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# Burdened by the Absence of the Billions?

By Howard Slater

Marx's concept of 'species being' is for some a way of re-connecting with fertile currents in the communist left. Howard Slater explores Fr re Dupont's recent book *Species Being and Other Stories* as a vehicle of exodus from left orthodoxies

*But this negation carries within it a yes which is greater than itself*

  Octavio Paz

Over the past few years several publications have surfaced from what can loosely be called the non-Bolshevik revolutionary milieus. Ordinarily publications from such milieus can hardly be noted for their personal openness, play with form and stalwart exasperation with the seeming shrinkage of their circles. Such books as *Call, Zones Of Proletarian Development* (ZPD) and this one by Fr re Dupont are noteworthy in that they seek, non-prescriptively, to provide grounds for optimism and fresh angles of approach for those milieus that will not rush to embrace them. A provocative theme in their approaches is the way that each reflects upon the modes of organisation of those milieus. Each has experimented with 'phantom organisations'   imaginary groupings of one or several that offer some means of conceptual secession, some means of supported self-exile from those hermetic orthodoxies for whom counter-cultural activists are, as 'culturalists', not to be taken seriously. From *Call's* elaboration of a party of secession through to Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's investigation of 'reflexive joint activity' in a ZPD, could it be that these books appeal to those distanced from the vestigially workerist revolutionary milieus, or to those convinced that capital's efficacy is, to some degree, related to its instauration as a social relation? Are such approaches, with their accent upon relational congruence rather than ideological purity, more attractive and less threatening for those put off by the over erudite, the emotionally inarticulate and the suicidal militancy that non-revolutionary 'others' complain of? Fr re Dupont frankly asks the question: 'why is it that others feel no interest for us?' (p.39).

[IMAGE]

Of these books, it is *Species Being and Other Stories* that could be described as the most personally exacting of the bunch. Being, in some ways, an account and autopsy of disillusionment, it has a self-interrogatory rigour that reminds me of Foucault's insistence that revolutionaries of all hues ask themselves why they identify as revolutionaries: too often the 'role' is taken for granted. For Fr re Dupont it could be more a matter of talking of a 'pro-revolutionary milieu', of getting rid of the identitarian baggage, moral purity and dysfunctional personal relations that abound, and embracing, instead, a manner of being that befits what he calls the 'for-human' of species being: 'only when the left despairs of itself is there room for a vaguely human becoming' (p.102).

That brother Dupont does not intensively interrogate, in an explicatory way, what Marx means by species being, but offers it up as a non-foreclosed 'for-human' (with all the pitfalls that could entail), means that as readers we must suspend our yearning for 'received truth' and participate in the suspension of certainties. Indeed, there is nothing certain in what Marx says: 'Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species being.'<sup>i</sup> But such conscious life activity does not necessarily mean theoretical work, but maybe means an ongoing lived antagonism between drives and the adequacy, or not, of forms of collective being. The presence within us of these drives and affects that cut across and cut up our rationalising and forecasting is, for me at least, an element of species being that persists as a common human trait that ideological production cannot appease. An articulation of the messiness of all this is a possible take on Dupont's 'for-human', and it is a messiness that Dupont does not recoil from:

I cannot bear to face what I have written 'bad faith dogs me. I have scanned through the words of course [...] That was more than enough to fill me with revulsion. (p.iii)

Revulsion, bad faith, the fear of attack and of finical criticism. Is this what it's come to for us?

This 'revulsion' endears Frère Dupont to me, and I hope in passing to take up its umbilical thread after outlining a little the eclectic content of this *sui generis* book. A book that whilst riffing, in part, on such currently debated concepts/practices as 'communisation', manages to come across like a work of experimental prose. The title *Species Being and Other Stories* is as good a place to start as any. Brother Dupont's mobilisation of a sense of fiction, in what is ostensibly a work of theory, enables a refreshing candidness and gives free reign to speculative and non-fore closing flights (speculation and playfulness, and their attendant 'messiness', being often misunderstood and a cause for barbed comment in the milieu?). It enables brother Dupont to 'begin again from a slightly different position' (p.16) and, as already suggested, to add his own take on the meaning of 'species being'. That Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* are a touchstone for this book should not be overstated since Frère Dupont improvises with this hazardous and dimly extrapolated phrase. Indeed, for me, it could be said that species being is not to be taken as a past state that we strive to reattain, some sort of human essence, but a work of collective (fictional) production; a malleability of seemingly innate ahistorical drives. For others, such as the group around *Internationalist Perspective*, an interesting angle is taken in their setting species being and social being in opposition/conjunction. And then there are those for whom the *1844 Manuscripts* and musings around them are a cause of shame and revulsion at the thought of a 'humanist' and pre-scientific Marx. But, as this brother seems to show, there is, in the 'terror of the dawn chorus', in the value-imposed balance sheet of a life, always the sense of a 'becoming human' to clutch to.

In some ways Frère Dupont's take on species being as the 'for-human' and the 'pre-human' is his tabula rasa, his beginning again from a different position, his attempt to find some 'invariants' or common human traits in the ongoing struggle against capitalism. And, who knows, to find a conceptual space for the working class after it has abolished itself! As with Jacques Camatte, the turn to species being here is tied up with a sense of the formation of a 'human community' as the

overarching communist tendency. A tendency that is counter to the reproduction of the species being as labour power that this brother asserts is, in the absence of capital investment and with a prole reluctance to work, being left to the liberal state: 'the working class constantly prepares itself for its return to species being, seeking its own level through this implied rejection of itself as working class' (p.70). This failure of reproduction as labour power as well as the schizoid position of a class subject that, so the theory goes, needs to desire its own dissolution, opens up notions of whether the working class is still the revolutionary subject. I get the sense that for this brother it is the milieus that are the blockage in the revolutionary process; that and the ideological mediation (encapsulated in organisational forms) that form a barrier between them and the Others.

That this brother asserts that the 'for-human' is a more common form of being than the role of the revolutionary implies, I think, that for him the revolutionaries are blind to the innate revolt of the 'for-human'; a revolt expressed not as a 'political use-value', but as a means to 'do everything to keep and increase our dignity as living things'.<sup>ii</sup> That species being is here made the synonym of revolt, and that revolt is made the 'essence which every human may access' (p.65) may give grounds for a much needed 'return to optimism'. However, it clashes with a leading question of the book: 'why does the proletariat not revolt against its conditions?' (p.viii). In response to his own musing Fr re Dupont says that these Others aren't inspired, that we in the milieu are solipsistic, have an insular self-regard, feel the individualised pressure of auto-culpabilisation and are increasingly negative. It's tempting to also suggest that the milieus (in all those separate waiting rooms) are so off-putting to the Others because each room feels, somewhat pathologically, that they are in 'possession' of the correct consciousness, the correct analysis, the skeleton key. Indeed, as a refreshing counterpoise to such righteous foreclosure, the meandering, engaging and almost extemporising aura of this book sees Fr re Dupont later stating with nonchalant assertiveness: 'It is never a matter of revolt becoming the vehicle of a solution' (p.75)! Revolt is not enough; you can't sulk a social relation away.

[IMAGE]

Whilst it is against the spirit of this eclectic and engaging book to attempt to place its 'conjectured ground' within a rational framework (critical appropriation), I do struggle a little with the demarcation of the 'pre-human' element of Fr re Dupont's take on species being. It seems to function on too many levels at the same time: as an exploration of the neolithic (or 'primitive communism?'); as a reference point to a state of precarity that is aligned to a human condition and not something of recent invention; as a harbinger (or childhood memory) of a relational existence unencumbered by the abstractions of value; as the persistence of the irrational and of a surplus; of the founding of human societies around death and ritual. The 'pre-human', then, is more succinctly offered up as an explanation to the 'destructive character of small group psychologies' (p.33) in that Fr re Dupont writes 'up to this moment groups have tended to allow the existence of an untheorised pre-human element hostile to their own expressed values' (p.23). Whilst the many surrealist organisations and group psychotherapy practitioners who work with the 'untheorised' and with the 'hidden third' of relational dynamics may feel a bit miffed to be overlooked, I can only think that the 'pre-human', in this context, is the unspoken elements of unconscious life; the transferences, projections and sublimations associated with group life; the persistences of affects that circulate between us; the clash between these mute feelings in search of words; and those 'expressed values' too full of the trickery

of ideological languages.

Fr re Dupont puts forward the tentative suggestion that pro-revolutionary groupings (already the prefix 'pro' is freeing for us Others) should embrace the 'pre-human', or, as my baggage dictates, unconscious group dynamics, in order, I reckon, to more roundedly embrace the becoming inherent in the 'pro-human'. The two, for Fr re Dupont, are in interrelation and this is given outline in the section entitled 'We Build Complex Assemblages' in which he extrapolates on a phantom organisation called earthen cup that has as its platform 'the untheorised and non-included aspects of human existence'. In this section of the book Fr re Dupont sketches out an 'organisation for those who have no organisation' (Bataille), an immanent organisation, an 'associative medium' (c.f. Surrealist groups), that rings out with both a poetic yearning and a declaratory tone that is vaguely self-mocking. He rounds off this nine point anti-manifesto as follows:

Our purpose is to develop a feral subject, that which even if it appears under present circumstances, is actually determined out of time, by both the most ancient past and the most distant future. The subject earthen cup seeks to invoke has its hands upon the levers of its own transformations, its mouth issues a code of metamorphoses. (p.47)

The feral subject invoked here has echoes of Antonin Artaud (cited earlier in the book), as does the persisting notion that earthen cup come to embody some form of expanded theatre and that pro-revolutionaries engage in role playing games.<sup>iii</sup> The spirit of the Bataille of *Acephale* and the Artaud of *Theatre of Cruelty* peek in here especially in their similar insistence and interest in summoning up the beyond rational (discourse) of 'primal' elements.<sup>iv</sup> Such a 'beyond rational' also surfaces in Dupont's 'feral subject' being 'determined out of time'. But rather than this having to be seen as some wildly transcendent subject it could be read, rather, as the furthest extension of a ZPD: the persistent proximity within us of the archaic and the modern; a marker of species being.

Artaud, then, provides something of a prism for me in the context of this book; a prism that also allows us to catch a glint of Marx. It's a simple phrase but, as cited by Fr re Dupont, Artaud, in talking of his prospective theatre (a combination of the pre-human and for-human, the archaic and the modern?), says that its efficacy is in 'compelling men to see themselves as they are' (p.25). This may seem like nothing to revolutionary identitarians distanced from the Others, but its implication is that we can only see ourselves as who we (temporarily) are by drawing upon the 'untheorised and non-included aspects' of ourselves; the affective elements that seem not just superfluous to the grand theoretical discourses that we immerse ourselves in, but seem like indications of our own revolutionary inappropriateness, our revulsion in thinking in knowing-all tones, our shame at being determined bourgeois subjects. Fr re Dupont: 'everything existent under the capitalist conditions transports value for the economy' (p.63). If we, to misapply Marx, are 'independent centres of circulation', if the makeshift formula 'I=value' holds, then there is a compelling case to see ourselves as 'who we are', as who we have been produced to be, in order to partake in the process of becoming human, of becoming species being.<sup>v</sup> This is itself part of the struggle against capitalism that remains 'non-included' as such. Rosi Bradiotti has stated it starkly thus: 'one has to contemplate the unedifying spectacle of one's own failings or shortcomings.'<sup>vi</sup>

Such a going fragile is no easy task and it is to be wondered whether by cruelty Artaud meant that a kind of autotraumatization was called to be delivered up by his proposed receptor-participants. This perhaps leads us to the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and another take on species being that, again, could be called an invariant; namely Marx's assertion that,

man as an objective sensuous being is therefore a suffering being, and because he feels his suffering, he is a passionate being. Passion is man's essential power.<sup>vii</sup>

Passion doesn't really go out of fashion (well, not yet), and suffering and trauma are human constants that no revolution can completely eradicate. In brother Dupont's terms, passion and suffering are both pre-human and pro-human. In a touching passage he urges that pro-revolutionaries invite others to reflect upon the truth of their own personal anguish, and thereby recognise their relation to the world (p.69). Such an attunement to their own feelings of revulsion for the organisation of the world may sound close to counselling or psychotherapy, but these latter are, on the whole, bogged down in the individualising therapeutic dyad.<sup>viii</sup> Instead brother Dupont, in Letter To T, returning to his organisational musings, offers crucially that we must visit our frailties into the context (p.118). Does he mean that our frailties, our emotional susceptibilities, our suffering, our blocks, our confusions, our fantasies, our feelings of alienation etc., should be allowed into the pro-revolutionary group context and be seen there as indications of our endocolonisation by capitalist valorisation imperatives and not as our unworthiness to the cause? Frère Dupont: we are dependent on mediated forms; our subjectivity echoes, even desires, the reproduction of these forms (p.105). If this sounds to some like a return to Encounter groups, Maoist self-flagellation sessions or mid 70s pro-situ auto-crucifixion, then, it could be countered that these were all ideological practices that actively repressed the primal or pre-human element of species being in favour of the self-protecting sleights of discourse/power. Foucault:

the manifest discourse [...] is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this not said is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said.<sup>ix</sup>

To allow for and work with the not said, the affective residue, gives an insight into a compelling nuance of what we are fighting against: capitalist valorisation imperatives as productive of a paranoid-narcissistic ego?

If this all sounds very individualistic then we must remember all those revolutionaries suicided by society as well as the personal costs of commitment and its deliberate precarity that Frère Dupont touches upon in the pages of his book. It is this level of psychological suffering that goes mostly unnoticed in those milieus that reduce their subject to the condition of the physically and mentally exhausted labourer. This says nothing about the levels of despair that follow upon protracted exhaustion nor does it give credence to the potential intensification of such suffering for those in the milieus: you're exploited, you know it, and worse you feel it, but you cannot manifest these feelings in the prevailing

language of the milieus. If "value", if value is breath, then, in the depths of a psychical suffering you can become intra-alienated; the relations between your own modalities breakdown in the generalised equivalent of a "self" that cannot become, that cannot risk its own difference. This makes us ripe not only to conform to the social situation as it is, but to submit to the "messy" orthodoxies of the revolutionary milieus for the want of anything more effectively and affectively engaging on a variety of "pro-human" levels.

[IMAGE]

And yet, there is, I feel, something pulsing and inchoate that is being brought slowly to expression in both this book and the others cited at the beginning of this review-article. Before drawing upon these sources it is useful to consider again the Marx quote above. Here, albeit before he embarks on his critique of political economy, Marx does not reduce the species being to "labour", but to passion and suffering, i.e. an opening out of species being and not a reduction to one of its many (potential) facets. So what happens if we couple this to the phrase "affective classes" reportedly uttered by Walter Benjamin during a trip to Paris in 1935? Amidst all the taxonomies and re-writes of class as a precariat, multitude, entrepreneurial etc., this phrase of Benjamin's remains for me the most provocative of the lot. What did he mean by this phrase that he didn't explore for himself but which was reported and glossed for us by Pierre Klossowski? Was he outlining a "phantom class"?<sup>x</sup> With this in mind, and inspired by the speculative tenor of Frédéric Dupont, yet with my own feelings of revulsion at adding to the list, could it be offered that the working classes are being recomposed as affective classes? What would this entail? A Fourierist notion of eroticised and pleasurable work? An appeal to the cracked-up to unite? A suggested point of convergence around a species-activity informed by desiring-production? A re-appropriation of affective labour? A more adequate response to a real subsumption marked by biopower? Does Benjamin's phrase, then, have any relation to *Call* when the anonymous authors have it that the Party "could be nothing but this: the formation of sensibility as a force" or elsewhere speak of "affective circulation"? Does it relate to Jacques Rancière's notion of a "distribution of the sensible"? And what impact would Jonathan Beller's idea of a "labour theory of attention" add to it?<sup>xi</sup> A great deal of collective thinking/practice (or a good critical lashing) would need to be done in this area, but Frédéric Dupont speculates in much the same direction himself:

for the left this recomposition of struggle into an intimate bodily reaction feels like a retreat but they are wrong [...] Revolt is an intimate relatedness to the world and therefore most real at the level of immediate feeling. (p.68)

So, in the revolt against economically induced suffering, a revolt in which we feel, feel-for and attempt to feel-with (empathy), we must also remember that these feelings too revolt against their bearers, that feelings are in revolt, that commitment is not guaranteed as circumstances change and the struggle to survive presses "inwards" and exacerbates individualism and its pathological variants. In these circumstances, forms of relation, of being-with, seem to become of paramount importance; relations which go towards co-creating a culture that is informed by the "pre-human" (unconscious) and the "pro-human" (increased dignity of living things), that encourages the mutual disclosure of a "going fragile" whilst militating against the appropriation for value of our sensual bodies' capacity for suffering and passion (capital makes money out of our death and our exuberant "vital force"). Affectivity is at stake, the capacity to feel and be impassioned into revolt, to have feeling destabilise our selves enough to risk the making of an "unnatural" difference, to no longer have shared feelings of

revulsion informed by the operations of mass culpabilisation, by the inherent authoritarianism of language, by the fear of an inhuman, value-laden judgementalism of our worth to enterprises, to the state and, sadly, to each other. So, maybe, for some âpro-revolutionariesâ it is necessary to toy with that âphantom classâ of the affective of which Benjamin is still foretelling. Open up front.

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### **Info**

FrÃ©re Dupont, *Species Being and Other Stories*, Ardent Press, 2007. Distributed by Little Black Cart. See <http://www.littleblackcart.com>

For âGoing Fragileâ see Mattin/Radu Malfatti at <http://www.formedrecords.com/formed03.html>

The illustrations accompanying this piece are âinvented photographsâ by Antonin Artaud and Roger Vitrac, taken from a brochure produced by The Alfred Jarry Theatre in 1930. They were reproduced in *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works* Volume 2, London: John Calder, 1999.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Footnotes**

i Karl Marx, *Early Writing*, London: Pelican 1984, p.328. A discussion on species being by some members of the Internationalist Perspective group can be followed at, <http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/ip-archive/ip-archive.html>. The exchange was inaugurated by Rose in Issue 43 (2005). Thanks to N for this link.

ii Adapted from an interview by Tatiana Kondratovitch with Pierre Guyotat titled âArt is What Remains Of Historyâ. See *Frozen Tears*, Vol. 2, 2004. See likewise Franco Beradi saying â... the inhuman appears as the dominant form of human relationsâ. See his âObsession With Identity Fascismâ at [www.generation-online.org/p/fp\\_bifo3.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_bifo3.htm)

iii These role playing games are not a million miles away from Mastaneh Shah-Shujaâs notion, developed through a reading of Lev Vygotsky, that a Zone of Proletarian Development can be an âimaginary scenario where participants within a ZPD could actively reflect and expand on the debate

without feeling pressure to enact preconceived roles and positions.â See Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, *Zones of Proletarian Development*, London: Openmute, 2008, p.100.

iv Paolo Virno has touched on this too in the opening essay of his most recently translated book. Here, in talking of exodus, he says that an element in the dignity of exodus is entrusted to a willing confrontation with âthe murmurings, the dangerous instability of our speciesâ. See Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, Semiotext(e), 2008.

v In issue 48 of *Internationalist Perspective* Sander makes the interesting point that âthe cost of production of the workers as a subject of capital, as subjected to the law of value, not through coercion or even the constraints of the need to earn a living, but in his/her consciousness, values, beliefs culture [...] is a complex of issues that Marxism has undertheorised.â I wonder whether a hermetic Marxism is up to this task; a Marxism of the milieu that doesnât seem to take seriously those ramifications of real domination such as âbiopowerâ and âthe production of subjectivityâ that have been developed by Foucault, Guattari, Deleuze and latterly Negri?

vi Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, p.201.

vii Karl Marx, *ibid.*, p.390.

viii Movement away from the individualising dyad and towards a more social and interrelational therapy have always been a staple of group psychotherapy, but many practitioners in the one-to-one counselling sphere, regardless of discipline (i.e. Person Centred, Psychodynamic and Existential psychotherapies) are embracing whatâs been called the âsocially positioned individualâ. See the work of Gillian Proctor, Pete Sanders, Mick Cooper, Peter Schmid, Lewis Aron, Ernesto Spinelli etc. Some of this work is available from PCCS Books. See, <http://www.pccsbooks.co.uk/>

ix Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1995, p.25.

x âPierre Klossowski: Entre Marx et Fourierâ, extracted by Denis Hollier in the appendices of *College of Sociology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.389. The phrase âaffective classesâ is reported as arising when Benjamin was pressed by members of the College Of Sociology to describe his take on a âphalansterian revivalâ (i.e. a reassessment of Fourierâs utopian ideas). Klossowski reports: âSometimes he talked about it to us as if it were something "esoteric", simultaneously "erotic and artisanal", underlying his explicit Marxist conceptions. Having the means of production in common would permit substituting for the abolished classes a redistribution of society into affective classes. A freed industrial production, instead of mastering affectivity, would expand its forms and organise its exchanges, in the sense that work would be in collusion with lust, and cease to be the other punitive side of the coin.â

xi See *Call* (n.d.); Jacques RanciÃ“râs *Politics of Aesthetics*, New York: Continuum, 2004; Jonathan Bellerâs âVertov and the Film of Moneyâ at, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/boundary/v026/26.3beller.html>. Interestingly and in correspondence to some of the themes of this review-article, the anonymous authors of *Call* have suggested the idea of a âhuman strikeâ. This has also been mooted by the Claire Fontaine group. See their text âReady-Made Artist & the Human Strike: A Few Clarificationsâ at <http://www.clairefontaine.ws/text.html>. Thanks to A for this latter link.