

2001

SLACK

(That Sweet Smell Of Havanarchy)

Years ago, when I was doing research for my first book *The Huifkar. A History of a Cigar Factory and its Workers* (1988), I was struck by the admiration for the craftsmanship of Cuban cigar manufacturers, as expressed by local workers within Dutch cigar factories. Although Huifkar-cigars made their way to the Russian Czar and to nazi's like Herman Goering, however, they were never able to really compete with that fine Cuban work of art: the Havana-cigar. Within the history of the Dutch working class, cigar manufacturers have been famous for their very independent workers organizations and their sympathy for political anarchism. Growing up in a small town with many cigar factories, my friends and I were frequently called 'cigar makers' by older conservative citizens. As a term of abuse, 'cigar makers' referred to youngsters who were identified by public opinion as slackers, fuck-ups and rebels. As punk rockers and psychedelic warriors, my circle of friends was delighted and in full effect we embraced the local negative identity of the cigar maker. This joyful experience made us dig deeper into the local history of cigar manufacturing. Consequently, we built up a vocabulary of slack, based on local social practices, like Blue Monday, vagabondism and alcoholism, to mention only a few typical practices, shared by many cigar manufacturers. Their love for free speech and free love, their distrust of bosses and priests, and their thirst for alcohol and adventure, turned cigar manufacturers into the true predecessors of late 20th century underground subcultures.

This wide range of slack practices served as a clandestine assault on the feudal factory system: if you are not allowed to participate in work or society, you will fight for that right. However, if you are forced to participate, you will answer with slack. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the industrial medium of the factory no longer provides the dominant model in Dutch society and economy. As a post-industrial nation, our New Economy is shifting towards a neo-feudal society. For 24 hours a day we are expected to tap into the digital matrix. Unfortunately, from the management's point of view, it is very tempting for digital workers to dedicate time to personal surfing of the web while at work. Underneath Newconomy's cosmetics, a new generation of cigar makers is turning slack into a giant social threat to the institution of work.

One of my favourite divining-rods in the present mediaspora is modernhumorist.com - an artists collective, dedicated to 'Propaganda in the Internet Age'. Last year they produced 'A Message from the Management', a series of billboards and posters that reflect on the unstoppable rise of slack in the workplace. Originally, a slacker is synonymous with a lazy person. In the world of business and economy, however, slack is regarded as the total amount of yearly expenses, caused by fraud, sabotage, abuse of collective securities, fainted illnesses and the use of means of production for one's own purposes. In my definition of slack, I crossed both notions: a slacker is a person who enlarges his own space and time within the space and time owned by the company he works for. Focussing on the German workplace, the American weekly *Time* (11 September 2000) provides a clear example of slack in contemporary society:

"Last month over 6 million U.K. fans turned in their televisions to see a crucial episode of the hit 'reality' series *Big Brother*. But an estimated 1.5 million people had already watched that segment via the Internet. Many of them had done so at work, compliments of their employers' broadband Internet connections. Managers' suspicions that their staff may be doing more than market research online have just been confirmed again in a recent study by the Dusseldorf branch of software company Sterling Commerce. It estimates that German companies lose almost \$50 billion each year through employees' personal surfing of the web while at work. Sterling surveyed 1,000 German companies and found that more than 60% of all employees with desktop Internet access go online at least once a day for non-business reasons. And that on average they spend 3.2 hours a week of company time online".

All commentators admit this is a very low estimation - slack has become an undeniable social aspect of our digital economy. In 1988 I was expelled as a member of a Dutch trade union for joining a faction that believed that contemporary social struggles in the workplace were no longer struggles for the reorganization of labor and the workplace (the classic scenario of socialism and unionism), but struggles against the institution of work itself. The famous analyses of the 1974 essay *The Organization of Labor versus The Revolt Against Work*, written by former unionist John Zerzan, fuelled underground ideas and gave rise to an intellectual and activist critique of work, culminating in blasphemous titles, like *The Abolition of Work*, *Sabotage in the American Workplace*, *Slackers Like Us*, *Temp Slave!* and *The End of Work* - underground bestsellers in the nineties. This hausse was supported by techno entrepreneurs like William S. Burroughs, Arthur C. Clark and William Gibson. Although this abolition movement started out as a countercultural strategy, highlighted in underground philosophies of the Church of the SubGenius, in dub, punk rock and techno raves, however, today the practice of slack has become a major source of conscious & unconscious resistance in the (digital) workplace.

Until the nineties, a slacker kept quiet about his or her clandestine activities. However, more recently, slackers are coming out and the subject of using the company's means of production for one's own intentions have become a more public affair - as also shown above in Sterling's survey in Germany. For several years now I discuss the subject of slack. Several months ago, I raised the issue at an international conference on Housing & Planning in Rotterdam. Nobody - of course - was involved in slack themselves, however, they all knew colleagues who slack around. The five most popular reasons to surf of the web while at work were these:

- * visiting *Big Brother* online;
- * MP3 downloading of digitally stored music;
- * surfing through porn sites;
- * playing computer games;
- * keeping in contact with one's personal networks.

Since the downfall of traditional unionism and the unemployment-movement, combined with the rise of shitty jobs in McDonald's restaurants or behind computer screens, the whole issue of slack has not only become a permanent threat to companies and managements, but to workers councils, trade unions and political workers parties as well. The slacker is on his own. Again, slack is the shadow casted by work, and it is

manifested there where people are forced to participate. Especially digital workers are offered numerous possibilities to use the means of production for their own sake.

But there's a much more interesting aspect I want to discuss with you here: within the framework of forced labour, matrixes of slacker networks and activities turn out to become more and more important for economic, social, cultural, artistic and virtual innovations. If I were an old skool-utopian, I would envisage the boundaries of horizontal economies and communities within the structures of our vertical and hierarchical society. If I were to define a revolution by the amount of collective access to means of production, as Marxists tend to do, than an untelevised revolution is taking place right now. The late 80's revolt of Eastern Europe was due to information and communication technology workers, who used their bosses' space, time and equipment to spread the word of resurrection and to co-ordinate activities against the communist regimes. In other words, it was slack that destroyed the Iron Curtain. Slack should be defined as 'passionate indifference'. This strange mixture of indifference (towards work and the workplace) and passion (for one's own desires) has major implications for the institution of work. Notions like 'digital amateurism' or 'pleasurable dillitantism' spread quickly over the Net and these concepts refer directly to the concept and practice of slack. In popular culture, the rise of slacker movies (*Office Space*), comics (*Hate*) and fanzines (*Temp Slave!*) have created a new genre of social fiction.

I am aware that raising the issue of slack is provocative, however, I am convinced that the subject deserves more attention as it speaks about a social contemporary phenomenon that is so intertwined with our digital society. I am also aware that further research will be able to question or confirm my general ideas on slack. To expand my research to different regions of the world, I would like discuss slack with workers in Havana - this famous cigar manufacturing city. I would be delighted if you could answer the following questions:

- * What role does slack play in contemporary social struggles in Cuba?
- * In what ways will the intertwined ness of intimacy (slack) and intimidation (work) infect present Cuban economy and culture?
- * Which Cuban social and cultural practices are a direct result of slack?

Yours in slack.