

# Book Review

Corinne Maier, *Hello Laziness (Bonjour Paresse)*, translation by. D. Watson, Orion Books, London, 2005. 137pp. ISBN 0752871862. \$24.95 (paperback). Also published by Pantheon Books (translation by Sophie Hawkes). ISBN 0375423737.

Reviewed by Sarah Gregson\*

## Becoming a parasite – on the real workers

The advertising campaign around *Hello Laziness: Why Hard Work Doesn't Pay* made it seem like an exposé that no one interested in the world of work could afford to ignore. Written by a senior economist at a large French corporation, Corinne Maier's work, it was alleged, would put the knife into *homo economicus cretinus*, the deadly parasitical species that survives at the top of the corporate food chain on a diet of meaningless jargon. 'It is the book your boss will not want you to read', promised the jacket which, the burgeoning sales figures would suggest, has not deterred buyers.

Although it has all been done before, many readers will enjoy the cynical humour and the well-aimed jibes at management hyperbole contained in this book. It is not difficult to identify with Maier's sense of alienation towards working life and I found myself nodding vigorously when she complains, 'companies aren't funky or exciting. They're boring and sometimes cruel.' In what she calls 'the marriage of stupidity and hypocrisy' aimed at putting a gloss over the harsh reality of corporate life, Maier indicts managers for multi-layered dishonesty, from the relatively harmless 'our people are our greatest asset' or 'we welcome your ideas' to the more direct lies, 'I haven't heard any rumours' and 'I have an open-door

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policy'. Having recently listened to an invited speaker exhort new university graduates to protect themselves as a 'brand' with a market value, I found that Maier's dig at business guru, Tom Peters, for propagandising the notion of the self as an enterprise also struck a chord.

In response to this managerialist onslaught, Maier urges the disaffected among us to 'poison the system from within', by engaging in a little industrial sabotage – doing as little as humanly possible and never, ever volunteering to take on new responsibility. To my mind, this is the real reason that the book has become so popular, not because of the quality of its analysis, but because the mere whisper of criticism against hard work has become so heretical in our globalised, hip-happenin' society that it creates an instant shock wave. However, the book's main weakness is its failure to offer anything to the millions of workers around the world who do the real work; indeed, Maier directs her argument explicitly to middle managers like herself whose contribution to productivity figures, even she admits, is not great. In her view, much middle management work is meaningless 'impression creation' and when she suggests that nobody would notice if her clique did stop producing reports full of mindless gobbledygook, going to pointless seminars and developing protocols, it is difficult to disagree.

Maier's book contains a number of patronising stereotypes about real workers that will, I suspect, irritate the many working-class readers who buy this book hoping for some recipes for resistance. Maier paints a picture of the workers around her as mindless drones, who don't read much, are unaware of their exploitation as 'slaves of the service sector' and aspire to little more than a heavily mortgaged house in the suburbs. Indeed, bludging on these workers is the key to Maier's 'revolutionary' advice. 'If you're going to skive, you need someone else to do the work', she advises, so it is important to be nice to the temps, contract workers and others at the bottom of the ladder who do not have the job security to opt out – they provide the cover. For her, opting out means making yourself a complete pain in the backside to work with. '[R]espond by becoming a parasite ... a dead weight, a wash-out, a permanent misfit, impervious to manipulation', Maier urges. In addition, she sneers at those who eat together in the canteen, arrange Christmas parties and go to lunchtime drinks – all those little things that make a humdrum work existence a little less monotonous. In addition, despite her exposure of the empty rhetoric that fills corporate promotional material, her own work is not free of meaningless generalisations – about 'human nature', 'the lazy French' and the disillusioned dinosaurs she calls trade unionists. For instance, she writes, 'Profit is a paradoxical notion: everyone talks about it, but no one knows exactly what it is.' From an economist especially, this is simply sub-standard.

Maybe, in truth, she wants to opt out of her job because she is not very good at it!

At a few points in the book, Maier remembers a little of her 1960s past about workers and social transformation – ‘the day the workers make a splash, the big fish will drown’, she says cryptically. But pessimism about the prospects for change is the dominant tone of her writing. ‘It’s pointless trying to change the system’, she pontificates. ‘The aim is to shuffle the cards without changing the dealer.’ In this regard, Maier is no different from the hundreds of other middle-class, would-be vigneron and truffle merchants who urge us to totter off to a rustic French village for a more meaningful life – a panacea possible for only the privileged few. And while her risky advice might get *you* the sack, she’s très bien, Jacques. When her employers at Electricité de France threatened her with disciplinary measures for organisational disloyalty, she was in a position to thumb her nose at their threats. ‘I only work part-time and devote the rest of my week to other, more exciting activities’, she boasts – aside from writing books, she runs a successful practice in psychoanalysis.

In a review by *Boss* magazine, much is made of Maier’s job security and how her employers will have difficulty getting rid of her. That just makes her book downright dangerous in Australia – here, I can imagine her book becoming little more than grist to the mill for those who would like to remove unfair dismissal protections.