

E Pluribus Unabomber

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Ned Ludd, the mysterious and probably mythical leader of the rebellion that shook the North of England in 1811 and 1812—would have understood the Unabomber. In Ludd’s name, masked bands of cottage hand weavers and combers rose up against the new machines that were displacing them; they smashed power looms and burned down textile mills. The authorities retaliated by making the destruction of machinery a capital crime. By 1813, twenty-four of the Luddites, as they came to be called, had been hanged.

The Unabomber combines the views of the Luddites with the cruelty of their repressors: to him, industrialism is not only an offense but an offense punishable by death. Since 1978, in sixteen incidents, he has killed three people, and injured twenty-three. The Unabomber says, grandiosely, that his aim is to destroy high-technology industrialism by terrorizing its leading agents—particularly the scientists and engineers who are indispensable to it—and, ultimately, to bring about a return to a civilization of “small, autonomous communities.” In his manifesto, excerpts from which appeared last week in the *Times* and the *Washington Post*, he writes that industrial society has damaged nature, generated numerous social pathologies, and robbed people of dignity, autonomy, and power over their lives while manipulating their behavior to make them consent to their enslavement. It’s an utterly one-sided picture but not an altogether inaccurate one.

The Unabomber is thought to be a solitary terrorist, but he is not alone in his dissatisfaction with industrial society. There has long been a kind of Unabomber strain in the West’s ambivalence about the science and technology that have given it so much of its power. The Enlightenment welcomed science for its promise of liberation from superstition and want. For a growing number of educated people during the century and a half following the Luddite rebellion, however, the promise soured. Though the Promethean power of the machine had its enthusiasts, of course, critics indicted it for producing not only technological unemployment but also the depersonalization and regimentation of work, the despoliation of nature, and, finally, the indiscriminate slaughter of total war.

All those things were mainly consequences of the exploitation of physics and chemistry, but since the nineteen-seventies the indictment has been widened to encompass the technologies of information and of life, including the cutting-edge fields of computer science and molecular genetics. Technology is now blamed not only for its dramatic disasters—Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, Bhopal and the Exxon Valdez—but also for the insidious, alienating replacement of conversation and community by television-watching and net-surfing. In “Rebels Against the Future,” a recent book celebrating the Luddites, Kirkpatrick Sale, a respected environmentalist and historian, decries computers in words the Unabomber might admire: “It is the computer and those who feed and handle it who reign supreme,” for “control of information is control of power.” In a half-dozen public forums, Sale has turned conviction into performance art by sledgehammering a computer to pieces.

And the accelerating revolution in the biomedical sciences has drawn similar attacks from many quarters. Jeremy Rifkin's books and lectures condemn what he sees as a desacralization of life resulting from the exploitation of genetic science by commercial biotechnology. There are religious leaders who assail the manipulation of genes as an exercise in hubris against the order of God's universe, feminists who attack the new reproductive technologies as turning women into mere babymaking machines, and animal-rights activists who trash biomedical research laboratories and oppose the use of organs from animals for human transplants, as when a group chanted at a transplant center in Pittsburgh, "Animals are not spare parts!"

Neo-Luddism of this kind is essentially an elite phenomenon, but, as a glance at the summer's most popular movies suggests, the audience for its echoes is large. In "Waterworld," technological folly melts the polar ice caps, and outlaws on gas-guzzling jet skis menace the floating survivors. In "Apollo 13," old-fashioned grit and ingenuity save astronauts marooned by high-tech failure. In "The Net," computer networks become an instrument of evil. And in "Pocahontas" a child of nature does her best to enlighten the technologically superior but morally inferior English colonists.

The critique of high-technology industrial civilization appeals to almost all of us in one way or another, but that doesn't keep us from hungering for scientific marvels. The recent announcement by Amgen, Inc., that it had come up with an anti-obesity hormone using a gene extracted from mutant mice produced a deluge of telephone inquiries; many of the callers offered themselves for clinical trials. One person's technological outrage is another's miraculous salvation. "Do you know what it's like to have liver disease? Do you?" a hepatitis patient shouted at the animal-rights protesters in Pittsburgh, momentarily silencing them. Neo-Luddism's sympathizers a group that includes some of us all of the time and all of us some of the time—tend to be selective about disliking technology and its byproducts. Many a macrobiotic couple has spent thousands of dollars to conceive in a test tube, the airports are crowded with people trying to get to the wide-open spaces, and the folksinger who declines to release his environmental ballads on compact disk and cassette is a rare bird indeed.

In the end, few of us are likely to generalize our particular aversions into the Unabomber's proclaimed preference for the pre-industrial past. Stripped of the gauzy romanticism of myth, the pre-industrial village was for most people a place of exhausting and unremitting subsistence labor, harnessing men, women, and children to the mind-numbing tasks of farm and household. It subjected most of its inhabitants to local prejudices, enforced ignorance, and arbitrary power, while leaving them vulnerable to devastating diseases and early death. For all our ambivalence about high-technology industrialism, most of us don't want to live in a society like that. Maybe the Unabomber—who is so desperate to have his screeds digitally type-set and printed on the high-speed, forest-fed, electric-powered presses of major newspapers that he is willing to kill for it—doesn't really want to, either. ☒

The Ted K Archive

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