

Rebels Against the Future: Lessons from the Luddites

Kirkpatrick Sale

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Industrial civilization is today the water we swim in, and we seem almost as incapable of imagining what an alternative might look like, or even realizing that an alternative could exist, as fish in the ocean.

The political task of resistance today, then—beyond the “quiet acts” of personal withdrawal Mumford urges—is to try to make the culture of industrialism and its assumptions less invisible and to put the issue of its technology on the political agenda, in industrial societies as well as their imitators. In the words of Neil Postman, a professor of communications at New York University and author of *Technopoly*, “it is necessary for a great debate” to take place in industrial society between “technology and everybody else” around all the issues of the “uncontrolled growth of technology” in recent decades. This means laying out as clearly and fully as possible the costs and consequences of our technologies, in the near term and long, so that even those overwhelmed by the ease/comfort/speed/power of high-tech gadgetry (what Mumford called technical “bribery”) are forced to understand at what price it all comes and who is paying for it. What purpose does this machine serve? What problem has become so great that it needs this solution? Is this invention nothing but, as Thoreau put it, an improved means to an unimproved end? It also means forcing some awareness of who the principal beneficiaries of the new technology are—they tend to be the large, bureaucratic, complex, and secretive organizations of the industrial world—and trying to make public all the undemocratic ways they make the technological choices that so affect all the rest of us. Who are the winners, who the losers? Will this concentrate or disperse power, encourage or discourage self-worth? Can society at large afford it? Can the biosphere?

Ultimately this “great debate” of course has to open out into wider questions about industrial society itself, its values and purposes, its sustainability. It is no surprise that the Luddites were unable to accomplish this in the face of an immensely self-satisfied laissez-faire plutocracy whose access to means of forcing debates and framing issues was considerably greater than theirs. Today, though, that task ought not to be so difficult—in spite of the continued opposition of a plutocracy grown only more powerful and complacent—particularly because after two centuries it is now possible to see the nature of industrial civilization and its imperiling direction so much more clearly.

Certain home-truths are beginning to be understood, at least in most industrial societies, by increasing numbers of people: some of the fish at least not only seem to be seeing the water but realizing it is polluted. Industrialism, built upon machines designed to exploit and produce for human betterment alone, is on a collision course with the biosphere. Industrial societies, which have shown themselves capable of creating material abundance for a few and material improvement for many, are nonetheless shot through with inequality, injustice, instability, and incivility, deficiencies that seem to increase rather than decrease with technical advancement. Industrialism does not stand superior, on any level other than physical comfort and power and a problematic longevity of life, to many other societies in the long range of the human experi-

ment, particularly those, morally based and earth-regarding, that did serve the kind of “apprenticeship to nature” that Herbert Read saw as the proper precondition to technology.

Say what you will about such tribal societies, the record shows that they were (and in some places still are) units of great cohesion and sodality, of harmony and regularity, devoid for the most part of crime or addiction or anomie or poverty or suicide, with comparatively few needs and those satisfied with a minimum of drudgery, putting in on average maybe four hours a day per person on tasks of hunting and gathering and cultivating, the rest of the time devoted to song and dance and ritual and sex and eating and stories and games... No, they did not have the power of 500 servants at the flick of a switch or turn of a key, but then they did not have atomic bombs and death camps, toxic wastes, traffic jams, strip mining, organized crime, psychosurgery, advertising, unemployment or genocide.

To propose, in the midst of the “great debate,” that such societies are exemplary, instructive if not imitable, is not to make a romanticized “search for the primitive.” It is rather to acknowledge that the tribal mode of existence, precisely because it is naturebased, is consonant with the true, underlying needs of the human creature, and that we denigrate that mode and deny those needs to our loss and disfigurement. It is to suggest that certain valuable things have been left behind as we have sped headlong down the tracks of industrial progress and that it behooves us, in a public and spirited way, to wonder about what we have gained from it all and reflect upon what we have lost. And it is, finally, to assert that some sort of ecological society, rooted in that ancient animistic, autochthonous tradition, must be put forth as the necessary, achievable goal for human survival and harmony on earth.

Philosophically, resistance to industrialism must be embedded in an analysis—an ideology, perhaps—that is morally informed, carefully articulated, and widely shared.

One of the failures of Luddism (if at first perhaps one of its strengths) was its formlessness, its unintentionality, its indistinctness about goals, desires, possibilities. Movements acting out of rage and outrage are often that way, of course, and for a while there is power and momentum in those alone. For durability, however, they are not enough, they do not sustain a commitment that lasts through the adversities of repression and trials, they do not forge a solidarity that prevents the infiltration of spies and stooges, they do not engender strategies and tactics that adapt to shifting conditions and adversaries, and they do not develop analyses that make clear the nature of the enemy and the alternatives to put in its place.

Now it would be difficult to think that neo-Luddite resistance, whatever form it takes, would be able to overcome all those difficulties, particularly on a national or international scale: commitment and solidarity are mostly products of face-to-face, day-to-day interactions, unities of purpose that come from unities of place. But if it is to be anything more than sporadic and martyristic, resistance could learn from the Luddite experience at least how important it is to work out some common analysis

that is morally clear about the problematic present and the desirable future, and the common strategies that stem from it.

All the elements of such an analysis, it seems to me, are in existence, scattered and still needing refinement, perhaps, but there: in Mumford and Schumacher and Wendell Berry and Jerry Mander and the Chellis Glendinning manifesto; in the writing of the Earth Firsters and the bioregionalists and deep ecologists; in the lessons and models of the Amish and the Irokwa; in the wisdom of tribal elders and the legacy of tribal experience everywhere; in the work of the long line of dissenters-from-progress and naysayers-to-technology. I think we might even be able to identify some essentials of that analysis, such as:

Industrialism, the ethos encapsulating the values and technologies of Western civilization, is seriously endangering stable social and environmental existence on this planet, to which must be opposed the values and techniques of an organic ethos that seeks to preserve the integrity, stability, and harmony of the biotic community, and the human community within it.

Anthropocentrism, and its expression in both humanism and monotheism, is the ruling principle of that civilization, as to which must be opposed the principle of biocentrism and the spiritual identification of the human with all living species and systems.

Globalism, and its economic and military expression, is the guiding strategy of that civilization, to which must be opposed the strategy of localism, based upon the empowerment of the coherent bioregion and the small community.

Industrial capitalism, as an economy built upon the exploitation and degradation of the earth, is the productive and distributive enterprise of that civilization, to which must be opposed the practices of an ecological and sustainable economy built upon accommodation and commitment to the earth and following principles of conservation, stability, self-sufficiency, and cooperation.

A movement of resistance starting with just those principles as the sinews of analysis would at least have a firm and uncompromising ground on which to stand and a clear and inspirational vision of where to go. If nothing else, it would be able to live up to the task that George Grant, the Canadian philosopher, has set this way: "The darkness which envelops the Western world because of its long dedication to the overcoming of chance"—by which he means the triumph of the scientific mind and its industrial constructs—"is just a fact. The job of thought in our time is to bring into the light that darkness as darkness." And at its best, it might bring into the light the dawn that is the alternative

If the edifice of industrial civilization does not eventually crumble as a result of a determined resistance within its very walls, it seems certain to crumble of its own accumulated excesses and instabilities within not more than a few decades, perhaps sooner, after which there may be space for alternative societies to arise.

The two chief strains pulling this edifice apart, environmental overload and social dislocation, are both the necessary and inescapable results of an industrial civilization.

In some sense, to be sure, they are the results of *any* civilization: the record of the last five thousand years of history clearly suggests that every single preceding civilization has perished, no matter where or how long it has been able to flourish, as a result of its sustained assault on its environment, usually ending in soil loss, flooding, and starvation, and a successive distension of all social strata, usually ending in rebellion, warfare, and dissolution. Civilizations, and the empires that give them shape, may achieve much of use and merit—or so the subsequent civilization’s historians would have us believe—but they seem unable to appreciate scale or limits, and in their growth and turgid- ity cannot maintain balance and continuity within or without. Industrial civilization is different only in that it is now much larger and more powerful than any known before, by geometric differences in all dimensions, and its collapse will be far more extensive and thoroughgoing, far more calamitous.

It is possible that such a collapse will be attended by environmental and social dislocations so severe that they will threaten the continuation of life, at least human life, on the surface of the planet, and the question then would be whether sufficient numbers survive and the planet is sufficiently hospitable for scattered human communities to emerge from among the ashes. But it is also possible that it will come about more by decay and distension, the gradual erosion of nation-state arrangements made obsolete and unworkable, the disintegration of corporate behemoths unable to comprehend and respond, and thus with the slow resurrection and re-empowerment of small bioregions and coherent communities having control over their own political and economic destinies. In either case, it will be necessary for the survivors to have some body of lore, and some vision of human regeneration, that instructs them in how thereafter to live in harmony with nature and how and why to fashion their technologies with the restraints and obligations of nature intertwined, seeking not to conquer and dominate and control the species and systems of the natural world—for the failure of industrialism will have taught the folly of that—but rather to understand and obey and love and incorporate nature into their souls as well as their tools.

It is now the task of the neo-Luddites, armed with the past, to prepare, to preserve, and to provide that body of lore, that inspiration, for such future generations as may be.

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