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WORDS

Slacker madness

Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America

Tom Lutz

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

by
Shawn A. Miller

Slackers haven't always been with us; they are a recent phenomenon. Idlers on the other hand, well, that's another story, and it's told, along with numerous others, by Tom Lutz in his nuanced and diverting book, *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America*.

"Only in the late 1980s and the early 1990s did 'slacker' become what it is today, the widely used term for someone with a distaste for work," Lutz writes.

A distaste for work, of course, isn't a novel attitude. That's sort of the point of Lutz's book. The slacker is unique in that he is a "deeply ironic figure," writes Lutz. "His melancholy is assuaged only by the comedy he finds in his own depressed debility."

Not all slackers are melancholy, however.

Nor are all idlers, loungers, romantics, loafers, drifters, bohemians, tramps, flappers, beats, surfers or hippies. Each of these groups—which Lutz, somewhat inconsistently, includes under the broader, contemporary heading of slacker—has its own unique history and distinctive features.

Lutz's thesis in *Doing Nothing* is that "slackers appear when [the] world is objectively changing. From the 18th century, when the slacker figure appears as a response to the Industrial Revolution, to the recent response to the

Information Revolution, slackers make big news whenever the world of work undergoes serious structural change."

The history of the slacker is thus, paradoxically, the history of work.

The slacker's first incarnation comes at the hands of English essayist Samuel Johnson in the form of the idler in the late 1750s. The idler is a reaction against the work ethic articulated by Johnson's contemporary Benjamin Franklin whose "early to bed, early to rise" aphorisms still hold sway today. Whereas Franklin preached a religion of industry and accumulation, the idler cast suspicion on such striving.

One of America's first slackers—a loungeur by Lutz's classification—was Joseph Dennie, who was a child during the American Revolution. Dennie lazed his way through Harvard with unhidden contempt for the "race of jackasses" and "stupid pedants" who hassled him and made his education difficult. He thus added a crucial aspect to the slacker persona—a disdain for authority and the status quo.

Next came the loafers in the late 1880s. These were largely unhappy wage slaves, those who drank on the job and felt oppressed by brutalizing manual labor. In Lutz's estimation, "the

alienated worker is not someone inherently lazy; people do not become slackers because of their character but because of circumstance."

Bohemians also arrive on scene around this time as artists with no money and no aspiration for work. They sleep on couches and get by on handouts much like tramps, hobos and bums, three distinct categories for Lutz.

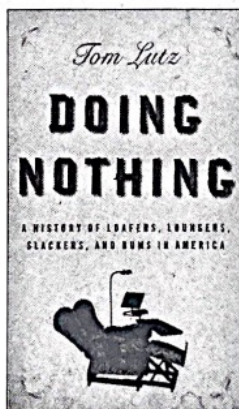
F. Scott Fitzgerald heralds in the era of flapper disillusionment in the 1920s. And Jack Kerouac "brought the non-comedic, depressive, alienated aspects of the slacker figure to the fore."

The slacker is unique in that he is a "deeply ironic figure," writes Lutz. "His melancholy is assuaged only by the comedy he finds in his own depressed debility."

Lutz's book runs out of steam by the time he arrives at the modern slacker—the slacker proper, as it were. He offers numerous contemporary cultural touchstones to illustrate the new self-conscious, ironic slackerism, which are relevant and fill out the picture. But I think he misses the mark entirely, for instance, when he holds up Anna Nicole Smith and her reality show as paradigmatic modern slackerism. The grotesqueness of Smith's life has more to do with celebrity than slacking.

And Lutz's conclusion that "the figure of the slacker needs to mean different things to different people at different times in order to serve its complex function as a goad to examining our relation to work, as a role to adopt while finding our relation to work. It's also a critique of our culture's twisty twisty relation to work and to leisure, and as a celebration of the same" is a bit mealy mouthed for my taste.

But even if Lutz's conclusions are tentative and suspect, his book is an edifying and worthwhile read because of the lively and interesting history it presents. □

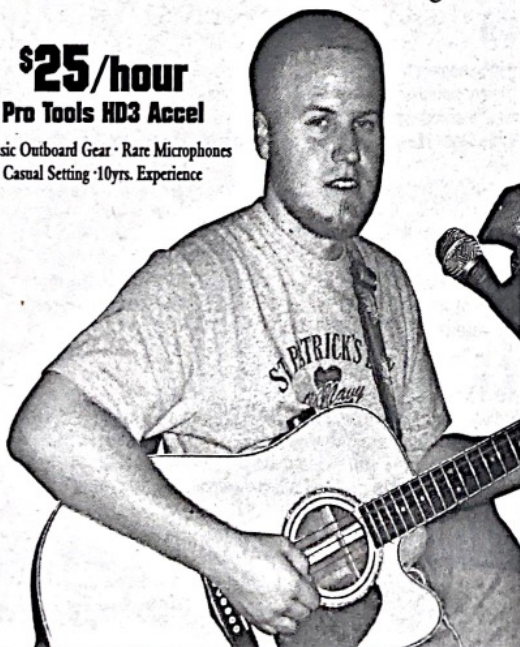


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Untitled

I love the trees of Sacramento,
the Delta breeze
on a summer evening,
the stars at night
that keep me company
when I miss the city.

—Danny Romero
Sacramento