

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Reclaiming the Good Life (Now!)

Jane Hindley

Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Idle*, Penguin, 2005.

Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Free*, Penguin, 2007.

*Idleness does not consist in doing nothing but in doing a great deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class.*

—R.L. Stephenson, “An Apology for Idlers,” 1881

*...there are new enemies of leisure today. Hunger and God have been replaced in the consumer age by possessions and status. The advertising industry leads us to believe that life will be improved by the purchase of a product. The purchase of a product requires money. Money requires hard work. Or debt. We go into debt to chase our desires, and then keep working to pay the debt. It's the modern form of indentured labor.*

—Hodgkinson, *How to be Idle*

Stop working, start living! Tom Hodgkinson has been on a soap box spreading this message around Britain for over a decade now—in parallel to the slow movement in Italy and the work-less campaigns in North America. Since co-founding *The Idler*, a bi-annual magazine, in 1993, he has become a presence on national radio and at local festivals, as well as an occasional columnist for newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Independent on Sunday*, and *The Sunday Times*. His two recent books, *How to be Idle* and *How to be Free*, have both become bestsellers.

You won't find words like neoliberalism or systemic in either of these manifestos-cum-manuals for good living. Nor will you come across concepts such as commodification, alienation and estrangement—although much of the argument could be framed in these terms. Hodgkinson writes from within a different tradition and in a different register. He belongs to an unorthodox line of English essayists and pamphleteers, which includes Dr. Johnson, Tom Paine, William Blake, William Morris, D.H. Lawrence, and George Orwell; and his prose is suffused with a sense of irony that has long typified English satirists and comedians.

*How to be Idle* has two purposes: to celebrate idleness and to attack the “work culture of the Western world that has enslaved, demoralized and depressed so many of us.” It proclaims the pleasures of idleness: of contemplation and reflection; of lounging around, napping and day-dreaming; of “languid” rather than “muscular” sex; of fishing, smoking and drinking; and of conversation and having a laugh. These are the good things in life, Hodgkinson asserts. While doing so, he lampoons the armory of norms, rules, and moral myths drummed into most of us from early childhood that train us to endure the drudgery of work-dominated lives. Why feel *guilty* about lying in bed? What is intrinsically *virtuous* about getting up early or working a long day? Such sentiments and beliefs are the dour legacy of a pleasure-denying Puritanism that dates back to the Protestant Reformation.

*How to be Idle* is a very funny book, which made me laugh out loud. It's an irrepressible stream of a text, in which anecdote, aphorism and verse from sources as diverse as the Bible, Henry Miller and Robert Burns flow together with observations from the author's personal experience and contributions to *The Idler*. By presenting choice extracts from the “canon of idle writing,” Hodgkinson buttresses his case and supplies role models to encourage the would-be idler. Montaigne, for example, so appreciated sleep that he arranged to be woken every night so he could “savor the feeling of sleepiness” and enjoy drifting off again. And of course God (as Paul Lafargue observed) set a great example: he worked intensively for six days and then

rested for all eternity. Moreover, popular dissent and protest against the work ethic and its manifestations in law and social policy goes back to Tudor times.

*How to be Free* picks up where *How to be Idle* left off. It is based on the realization that “to be idle is to be free”; and by this Hodgkinson means both free from and free to. This sequel is a more overtly anti-capitalist book. It is written from a stance that blends anarchism, medievalism and existentialism into “a philosophy of everyday life.” Hodgkinson’s starting point is that “the Western world has allowed freedom, merriment and responsibility to be taken away from it, from ourselves.” In their place we have “greed, competition, lonely striving, greyness, debts, McDonald’s and Glaxo Smith Kline.” But, he asserts, we don’t have to collude in this. We *are* free. We *can* take responsibility, exercise our freedom, have fun, and live more colorful, varied, lives. His aim is to explain how: “my intention is to show you how to remove the mind forg’d manacles and become free to create your own life.”

This is a book designed to rouse us to action. It is a call to wake up and see through the claim that we need money, property, and career to live a good life. For Hodgkinson, this claim is absurd. It’s a myth that shackles (all but a few of) us to “work-slavery,” “shopping-slavery,” and debt, while inducing anxiety, guilt and fear. His message is cast off the bonds of work-mortgage-consumption, reorient your desires away from status and possessions, and you’ll soon find that it is feasible to live very cheaply *and* enjoy life much more. In making his case, Hodgkinson discusses alternative philosophies ranging from Schumacher and Morris to the 1960s back-to-the-landers and punks. He also enthusiastically presents a host of practical tips on how to get organized. The point is not withdrawal into self-sufficient communities. Rather it’s to pursue a bundle of complementary livelihood strategies that reduce reliance on money: work a three-day week, grow your own vegetables, forget about gadgets, bake your own bread, play the ukelele, ride a bike, use free-cycle, make compost, enjoy the washing up! Many of these recommendations replicate those to be found in manuals on ethical or green living. But Hodgkinson makes it sound fun, rather than a moral duty.

In sum, in *How to be Idle* and *How to be Free*, Hodgkinson overturns dominant values, norms and practices and in the spirit of the fool proclaims there *is* an alternative. It is this spirit that makes reading these two books so refreshing. Hodgkinson’s approach contrasts with the tone of denunciation that often pervades anti-capitalist writing. It also discloses the limitations of recent social science analyses. Zygmunt Bauman’s *Consuming Life*, for example, gives a brilliant description of contemporary consumer culture. Yet, because he gives no attention to cracks in the system and how we might escape or challenge it, the reader is left with a deep sense of powerlessness. In the case of Richard Layard’s *Happiness*, which typifies a mainstream policy approach, the weaknesses are more obvious. This high-profile book is so premised on dominant norms that it makes no mention of the long-hours work culture and personal investment in job/career as causes of contemporary malaises. Instead Layard analyzes the effects (family breakdown, incivility, fear, crime, mental illness) as discrete phenomena before reaching the banal conclusion that we need more funding for cognitive behavioral therapy and clinical drugs.

This isn’t to suggest that there are no flaws or weaknesses in Hodgkinson’s approach. I found his medieval nostalgia and his blithe advocacy of a three-estate social order hard to swallow. Likewise, the equation of socialism with grim Soviet regimes and the odd, caricatured reference to Marx were irritating (especially as Hodgkinson’s attack on the division of labor and his vision of the good life echo those of *The German Ideology*). A further problem is that in places, *How to be Free* comes across as a very middle-class book. Hodgkinson is right in suggesting that if we learn a trade we, can live on the earnings of a three-day week. But, given the costs of housing in the U.K., it is difficult to see how people on minimum wages or low-paid service jobs could make ends meet.

Still, if we adopt a pluralist approach to counterhegemonic strategies, *How to Be Idle* and *How to Be Free* are welcome interventions. These two books have punctured the mainstream U.K. media at a time when neoliberal orthodoxies are deeply entrenched. Moreover, Hodgkinson’s style means they are accessible

to readers from a wide range of backgrounds. So they may be valuable for introducing younger generations to a set of classics largely displaced from social science and humanities curricula in universities. Right now, calls for changes in lifestyles that appeal to ethical sensibilities in terms of social or ecological justice are failing. It may just be the case that Hodgkinson's alternative hedonism, by appealing to innate desires for happiness, may be a more effective catalyst.