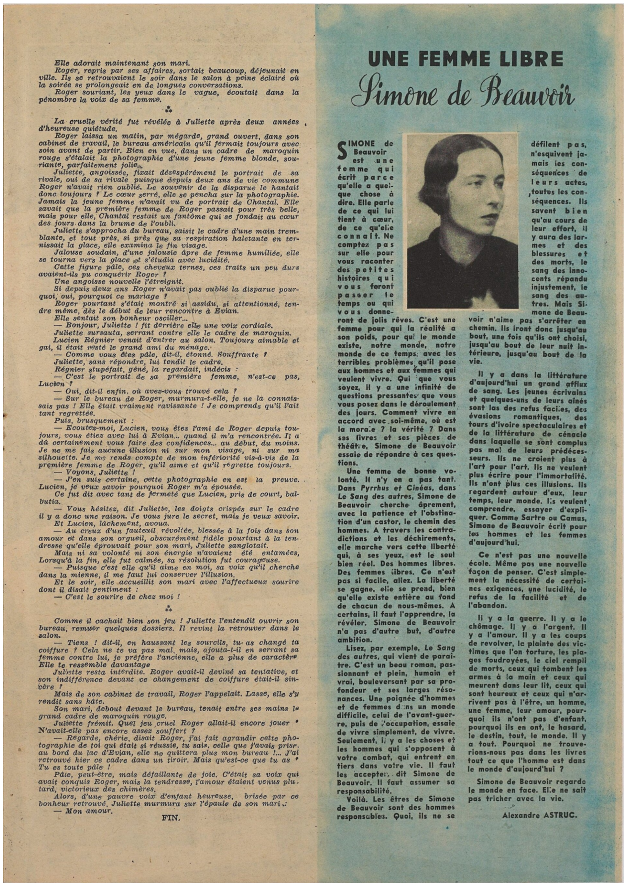
»The man of the year will be a woman. Or rather: Women. Idolised, sanctified, deified women«. Thus wrote French journalist and writer Éric Zemmour in a 2018 column, adding that the »feminine revolution is underway«.[1] The idea that women are idealised, at the expense of men, is one of the main features behind the »crisis of masculinity« concept, which has enjoyed increasing popularity in the last two decades or so. »Crisis« here designates the suffering and difficulties that men undergo because they are men – the absence of positive masculine role models, underperforming at school, high suicide rates, and so on –, and because of the outsized influence that women and feminists supposedly have on society.[2] Nowadays, this concept is notably supported by far right networks, and particularly by ideological entrepreneurs such as Éric Zemmour and Alain Soral, among others, in France.

The argumentation underlying the concept – that there must be a crisis of masculinity – can be divided as follows: (1) Men and women are biologically different, which causes differences in their psychological make-up and abilities. (2) Because of these differences, they used to have different and distinct societal roles. (3) Feminism has warped this natural partitioning of feminine and masculine roles. (4) Owing to these changes, masculinity is in crisis, causing both men and women to suffer. What is more, proponents of the concept such as Éric Zemmour routinely use »science« to justify these assertions, skilfully interweaving in their writings ideological claims with (alleged) scientific facts.

Drawing on the case of Zemmour, the aim of this text is to analyse these tactics; that is, its aim to show how various fields of science are used to justify above arguments, Zemmour engaging, as we shall see, both natural and human sciences. In addition, he uses literature, politics, even pop-cultural references to drive home his argument – treating them like further sources of factual knowledge. Indeed, in his writings, he does not make any difference between scientific results and narratives from novels, movies, or the lives of politicians and authors, seemingly confronting the reader with a plethora of evidence.

To see this, this essay draws on Zemmour's journalistic output as well as his (bestselling) books, notably *Le Premier Sexe* (2006), in which scientific references were numerous and diverse; it also resorted to a range of rhetorical techniques such as deference to authority. Far from presenting a broad scientific theory supporting the notion of an emerging »crisis of masculinity«, Zemmour's *oeuvre* on closer inspection reveals itself a mere arrangement of quotes, arguments and examples taken from scientists, philosophers, writers, or politicians. Zemmour frequently quotes these »sources« out of context, thus fitting their arguments to his own theory. As we shall see, this enabled him to write his own version of history – one opposed to the work of professional historians; as well as to write his own account of the interactions between nature and culture – in ways that appeal to citizens who mistrust established institutions.



Elle adorait maintenant son mari.
Roger, repris par ses affaires, sortait beaucoup, déjeunait en ville. Ils se retrouvaient le soir dans le salon à peine éclairé où la soirée se prolongeait en de longues conversations.
Roger souriant, les yeux dans le vague, écoutait dans la pénombre la voix de sa femme.

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La cruelle vérité fut révélée à Juliette après deux années d'heureuse quiétude.
Roger laissa un matin, par mégarde, grand ouvert, dans son cabinet de travail, le bureau américain qu'il fermait toujours avec soin avant de partir. Bien en vue, dans un cadre de maroquin rouge s'étalait la photographie d'une jeune femme blonde, souriante, parfaitement jolie.
Juliette, angoissée, fixait désespérément le portrait de sa rivale, qui de sa vie depuis deux ans de vie commune Roger n'avait rien caché. Le souvenir de la disparue le hantait donc toujours ? Le cœur serré, elle se pencha sur la photographie. Jamais la jeune femme n'avait vu de portrait de Chantal. Elle savait que la première femme de Roger passait pour très belle, mais pour elle, Chantal restait un fantôme qui se fondait au cœur des jours dans la brume de l'oubli.
Juliette s'approcha du bureau, saisit le cadre d'une main tremblante, et tout près, si près que sa respiration haletante en ternissait la glace, elle examina le fin visage.
Jalouse soudain, d'une jalousie âpre de femme humiliée, elle se tourna vers la glace et s'étudia avec lucidité.
Cette figure pâle, aux cheveux ternes, ces traits un peu durs avaient-ils pu conquérir Roger ?
Une angoisse nouvelle l'étreignit.
Si depuis deux ans Roger n'avait pas oublié la disparue pourquoi, oui, pourquoi ce mariage ?
Roger pourtant s'était montré si assidu, si attentionné, tendre même, dès le début de leur rencontre à Evian.
Elle atténua son bonheur oscillant...
— Bonjour, Juliette ! fit derrière elle une voix cordiale.
Juliette sursauta, serrant contre elle le cadre de maroquin.
Lucien Régnier venait d'entrer au salon. Toujours aimable et gai, il était resté le grand ami du ménage.
— Comme vous êtes pâle, dit-il, étonné. Souffrante ?
Juliette, sans répondre, lui tendit le cadre.
Régnier stupéfait, gêné, la regardait, indécis :
— C'est le portrait de sa première femme, n'est-ce pas, Lucien ?
— Oui, dit-il enfin, où avez-vous trouvé cela ?
— Sur le bureau de Roger, murmura-t-elle, je ne la connaissais pas ! Elle était vraiment ravissante ! Je comprends qu'il l'ait tant regrettée.
Puis, brusquement :
— Ecoutez-moi, Lucien, vous êtes l'ami de Roger depuis toujours, vous étiez avec lui à Evian... quand il m'a rencontrée. Il a dû certainement vous faire des confidences... au début, du moins. Je ne me fais aucune illusion ni sur mon visage, ni sur ma silhouette. Je me rends compte de mon infériorité vis-à-vis de la première femme de Roger, qu'il aime et qu'il regrette toujours.
— Voyons, Juliette !
— J'en suis certaine, cette photographie en est la preuve. Lucien, je vous avoue pourquoi Roger m'a épousée.
Ce fut dit avec tant de fermeté que Lucien, pris de court, balbutia.
— Vous hésitez, dit Juliette, les doigts crispés sur le cadre il y a donc une raison. Je vous prie le secret, mais je veux savoir.
Et Lucien, lâchement, avoua.
— Au creux d'un fauteuil révoltée, blessée à la fois dans son amour et dans son orgueil, obscurément fidèle pourtant à la tendresse qu'elle éprouvait pour son mari, Juliette songeait.
Mais ni sa volonté ni son énergie n'avaient été entamées, Lorsqu'à la fin, elle fut calmée, sa résolution fut courageuse.
— Puisque c'est elle qu'il aime en moi, sa voix qu'il cherche dans la mienne, il me faut lui conserver l'illusion.
Et le soir, elle accueillit son mari avec l'affectueux sourire dont il disait sentiment :
— C'est le sourire de chez moi !

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Comme il cachait bien son jeu ! Juliette l'entendit ouvrir son bureau, remuer quelques dossiers. Il revint la retrouver dans le salon.
— Tiens ! dit-il, en haussant les sourcils, tu as changé ta coiffure ? Cela ne te va pas mal, mais, ajouta-t-il en servant sa femme contre lui, je préfère l'ancienne, elle a plus de caractère. Elle te ressemble davantage.
Juliette resta interdite. Roger avait-il deviné sa tentative, et son indifférence devant ce changement de coiffure était-il sombre ?
Mais de son cabinet de travail, Roger l'appelait. Lasse, elle s'y rendit sans hâte.
Son mari, debout devant le bureau, tenait entre ses mains le grand cadre de maroquin rouge.
— Juliette, frémit. Quel jeu cruel Roger allait-il encore jouer ? N'avait-elle pas encore assez souffert ?
— Regarde, chérie, disait Roger, j'ai fait agrandir cette photographie de toi qui était si réussie, tu sais, celle que j'avais prise au bord du lac d'Evian, elle ne quittera plus mon bureau !... J'ai retrouvé hier ce cadre dans un tiroir. Mais qu'est-ce que tu as ? Tu es toute pâle !
Pâle, peut-être, mais défaillante de joie. C'était sa voix qui avait conquis Roger, mais la tendresse, l'amour étaient venus plus tard, victorieux des chimères.
Alors, d'une pauvre voix d'enfant heureuse, brisée par ce bonheur retrouvé, Juliette murmura sur l'épaule de son mari :
— Mon amour.

FIN.

UNE FEMME LIBRE

Simone de Beauvoir

SIMONE de Beauvoir est une femme qui écrit parce qu'elle a quelque chose à dire. Elle parle de ce qui lui tient à cœur, de ce qu'elle connaît. Ne comptez pas sur elle pour vous raconter des petites histoires qui vous feront passer le temps ou qui vous donneront de jolis rêves. C'est une femme pour qui la réalité a son poids, pour qui le monde existe, notre monde de ce temps avec les terribles problèmes qu'il pose aux hommes et aux femmes qui veulent vivre. Qui que vous soyez, il y a une infinité de questions pressantes que vous vous posez dans le déroulement des jours. Comment vivre en accord avec soi-même, où est la morale ? la vérité ? Dans ses livres et ses pièces de théâtre, Simone de Beauvoir essaie de répondre à ces questions.

Une femme de bonne volonté. Il n'y en a pas tant. Dans *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, dans *Le Sang des autres*, Simone de Beauvoir cherche âprement, avec la patience et l'obstination d'un castor, le chemin des hommes. A travers les contradictions et les déchirements, elle marche vers cette liberté qui, à ses yeux, est le seul bien réel. Des hommes libres. Des femmes libres. Ce n'est pas si facile, allez. La liberté se gagne, elle se prend, bien qu'elle existe entière au fond de chacun de nous-mêmes. A certains, il faut l'apprendre, la révéler. Simone de Beauvoir n'a pas d'autre but, d'autre ambition.

Lisez, par exemple, *Le Sang des autres*, qui vient de paraître. C'est un beau roman, passionnant et plein, humain et vrai, bouleversant par sa profondeur et ses larges résonances. Une poignée d'hommes et de femmes dans un monde difficile, celui de l'avant-guerre, puis de l'occupation, essaie de vivre simplement, de vivre. Seulement, il y a les choses et les hommes qui s'opposent à votre combat, qui entrent en tiers dans votre vie. Il faut les accepter, dit Simone de Beauvoir. Il faut assumer sa responsabilité.

Voilà. Les êtres de Simone de Beauvoir sont des hommes responsables. Quoi, ils ne se défilent pas, n'esquivent jamais les conséquences de leurs actes, toutes les conséquences. Ils savent bien qu'au cours de leur effort, il y aura des larmes et des blessures et des morts, le sang des innocents répandu injustement, le sang des autres. Mais Simone de Beauvoir n'aime pas s'arrêter en chemin. Ils iront donc jusqu'au bout, aux fois qu'ils ont choisi, jusqu'au bout de leur nuit intérieure, jusqu'au bout de la vie.

Il y a dans la littérature d'aujourd'hui un grand afflux de sang. Les jeunes écrivains et quelques-uns de leurs aînés sont las des refus faciles, des évasions romantiques, des tours d'ivoire spectaculaires et de la littérature de cénacle dans laquelle se sont complus pas mal de leurs prédécesseurs. Ils ne croient plus à l'art pour l'art. Ils ne veulent plus écrire pour l'immortalité. Ils n'ont plus ces illusions. Ils regardent autour d'eux, leur temps, leur monde. Ils veulent comprendre, essayer d'expliquer. Comme Sartre ou Camus, Simone de Beauvoir écrit pour les hommes et les femmes d'aujourd'hui.

Ce n'est pas une nouvelle école. Même pas une nouvelle façon de penser. C'est simplement la nécessité de certaines exigences, une lucidité, le refus de la facilité et de l'abandon.

Il y a la guerre. Il y a le chômage. Il y a l'argent. Il y a l'amour. Il y a les coups de revolver, la plainte des victimes que l'on torture, les plages foudroyées, le ciel rempli de morts, ceux qui tombent les armes à la main et ceux qui meurent dans leur lit, ceux qui sont heureux et ceux qui n'arrivent pas à l'être, un homme, une femme, leur amour, pourquoi ils n'ont pas d'enfant, pourquoi ils en ont, le hasard, le destin, tout, le monde. Il y a tout. Pourquoi ne trouverions-nous pas dans les livres tout ce que l'homme est dans le monde d'aujourd'hui ?

Simone de Beauvoir regarde le monde en face. Elle ne sait pas tricher avec la vie.

Alexandre ASTRUC.

Fig. 1: »Une femme libre« — Éric Zemmour's bestselling antifeminist tract *Le Premier Sexe* (2006) is an allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's seminal *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949).

The crisis of masculinity in French far-right networks

Éric Zemmour was born in 1958. He studied at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris until 1979, and then worked as a journalist at various outlets, including *Le Quotidien de Paris*, *Info-Matin*, and *Le Figaro*. He also wrote articles in other newspapers, such as *Valeurs Actuelles*. In an interview released in 2013, Zemmour claimed that he was not affiliated to any political party, and that his political influence was »gaullo-bonapartisme«. He also said that this political family had a »glorious history, from Bonaparte to the General De Gaulle, and then to Philippe Séguin and Jean-Pierre Chevènement«.[3] More notably, at the time he was close to anti-Maastricht politicians such as the founder of the far-right party Front National (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen. Though not a politician himself, then, Zemmour elsewhere noted that, in fact, he »ha[d] the impression of engaging more in politics than most politicians«, a view shared by observers

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from the left, including the former editor of *Nouveau magazine littéraire*, Raphaël Glucksmann: »Zemmour has a very clear ambition, which is to erase the divide between the Republican right and the far right under the banner of the far right«.[4] In order to press his agenda, Zemmour can rely on his considerable presence in the media. Indeed, Zemmour regularly appears on television channel CNews (four days a week for one hour); in *Face à l'info*, a show in which he debates with a guest on a current topic; on Wednesdays for two hours on *Paris Première*, where he has been a co-host in the show *Zemmour et Naulleau* until September 2021; and he regularly writes columns in *Le Figaro*. In order to »generate buzz«, he also makes frequent appearances on television shows to debate with his opponents.[5] Meanwhile, his presence in the media is highly controversial: Zemmour is well-known among the general public for his contentious stances; he also was sued and even sentenced several times for encouraging racial discrimination and religious hatred.[6] However, television channels such as CNews are reluctant to part with him, allegedly to respect the right to freedom of speech, but mainly because his shows are watched by a broad audience. Either way, this media exposure lends him visibility. Indeed, although he is neither a philosopher nor an historian, the media typically present him as an expert in politics and current social issues. As a consequence, Zemmour frequently finds himself in the spotlight, especially in right-wing spheres.

Already in 2006, Zemmour had published *Le Premier Sexe*, a book in which he argued that French society is deeply influenced, or rather, controlled by women, including in sectors such as economics and politics. In this society, according to Zemmour, the main goal of men now was to »becom[e] a woman like the others«, because »being a woman is not a sex anymore, but an ideal«. Thus, men are »deprived of their own minds«, and masculine values are disappearing.[7] This scenario would then resurface in his other books, such as *Destin Français*, published in 2018.

Zemmour, of course, isn't an isolated figure. Other ideologists associated with far-right networks had developed similar ideas, notably the French-Swiss essayist Alain Soral. In 1999, seven years before Zemmour's *Premier Sexe*, the latter had published *Vers la féminisation?*, an essay in which he likewise criticised the (damaging) influence of feminism on French society, claiming that feminism was a diversion from issues of class, inequality, and so on. For Soral, the »totalitarianism of feminism« tends to reduce our world's perception to »the unconscious, seduction, affectivity and consumption, which forbids any social or historical criticism«.[8] As with Zemmour, the idea underlying Soral's thesis is that men and women are intrinsically different, which justifies their social inequality; by implication, feminism is essentially a distraction from ›real‹ social inequalities. Such sentiments, it has been suggested, have their roots in the antifeminist theories that the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), of which Soral was once a member, supported before 1975.[9] Indeed it is common for Soral, who joined the *Front National* in 2005, to make use of Marxist concepts to camouflage his nationalism and to cater to the working-class. In a video

released in 2018, Soral noted that he had written on all these topics years before Zemmour appeared on the scene, implying that he influenced him – something Zemmour had already denied in an interview in 2017.[10] Meanwhile, in his book *L'amour à trois: Eric Zemmour, Alain Soral, Alain de Benoist* (2016), Nicolas Bonanni suggests that Zemmour's and Soral's ideas are similar because they are both influenced by Alain de Benoist, the founder of the »Nouvelle Droite«.[11]

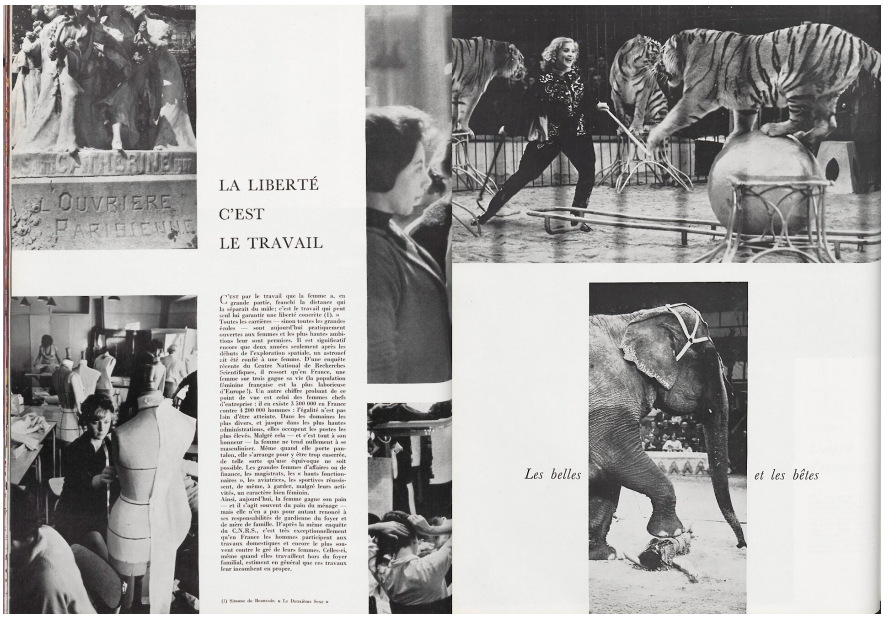

Fig. 2: »La liberté c'est le travail« — commonly seen as a time of progress and emancipation, in Zemmour's scheme of things the 1960s and 1970s merely accelerated the disruption of cultural standards.

Explaining men's and women's biological nature

Science, of course, has often been used to naturalize inequalities. This trend is not new: biology in particular has long been mobilized to justify forms of sexism. In the nineteenth century, scientists relied on morphological characteristics, such as the size of the brain, to show that women were inferior to men.[12] Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, it were anthropologists such as Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger, for instance, who furthered the naturalization of ›male‹ respectively ›female‹ behaviours. As Erika Milam writes in her book *Creatures of Cain*, »Fox's larger point was that evolution acted to modify human behaviour, just as it had altered our anatomy«.[13] Milam further sums up his thought as follows:

> »males competed with each other for access to reproductively available females, and females fought for status within the social hierarchy to ensure the survival and health of their offspring. To succeed evolutionarily, he posited, a male had to be smart, able to defer

> gratification (sexual or otherwise), be socially graceful and cooperative (with larger, more important males), and acceptable to females. Most important, »he must also be tough and aggressive in order to assert his rights« within the hierarchy. Control over such emotions turned into the capacity to use tools, wield weapons, and ultimately shape his environment«.[14]

In brief, for Fox, the construction of masculinity and femininity was closely associated with their reproductive functions. Similarly, Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups*, published in 1969, argued for the importance of bonds between men in the emergence of structured societies, while women apparently played no such role. After the release of his book, it was criticised as a justification of patriarchy by way of biology. Nowadays, antifeminists still resort to such biologisms in order to justify their ideas.[15] For example, in aforementioned *Vers la féminisation?*, Alain Soral attempted to correlate human biology, psychology, and male-female inequalities. (For him, the mind is entirely determined by the body). For example, women's bodies are fattier, and their genitals are inside the body and open. In contrast, men's bodies are more muscular, while their genitals are external. Therefore, Soral's reasoning goes, women's minds are different from men's minds: they are characterised by seduction and manipulation, women having a psychological need to be filled by a man to be complete. Men, by contrast, are psychologically complete and naturally attracted to action. Or again, women are by nature incapable of a coherent vision of the world, which prevents them from being good thinkers. Therefore, it is natural that politics is dominated by men.[16]

Zemmour similarly draws on biologistic theories to account for the ›natural‹ differences in societal status between men and women. In his 2018 article *L'éternel féminin, impossible à dépasser*, for example, Zemmour ostensibly reviewed a book, Peggy Sastre's *Comment l'amour empoisonne les femmes* – for Sastre, too, masculine domination finds its roots in biology, particularly in evolutionary theories. In her book, Sastre, a French journalist with a PhD in philosophy of science, thus claimed that feminism was utopic, because it wants to achieve an »undifferentiated equality« between men and women. Provided that they are determined by their genes, which have not changed for 30,000 years (according to Sastre), this »undifferentiated equality«, however, is impossible.

Needless to say, Zemmour endorsed her thesis, noting that both, hormones and the »Darwinian rules of evolution« explain the behavioural differences between men and women: »women must procreate and take care of their children; therefore they need a protector, whom they select at best«. Trying to run counter to this biological law, Zemmour implied, would have serious consequences. To back this up, Zemmour essentially resorted to argument from authority, emphasizing the fact that Peggy Sastre has a PhD in philosophy of science; and he then stressed that her work is based on »numerous, very serious studies«, without actually citing any.[17] In *Destin Français*, he similarly emphasized the importance of the rules of Darwinist

evolution regarding the relationships between men and women.[18] As he wrote there: »Men produce millions of sperm cells easily; women have one egg cell a month and a few oocytes at their disposal; this difference induces a founding inequality, dissimilar behaviours, ›gender-oriented‹ behaviours, as the saying goes nowadays – a sentimental over-investment for women, a hunting behaviour for men, who are pushed into preying as much as possible – thus falling into the purview of biology, not of sociology«.[19]

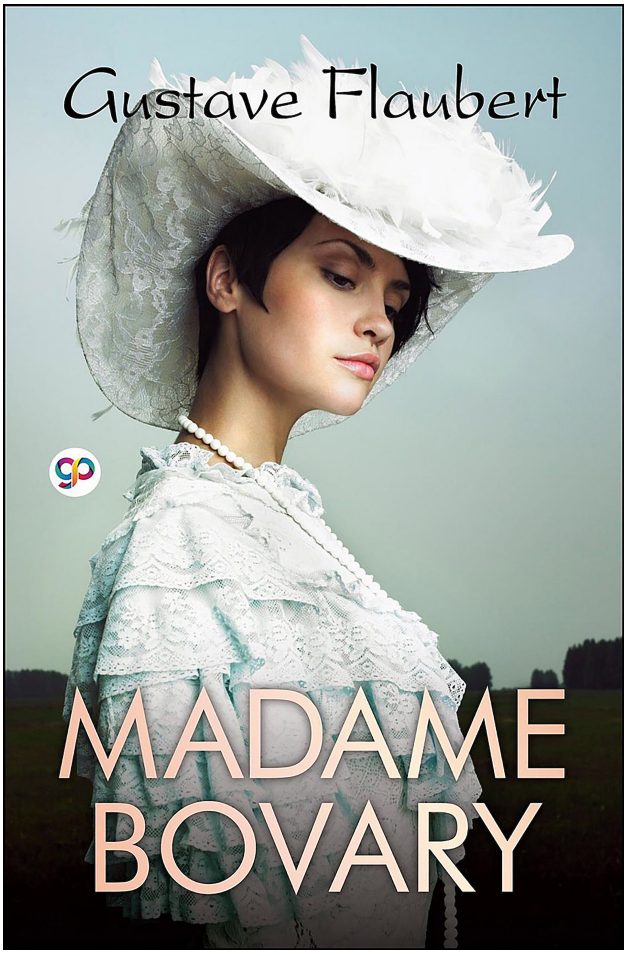

Fig. 3: Drawing on ›common‹ knowledge: In his writings, Zemmour frequently refers to canonical texts such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), knowing full well that his readers will be familiar with the characters — pictured is an ebook version.

In short, men and women's differing reproductive functions are aligned with conservative notions of masculinity and femininity, in an argument that is similar to Robin Fox's thesis above: Women need to procreate; they think they »waste their time when they are not taking care of [their babies]«; women look for a protector (a rich man able to provide for their families), and so on. To make this sound plausible, Zemmour frequently draws on the works of famous French writers. Already in *Le Premier Sexe*, for instance, he

cited texts by the nineteenth century novelists Stendhal and Balzac to provide seemingly naturalistic descriptions of men's sexual desires. Both texts here served to underscore the notion that men cannot love *and* desire at the same time, which is why it is natural for them to cheat on their wives. In other words, Zemmour takes these texts at face value, without questioning their epistemic relevance. By citing authors most of readers will have studied at school, and whose work is considered canonical in terms of French literature, Zemmour thus provides a seemingly unquestionable backbone to his argument. In other words, in appealing to his readers' tacit presuppositions, he shrewdly makes use of ›common‹ knowledge.

In the same vein, Zemmour mobilizes famous philosophers (e.g. Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and notable scholars such as French ethnologist Christian Bromberger, philosopher and historian René Girard, or the American anthropologist Margaret Mead.[20] In all of these cases, Zemmour cites them without context, riffing on their arguments without giving any broader description of the framework in which those points were made.

Omitting the scientific fields that question the dichotomy between nature and culture

If men and women are indeed essentially different, following the above reasoning, it is natural that they should have different positions in society. To Zemmour, consequently, the disruption of this supposedly natural order is »a catastrophe«.[21] As he explained both in *Le Premier Sexe* and *Destin Français*, this process of disruption started after the first World War, when society was turned upside down, and when profound transformations concerning the relationship between men and women ensued. In *Destin Français*, he named this a »Big Bang«, a »shock between historical time and evolutionary time, between reason and instincts, between nature and culture, between brains and guts, between speech and hormones«.[22]

Yet even to Zemmour, nature isn't all there is to it. In an interview released in 2006, for example, Zemmour said that because he grew up in the 1970s, he knew that culture played a role in the development of masculinity and femininity.[23] (In *Destin Français*, he similarly contended that »natural and cultural, biological and social, instincts and cultural constructions, [...] do not contradict themselves, but complement each other«.) Zemmour, then, does include cultural aspects in his argumentation; but he does so only superficially. Notably, he doesn't take into account the research pursued in scientific fields that *question* the dichotomy between nature and culture he aims to erect.

For example, when Zemmour makes allusions to biology, he essentially refers to a simplistic version of genetics and Darwinist evolution, ignoring discoveries that would challenge his account – for example, in the field of

epigenetics. Indeed, recent studies in epigenetics, and particularly in environmental epigenetics, challenge theories based on a schism between nature and culture: in fact, they blur the boundaries between these two concepts.[24] Studies thus show, for instance, that environmentally acquired traits can be transmitted to subsequent generations; researchers, moreover, are uncovering the molecular mechanisms responsible for this transmission.[25] In other words, and contrary to Zemmour's telling, current biological research may be said to shed light on various mechanisms that integrate biological and cultural factors.

Biological theories, then, have become more open to engaging with social factors thanks, in part, to the discoveries in epigenetics. The existence of epigenetic programming mechanisms suggests that human nature is adaptative, questioning the kind of Neodarwinist theory which Zemmour's description of men and women relies on. More broadly, environmental epigenetics challenges concepts of genetic determinism, offering richer (biological) descriptions of individuality and human psychology. In turn, epigenetic research also has had an influence on our perception of social factors:[26] Notions of social space are reconfigured by epigenetic discoveries in that the social can be considered in terms of molecular interactions between body and environment, which is measurable. Therefore, a materialist language that used to be specific to biology has seeped into social studies. Significantly, this »molecularisation« of social space does not imply the reduction of cultural aspects to genetics. Rather, it takes into account the interactions between body and external cues, redefining their relations. Social time is likewise reconfigured, in that the life-history of an individual, too, is structured by epigenetic factors. In light of these discoveries, Zemmour's conjecture of a »shock« between historical and biological times, or nature and culture, falters.

Perhaps less unsurprisingly, Zemmour is loath to consider the field of gender studies, according to which genders are (also) the outcome of cultural factors and socialisation.[27] Of course, this reluctance, or rather, hostility is part of a broader trend in extreme-right networks around the world: politicians including Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Vladimir Putin, and Viktor Orbán have lashed out against it. In France, Christine Boutin, the head of the *Parti Chrétien-Démocrate* (Christian Democrat Party), similarly attacked the field: In 2011, she wrote »une Lettre ouverte sur le Gender« (an open letter on Gender), addressed to Luc Châtel, the Minister of Education, in which she invoked the fears of »catholic circles« vis-à-vis gender issues. She subsequently was joined by several members of parliament from the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), the former French main conservative party.[28] This controversy surrounding gender would intensify when, in 2012, a draft bill to allow homosexual people to marry was submitted.

In this context, the concept of gender is called »la théorie du genre«, which is a way to discredit it by casting doubts on its scientific relevance.[29] Beside the UMP, notably extreme-right groups criticised gender »theory«.[30] For

example, the organisation *Egalité et Réconciliation*, led by Alain Soral, published numerous articles and videos on that matter. Zemmour also took part in this barrage of criticism, drawing parallels between Judith Butler – one of the most prominent exponents of gender studies – and »les femmes savantes« (the learned women), as ridiculed in Molière's comedy *Les Femmes savantes* (1672).[31] In *Destin Français*, he even went further, calling gender studies a »theoretical and lexical hodgepodge« that merely served the ideological purpose of getting rid of the supremacy of heterosexual males.[32]

Fig. 4: While the fictional Madame Bovary — seen here as a sculpture by H. Jondet — hardly is representative of the women of her time, Zemmour is adept at evoking the past ›greatness‹ of France.

Mixing literature and science

Already in *Le Premier Sexe*, Zemmour used different types of narrative to evoke a bygone patriarchal society, contrasting this society with the new, supposedly »feminised« one. These narratives, as noted, were not presented as (fictional) narratives, but rather on par with scientific knowledge, enabling Zemmour to write his own version of history. In order to show how society used to be before its »feminisation«, Zemmour referred

to the canonical texts of French literature in various ways, from mere citations to referencing the plot of whole novels. At times, it's sufficient for Zemmour to simply mention the names of characters from well-known novels. For example, to show that »women used to dream of the ideal couple«, Zemmour brings up the princess of Clèves, from the eponymous novel by Madame de La Fayette (1678), and Madame Bovary, from the novel by Gustave Flaubert (1857).[33] Both are feminine characters with well-known romantic expectations, suitably supporting Zemmour's line of argument: »In the olden days, Madame Bovary took a lover to experience the dream life of the Parisians, whose adventures she read about in pulp literature«.[34]

These short references enable Zemmour to (seemingly) substantiate his case, without in fact having to explain the link between his theory and the historical evidence supposedly supporting it. While Madame Bovary certainly isn't representative of the women of her time, however, Zemmour can rely on his readers to understand the point he is making: these novels form part, as it were, of general knowledge.

Novels thus feature frequently in Zemmour's descriptions of »traditional patriarchal society«, whether he explains that there was (or should be) a dichotomy between sexual desire and love, or whether he recounts how men had wives, who were respected and with whom they had children, as well as mistresses, who were desired sexually, but did not benefit from the protection of marriage. To make his point, Zemmour draws on *Une vie*, by Guy de Maupassant (1883), and *La femme de trente ans*, by Honoré de Balzac (1842) – both novels in which women are deceived by their husbands.[35] And he refers to the lives of French nineteenth century authors themselves – Flaubert, Maupassant and Baudelaire – who had recourse to the services of sex workers openly and shamelessly (while American politicians such as Bill Clinton, a century later, had to apologize publicly for the same kind of actions).[36] These literary references, drawn from the heights of French nineteenth century culture, thus aim at showing how men and women used to interact before the so-called feminisation of society, and that this order of things was natural. It is also in line with Zemmour's nostalgia of the past »greatness« of France, a past golden age – a recurring topic in the extreme-right ideology, from Jean-Marie Le Pen's exclusionary brand of nationalism to Trump's campaign slogan »Make America great again«.[37]

To be sure, even professional historians tap novels as sources to understand the political, social, economic, and cultural context of a given time. But historians such as Judith Lyon-Caen emphasise that the question of the relationship between history and literature is complex, and that »methodological precautions [are] essential to the historian's work with literature«.[38] Zemmour, by contrast, eludes such issues, citing literary works without any precaution: he does not provide context or critical analysis, let alone deconstruct his textual evidence (that could be read from other angles). To the contrary, in *Destin Français*, he criticised the *questioning* of

literary canons, something that according to Zemmour first happened in American universities under the influence of French Theory during the 1960s and 1970s. Against the grain of cultural and feminist studies, to him, white male authors (among them Balzac and Flaubert) »shaped the [universal] concepts of humanism, freedom, progress, and emancipation of individuals«.[39]

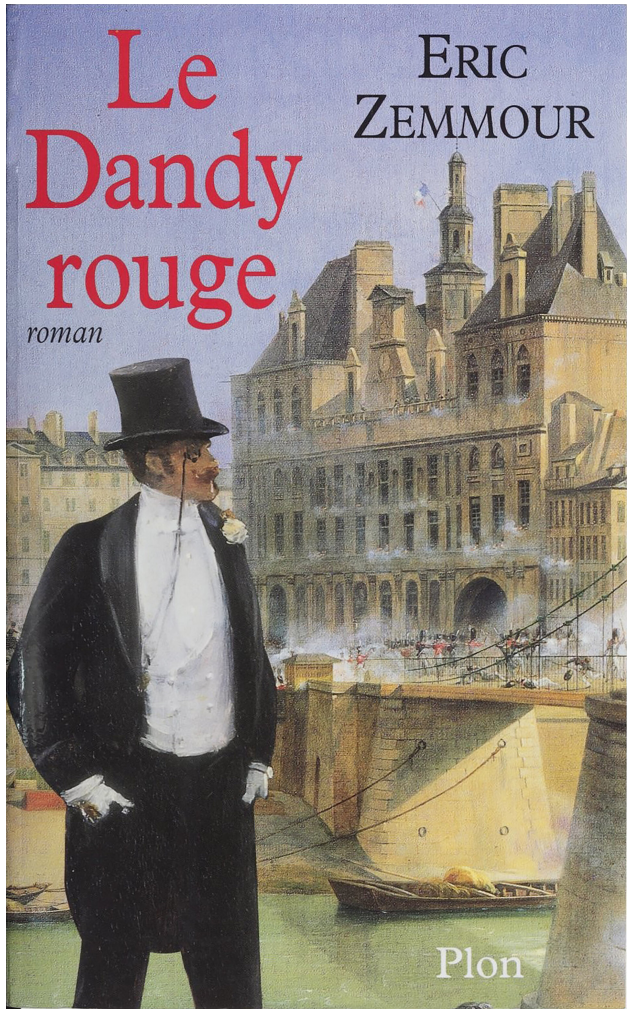

Fig. 5: *Le Dandy Rouge*: Zemmour's 1999 novel »mixes politics, treason, pretense, vanity and romanticism«.

Meanwhile, these references to the literary past enable Zemmour's version of history to sustain a veneer of erudition: *Le Premier Sexe* recounts a history of France from the seventeenth century to present days, told through the lens of male-female relationships. In Zemmour's telling, women progressively took over power, while men gave up on their manliness.[40] As noted, Zemmour makes much of the disruption of cultural standards during and after the First World War; and another turning point occurred in the 1970s – in the wake of May 1968, because of new social movements, owing

to novel legislation (e.g. granting rights to women in terms of remuneration and birth control). Since then, according to Zemmour, feminine values have dominated society. In this version of history, »feminism« is exclusively framed in pejorative terms – the title of the book itself of course is a reference to the well-known feminist book, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which Zemmour, needless to say, finds wanting.[41] Indeed, to Zemmour, feminism, be it identarian or universalist, puts women at a disadvantage.

According to French historian Gérard Noiriel, Zemmour, by cultivating such vernacular versions of history, »aims at discrediting all professional historians«. Zemmour, as Noiriel notes, sees France as an »imaginary character, with a stable and immutable identity, and not as a community of individuals«; professional historians, in contrast, seek to understand the complexities involved in the construction of something like the French ›people‹.[42] Nevertheless, to Zemmour it's the professional historians who are powerful and have the ability to control what history is told: against them, Zemmour adopts the »position of the gagged hero«, meaning that he pretends to be censored by his opponents – even though, as Noiriel notes ironically, these historians rarely appear on television and do not enjoy Zemmour's level of media exposure. Indeed, Zemmour's considerable popularity as an ›outsider‹ allows him to appeal to freedom-of-speech whenever he is attacked by his critics, while simultaneously appealing to the ressentiments of citizens who have come to mistrust establishment institutions.

Conclusion

As we've seen, to show that a ›crisis‹ of masculinity is occurring, and to explain why, Zemmour ostensibly makes use of a wide range of evidence. To naturalize the differences between men and women, he resorts to a mix of biology, psychology, anthropology, and ethnology. Meanwhile, to dramatize the ways French society devolved into a ›feminised‹ society, he conjures up fictionalized versions of past and present societies, fashioning himself as an anti-establishment, hence proper historian.

Despite all that, Zemmour's approach – a montage of quotations from science, philosophy, and literature – evidently is not particularly scientific. Indeed, he tends to dismiss, more or less explicitly, entire academic fields, notably gender studies and (academic) history. This doesn't prevent Zemmour from being a successful writer, however. His bestselling books include *Le Suicide Français* (2014) (500.000 copies) and *Le Premier Sexe* (2006), which wasn't quite as successful; it still sold 100.000 copies.[43] Clearly, his ideas are being taken seriously, at least in right and extreme-right circles, where he is revered as »a man of influence«, someone distinguished by »having been right before everyone else«.[44] He is also often described as someone who says out aloud what everyone thinks. In these circles, he is considered as an intellectual, someone who prioritizes big

ideas, who writes well, is intelligent and knowledgeable. In academic spheres, needless to say, his work tends to be frowned upon. Nevertheless, according to journalist Jean-Marie Durand, this is not enough to bring him into disrepute. Indeed, his »anti-intellectualist« positions precisely appeal to parts of the population, the ones who think that »France is dying because of its ›feminisation‹, ›xenophilia‹, ›islamisation‹, and the derision and deconstruction of moral values of days gone by«.[45] Dressed up as science, these positions constitute a reason for his popularity.

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