

The Luddites Are Back

To resist or not to resist, that is the question

Monika Bauerlein

March 1, 1996

When the English weavers who called themselves Luddites began rioting and destroying mechanized looms in the early part of the 19th century, they were met with the full force of the democratic state and 14,000 soldiers. When writer and self-described Neo-Luddite Kirkpatrick Sale took a sledgehammer to a computer on the stage of an *Utne Reader* forum in January 1995, however, not a single cop showed up. Sale's action, as he and everyone else knew, was strictly performance; so, in a creepier sense, were the killings-by-mail by the man the FBI calls the Unabomber. Neo-Luddism got a lot of attention at the time of the publication of the Bomber's 35,000-word screed, which made the best-seller lists in an unauthorized, unabridged edition (*The Unabomber Manifesto*, Jolly Roger Press). Then the headline writers moved on to other topics, barely having touched on the fact that—theatrics aside—the Bomber isn't the only one having second thoughts about industrial technology.

One of the academics to whom the FBI circulated the essay was Sale, who—after accurately assessing the piece as "woodenly written, full of academic jargon and pop psychology, repetitive and ill-argued"—notes in *The Nation* (Sept. 25, 1995) that "the Unabomber and I share a great many views." In fact, "FC" (the signature on the manuscript that might stand for Freedom Collective or Fuck Computers) could have lifted some of his points directly out of Sale's books. Or, for that matter, from the writings of Jerry Mander, Chellis Glendinning, Jeremy Rifkin, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Neil Postman, Theodore Roszak, Dave Foreman, Langdon Winner, Stephanie Mills, or the myriad lesser-known writers whose work appears in publications like the anarchist/sustainable society mag *Fifth Estate*.

Luddism's comeback has been in the works for a while, though one label hardly describes the vastly different currents of technoskepsis stirring under the surface of the Second Industrial Revolution. There's an upscale, slightly nostalgic version focused on computer phobia and typified by the Lead Pencil Club, brainchild of New York publisher Bill Henderson; a forthcoming book called *Minutes of the Lead Pencil Club: Second Thoughts on the Electronic Revolution* (Pushcart Press) includes essays by the likes of Sven Birkerts (*The Gutenberg Elegies*), Clifford Stoll (*Silicon Snake Oil*), and (!) Ted Koppel. A less elegiac strain of the movement includes the growing number of people whose experience—losing jobs to automation, seeing their backyards poisoned by industrial waste—shoves the downside of "progress" in their faces. And then there's what *The New Yorker* called "the Luddite in all of us," the one who smirks slightly at hearing that corporate America is only very quietly admitting the billions it loses to sabotage from bored, creatively stifled, or justifiably pissed-off employees.

Thus far, the new Luddites—with the exception of Earth First's well-publicized monkeywrenchers—have been long on talk and short on action. One effort to start talking about what to *do* comes from Ohio's Scott Savage, editor of *Plain* magazine and director of the Center for Plain Living, who is working to pull together the Second Luddite Congress on April 25, the anniversary of the day that the first congress was declared by the original Luddites more than 180 years ago. Savage's goal is a "nonresistant Luddism" that would transform industrial society without confrontation;

it's hard to say whether it will have any more of a prayer than the original Luddites' machine-smashing. What's clear, though, is that someone, somewhere needs to start opening horizons beyond the "technology sucks" *vs.* "technology is groovy" mode that dominates current treatments of what the English weavers called "the machine question." For a particularly disturbing example, check out the debate between Sale and *Wired*'s Kevin Kelly (*Wired*, June 1995), which ended in the contestants' each committing a \$1,000 check to a bet on—note the subtlety here—whether technology will have saved or wrecked the world by 2020.

The Ted K Archive

Monika Bauerlein
The Luddites Are Back
To resist or not to resist, that is the question
March 1, 1996

<utne.com/science-and-technology/the-luddites-are-back-kirkpatrick-sale/>

www.thetedkarchive.com