REVIEW:

*Anomie/Bonhomie & Other Writings*

by HOWARD SLATER

(Mute Books)

text by STEVE HANSON

Through Howard Slater’s eyes, we see the whole world as some nuthouse exercise yard, a global, therefore endless, circuitous assembly line. Its ‘product’ is a workforce to run the same information-network that produces it. The serpent eats its own tail, language controls language, and the by-product of this process is our own, very human slavery. Slater shows us a vast, pornographic time and motion study, but with no operator as a ‘subject’, its drivers are on permanent leave. The word ‘tour’, after all, was derived from the Latin ‘tornus’, to turn, as in a lathe, which was perhaps the ultimate machine: it alone made other machines. On Slater’s landscape, it seems to me, there are only objects, but nonetheless he urges us to break through, to become subjects once again.

I reviewed an issue of Slater’s magazine *Break/Flow*, with its Deleuzian title, in the late 1990s, for *Pahemaic Terrascope*, one of the underground publications I wrote for at that time. Slater has developed his incredible style in similarly no-pressure environments, something we should be grateful for. According to what is known as ‘the blurb’, appropriately in this case, Slater ‘improvises around what Walter Benjamin could have meant by the phrase “affective classes”’, and via this ‘messianic shard’, he develops ‘a therapeutic micropolitics by way of a mourning for the Workers’ Movement and a grappling with the “becomings of capital”’.

Slater states, rightly, that late twentieth and early twenty-first century capitalism creates internalised subjects. He then urges us to mine ‘our anxieties and vulnerabilities’, and via doing so create ‘markers’ in a ‘way of life that is precarious’. He warns that if these anxieties remain unshared, we can lose access to insights into capitalism as well as losing chances for deeper levels of solidarity. Slater is exploring the ‘possibilities for collective “affective” practices to combat capitalism’s colonisation of the psyche.’

In this sense, Slater shares some of Zygmunt Bauman’s concerns. As work and community becomes variously fragmented, idiotic, scarce, pointless, brutalizing, and literally ‘senseless’ for many people, the human subject turns inwards, but once there, it finds no ground on which to stand upright, only a bottomless void to be filled, with nobody to hand who might tell us how to fill it. This is not simple exegesis, I have seen it in some of the more troubled students I have engaged with. Many of them shared key symptoms: sheer rage followed by a retreat to an inner landscape, neither state being able to articulate what was happening to the whole psychic organism. After witnessing this several times, I feel very strongly that what Slater is urging us to do in this book is correct. He wants us to turn outwards, globally, and turn our symptoms outwards, to face each other again. It is appropriate that he once hypothesized a group
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called the ‘Secessionist Outernational.’

So, Slater’s work is not simply interchangeable with Bauman’s either. He clearly emerges from Marxism, but specifically the Freudo-Marxist traditions of the twentieth century, traditions themselves halted and fragmented by two world wars and the subsequent rise of a medicalized western culture. Slater is also a Situationist of sorts. If Bauman essentially emerges from the sociological traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Slater emerges from the art school traditions of the late 1960s and onwards. He collages poetry, visual or otherwise, and other more strategic forms of written representation, to both loosen-up and exemplify his subject matter. The book’s poetical sections are not simply ‘interludes’, but exemplificatory parts of Slater’s argument, and he steps off into poetry at the very end, something which re-performs much of what he has said about language and politics. But Slater also has things to say about counter-cultures elsewhere, warning us not to reify them, but to move them forward continuously.

Similarly, Slater understands that our critiques of capitalism must move on, positing new units of analysis, identifying more recent symptoms. If, in the 1970s and 1980s, the home was a key site to focus any critique of life under capitalism, re-producing as it did the Master-Slave discourses of the workplace along gendered lines, and in a similarly brutalizing way, mutating kinship networks into a kind of sub-Fordist auto-production, in 2012 the critique should focus – not the best word to use for the most fragmented of ‘sites’ – on our contemporary psyches, on so-called ‘individualization’. Two other sociologists, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, wrote about the ‘hidden injuries’ of class, and like Bauman’s work, their insightful take on it was diagnostic. But Slater attempts to diagnose and then go further, in order to give us a discursive via which we might begin to assess what I could call ‘the hidden injuries of individual fragmentation’, before externalising them polemically.

The centrepiece of this book is its title essay, ‘Anomie/Bonhomie: Notes Towards The “Affective Classes”’. Its sheer brilliance is obvious. Slater begins by placing us right at the centre of the post-crash storm. In fact, the whole essay seems to pour into its silent, dead eye. Slater begins by explaining that the old world of worker struggle has ended: ‘We are worried that the class doesn’t want to be a class and that the only ones who want it thus are not from that class.’ In fact, worker struggle hasn’t just dried up, it has resulted in a pathos of injury which cannot be responded to by anyone except the priests of biopower. Even the unions cannot help, it is not ‘militant’, Slater suggests, to be ‘sick’. This sickness circulates inside the prison of choice, either freedom from work via debt, or freedom from debt via work. Both ‘choices’ provide:

…forms of withdrawal from the stress and boredom of (a) an interminable working week (b) a continuously empty calendar. Both offered endless abstract time in the moments of calculating how long there was to go.

That Slater places this in the past tense is speculative, but it tells you where he is heading with his critique. If Hegel’s Phenomenology was written under the influence of the divine, Slater pours out his centrepiece essay under no less a potent hallucinatory grip. But he writes out of the abject, battered shoes of all humans who have lived in the un-communicable horror of this un-choice and its only possible termination: suicide. He employs the reggae term ‘sufferation’: mass and individual suffering combined. He quotes Sun Ra, saying ‘there’s a change in the air’, asking us if we ‘can hear the heavy silence there’. I hear the silence all too clearly, and feel its heaviness, as Slater moves closer to it. He ends this chapter with the concept of ‘affective soviets’, which he claims are a ‘poetic fantasy’ that nonetheless lacks any kind of ‘proprietorship’. The essay seems to extinguish itself in abstraction at this point, as it reaches the limit of what is sayable. It moves into a more gestural mode, via concrete poetry and drawing. It is, after all, an edge-proposal, and an essential one, not just a welcome one. Slater, in this essay, provides a full diagnosis and notes toward a prescription.

This, as far as anyone can make such a glib comment about such serious critiques, is ‘all well and good’. But what are the objections? The main one, for me, arrives immediately, during Slater’s piece ‘From Exodus To Species-Being’, written in 2002, which serves as a polemical introduction here. Slater says that we build ‘species being’ – Marx’s term – via ‘self exile’, and accuses those who remain in the wake of this radical
exile of the ‘inherent laziness of their hard work’.

I have problems with this. If everyone received the kind of critical education Slater has – no matter where he has taken it from – then maybe it would be an acceptable accusation. As they don’t, it is not. I can understand how provoking people into positions of liberation and resistance may be a good thing, but there are dangers and traps, which are equally created by language and representation, and Slater’s own work does not escape the phenomena he exposes just because he exposes it.

I also want to sketch in a warning here, which has been raised by others before – albeit more politely – about applying ‘nomadism’, ‘exile’ and ‘exodus’, terms which describe those who are truly ‘outside’, to the readers of a book published by Mute. To be fair, Slater is applying those terms to people engaged in ‘mass migration’, or fleeing the factory, right from the start. But Slater’s book will not reach every person in the world. It has a particular address, and, I would argue, an even more particular set of addressees. This may not have been Slater’s intention, but I worry about a mis-reading, and really only want to make the point that one man’s liberating dis-assembly is another man in pieces. ‘Nomadism’, ‘exile’ and ‘exodus’ are exciting and adventurous for artists flying from Berlin to London, with copies of this book in their bags, without ever returning to the already centreless LA from which they began. But the kind of exodus and exile forced by Indian corporations in the name of expanding their middle classes are of a different order entirely, to pick just one example out of hundreds. Basically, we always need to be very clear: for whom is ‘exile’ and ‘exodus’ being declared? It is also worth pointing out that this moment rises out of the almost rabid Deleuzianism of 2002. I began my MA at this point, and some of my fellow students were simply tripping on it.

Elsewhere, Slater talks about the avant-garde cell, with their expulsions, the surrealists, and the largely un-mentioned Situationist International, whom I know are present in Slater’s thinking because Isidore Isou and the Lettrists are. Slater describes the ‘expelled’ cell member as a kind of metaphor for modes of consciousness in a whole psychic organism – or its unconscious – understanding that expulsion is a search for clarity within the remaining group, although this is ultimately also a kind of psychic hemorrhaging. Slater argues that the surrealists:

...provide many covert clues to the problem of how to organise becoming, how to maintain a self-institutional frame for “open-beings”. Once the subject is seen as a rhizomatic terrain, a blurring container of multiple selves, then the old methods of political organisation can be deemed prolific in their failure.

I would argue here that The Party is already far from dead, and its revival may yet occur. This is not to suggest that this would be a welcome event, or to claim that The Party will ever evade what Slater criticises as its old ‘into polity via logos’ formalism. Slater understands that this kind of politics is that of the already re-presented, but that ‘blurring container of multiple selves’ still manages to put on a tie and present a convincing enough face to rule for another thousand years, and this open-ended version risks eventually doing the same thing: is there a human rhizomatic becoming which occurs outside of language? Ultimately, I’m not sure if any grouping, from a pair upwards, can ever really escape D.W. Winnicott’s observation that assemblages are always roughly fifty percent provision and fifty percent hindrance, and we don’t have to look very far to see the same expulsions in The Monolithic Parties. The old methods of political organisation have piled failure on failure, alongside capitalism they continue to propel Benjamin’s historical storm. This is undeniable, but new forms of organisation cannot yet be judged to be prolific in their successes either.

I worry that this pursuit of a new form of polity for all might only result in a hermetic occulting for those who buy books published by Mute. But we do need to try something else, especially in Britain, with its vast, institutional drag factors, and our current, pathetic, almost universal shift to the right, precisely at the moment when the direct opposite is required.

What Aristotle called the ‘ergon’ or ‘peculiar work’ of the thing must be teased out, and Slater’s attempts to do this are nothing short of heroic. But the banal, abject and brutalising spaces he describes will not simply wither and pass away because ‘we’ take to the skies in search of our infinite becoming. In fact, they are precisely the spaces that becoming needs to mesh with, in order to transform them. These are the very particular man/machines we need to aim for. But the
problem is, once in this zone, we begin to see that everything is a machine, everything slips, inside and outside fold into one. In ‘The Desiring-Machines’, Deleuze and Guattari made no distinction between man-made and man-as-machine, and though they problematise Freudian psychoanalysis, the links seem clear: neurosis is figured as machine slippage, and here I am returned again to the terrifying landscape of objects Slater begins on.

But these objections do not halt the efficacy of Slater’s argument. They are just over-wary reservations of my own. In fact, they may be completely unreasonable to put in light of the speculative, proposal-based formalism of Slater’s work. Because Slater then takes his polemical introduction and runs with it, runs it through the rest of the book, teasing out the state of the contemporary subject, urging us to locate our species being in our dis-assembling, forced or otherwise, at the same time as he shows us how someone might disassemble in another direction, by example.

But this text isn’t just about fragmentation either. Slater shows us what we’re made of as well. The metaphysicians who have hinted that matter may well be endowed with the faculty of thought have perhaps not reasoned ill,’ La Mettrie commented, towards the end of the eighteenth century, a man who would later exhale for the last time due to an overdose of Pheasant paté. ‘The Leibnizians’, La Mettrie suggested, ‘have set up an unintelligible hypothesis. They have rather spiritualized matter than materialized the soul.’ Slater, via Marx, has re-materialized the ‘soul’ of the early 21st century human, and he sees that urgent work is again required. Via his fantastic use of an illustration from a Power Rangers toy, Slater shows us how we are assembled from birth, supposedly for our gain, but Slater sees how this is something which comes at the ultimate price.

Anomie & Bonhomie was an album by Scritti Politti, and there may or may not be a link with Slater’s rise from roughly the same milieu in his titling. Anomie/ Bonhomie also seems to metonymically mirror his earlier publication, Break/Flow. ‘Anomie’ is the break, and ‘bonhomie’ does the flowing. Whatever the case may be, I personally take it as a description of the almost bipolar symptoms of post-capitalist schizophrenia that Slater is so good at describing, performing, finding, and externalizing, at the same time as it reflects Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.’

And therein lies the dialectic. This book does not describe ‘something that we should all be interested in’, but something that we all have no choice but to struggle through in various ways, and through that struggling, to try to create the possibility of emancipation via the struggle of continual becoming. Despite my minor worries over some of the details, Slater’s book is a very brave step forward.

‘Accumulate’, whispers capital, deafeningly. ‘Dépense!’ screams Georges Bataille in retort, a phantom from the grave. Perhaps unintentionally, Howard Slater’s book is a timely reminder of the fine line between those two total despots.

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