

A New Luddite Rebellion

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"Welcome to the modern world. It's just like the old world, except it doesn't work."

—Peter Grey

My friend and I were both hungry; me perhaps a bit more so since I'd been traveling all day, hadn't eaten that morning and it was now mid-evening.

"I'll take you to dinner," I told him. "Somewhere close—maybe pizza."

"Okay," he answered, and then started looking at his phone. "This place has really good reviews. Just need to take two trains."

I was *really hungry*. "How long will that take?" I asked.

"45 minutes, maybe an hour."

I shook my head. "Seems far and will cost a lot to get there. Isn't there a place nearby?"

It was his turn to shake his head. "None with good reviews."

"I don't care," I answered, probably a bit too curtly. The hunger was irritating me greatly. "Let's just walk to one of them."

So we did, set out into the cold city night, finally coming to an Italian restaurant. I looked at the menu, the prices were decent. "Perfect," I said, turning to him.

"I can't find any reviews on Trip Advisor though," he answered. "But there's one about a mile from here with a lot of reviews..."

Exhausted and frustrated, I snapped back: "Food's food. I'm buying anyway...let's go in."

"But it might not be good," he replied, until suddenly seeing something on his phone that made him excited. "Nevermind, I found it. Good reviews, we can go in."

I've thought about this interaction very often since it happened a few months ago. My friend isn't stupid; in fact, he's very intelligent, and his magical insights into the world are often quite profound. Nor is he hardly alone in succumbing to the peculiar sort of paralysis of inaction I've recounted here. In fact, I suffer from it often too, as no doubt you likely do.

The desire to know if something is good before you try it, to want certainty about the uncertain—that's hardly a new thing. But what is new, deeply radically new, is our reliance on social media (and the corporations which run them) and technological devices to give us that certainty, to tell us it's going to be okay, to remove the risk that an action might not result in the absolute best conditions.

As with a night out at a restaurant or a date with a person met online, so too with any of the actions we might take towards revolution. We look to Tumblr and Twitter to gauge the sentiment of others, to divine if our groups and theories and plans are popular enough, have all the required sign-off's from every possible identity focus-group, and nod sagely when told *'that won't work'* by whichever correctly-branded social justice personality happened to come through our feed that particular minute.

We do not revolt because we might fail. People might get shot or imprisoned, vulnerable people might suffer more than they already do, police oppression might increase, and all that effort could be wasted forever. And though these fears have always been good fears, our reliance on technology for re-assurances of certainty has amplified our inaction. This is not a controversial statement: if many of us can barely try a new restaurant without relying on smartphones to take away the very minimal risk of an awful meal, why would we expect ourselves to face actual, real risk?

Those Satanic Mills

If you feel this way of critiquing technology seems bizarre, anti-modern, 'primitive,' or appears to ignore all the 'good' that technology has done, you might be tempted to describe all this as 'luddite.' And you'd be correct, and not in the ways most moderns have come to understand what the Luddites fought for.

The Luddites have always fascinated me. Men and women, sometimes cross-dressing, stealing into oppressive factories in the middle of the night to smash looms to stop production: that's quite hardcore, regardless of why they did it. Besides the awesome acts of industrial sabotage, however, two other aspects of what the followers of King (or Ned, or Captain) Ludd did two hundred years ago are extremely relevant to us now.

The first aspect is their anarcho-paganism. They all claimed to follow a ghostly captain or leader who urged them on their night-time strikes against the industrialists. The stories they told about exactly who He was varied just as often as their actions: Ludd lived under a hill, or in a well, or under a church, all three places not ironically located "somewhere" in Sherwood forest, where Robin of Locksley and his fellow rogues were said to hide. Ludd was a spirit, a king, or a general ("No General But Ludd/Means The Poor Any Good" went one of their chants), or just a captain amongst them, or even the ghost of a man named Ned Ludd (killed after sabotaging a factory, goes the stories). Like other similar groups such as the Whiteboys and Molly Maguires and Rebecas, the Luddites invoked the mythic against capitalists and the State to great effect, at least while their resistance lasted.

And that brings me to the third aspect of the Luddite resistance, the part which I find most haunting as another year on this earth passes for me (I'm 41 today, it seems). To explain this aspect, though, we need to step back a bit and look not just at the Luddites themselves but at the era in which they fought and the strange (and eerily familiar) historical circumstances which created the world around them.

If industrial capitalism has a specific birthdate and birthplace, it was 1769 in Derbyshire, England. It was in that year and in that place the very first modern factory was built by Richard Arkwright. The sound of the factory was compared to "the devil's bagpipes," a fact memorialized in this poem by Lorna Smithers:

When Richard Arkwright played the devil's bagpipes on Stoneygate a giant hush came over the town. The blistering whirring sound against the pink horizon of a sun that would not set over clear sights for two centuries of soot and smog was damnable. Yes damnable! Gathering in storm clouds over Snape Fell.

You who have seen a premonition might have heard the village seers tell of smoke for flesh charry knees and the squalor of shanty towns. Red brick mills turning satanic faces to the coin of their heliotropic sun: Empire.

Piecers running between generations bent legged beggars, tongue in cheek defiant. Weavers watching shuttles slipping through fingers like untamed flies. Luddites sweeping across greens with armaments and gritted teeth...

It took forty years for Arkwright's new terror, "those Satanic mills" as William Blake called them in 1804, to finally spark the resistance movement known as the Luddites. In that space of time, Arkwright's first mill multiplied into 2400 similar factories spread throughout England (mostly in the major cities), an average of 60 a year.

So, in two generations, Britain had gone from a place where there was no such thing as a factory to a place where there were several thousands. In four decades, an entire society which had started out knowing nothing about industrialization appeared to become irrevocably industrialised, and it was at that point the Luddites struck.

But why then? Why not before? And why fight what appeared to be inevitable?

Against The Modern World

We must first ignore the modern interpretation of what a Luddite is. They weren't 'anti-technology' or slow-to-adapt old people hopelessly left behind in a new world. Nor were they only concerned with fighting for better wages for weavers (who, before the factories, were able to support themselves and large families on the income from their specialized trade).

They were people close to my age and somewhat younger, the oldest people alive in Britain who could still remember the old world before factories, but still also young enough to actually work in them. They were a generation that stood on a threshold between the pre-industrial world and the new industrial capitalist order.

Imagine if you will what it must have been like to see your parents and the older people in your villages, towns, and cities starving because they could not or would not adapt to this brave new world. Many of them were too old, feeble, or weak-sighted to work in the factories, and anyway the factory owners preferred children as young as five to do much of the nimble work (and they couldn't fight back). So while you see the older generation starving and destitute, you also see your own children or younger siblings coming home from the mills with broken fingers, strange bruises, and unmentionable wounds from their 14-hour day crawling under machinery to tie broken threads or retrieve loose bobbins.

And then there's you, you and others your age, still young enough to work in many of the mills yet old enough to remember when the world wasn't like this at all.

Now, it is almost impossible for us to imagine a world before factories, even as in many modern liberal democratic countries very few of us have actually stepped foot in one. That's not because they aren't around anymore: they've moved mostly to Asia and Africa, where exhausted workers are crammed up like cattle in a slaughterhouse to make the phone and laptops you're probably reading this on (as well as the clothes you're wearing, possibly the chair you're sitting on, and most of the stuff inside the home where you lay your head at night) for little or no wages.

And it is almost impossible to imagine what society was like before the factory. What was it like to only wear clothes made by yourself or people who lived nearby? What was life like before the cities swelled with displaced peasants blinking in the light of dawn before the gates of textile and steel mills, hungry and exhausted but jostling each other in line for a job that day to feed their family? What did the streets and town squares look like at night before everyone had to wake up at dawn to go to work? How did we relate to each other before wages became the only way to survive? And what did society look like before mass-production, when no one ever wore the same thing, when 'pre-packaged experiences,' monoculture, and conformity were literally impossible?

It is almost impossible to imagine the world before factories.

Almost, but not *completely*.

Because we are living in a similar world to what the Luddites experienced.

”All That Is Sacred Is Profaned...”*

(* from *The Communist Manifesto*)

If you can pinpoint any places in western history where technology severely altered the way human society functioned, I suspect there are three. The most obvious one is the industrial revolution, which was also the birth of capitalism. The one before that changed the world as well (but much more slowly) was the invention of the printing press, which gave to early merchants and the bourgeoisie the power to disseminate literature outside the strictures of religious and royal decree. And while we tend to see that invention as a net gain for humanity, we must remember that mass-printing and distribution has always been primarily in the hands of the rich, with the rest of us merely passive consumers.

The third—well, that’s the era we’re in now, the computer/internet ‘revolution.’

The first ‘node-to-node’ digital communication happened in 1969, 200 years after from the birth of Richard Arkwright’s steam-powered looming frame. But being military technology, it took more than a decade for that technology to filter out to non-military capitalists and become the ‘World Wide Web.’ In the following decades, we’ve gone from a world where random (“risky”) human interactions occurred only in public spaces to one where most such interactions now occur ‘online.’ Here’s some other stuff that has changed:

- 30 years ago, there were no smartphones or texting; in 2015, 98% of all Americans 18-29 years old had a cellphone.
- 17 years ago there was no Wikipedia, 14 years ago there was no such thing as Facebook, 12 years ago no Twitter, 11 years ago no Tumblr, and 7 years ago no Instagram.
- In 1984 only 8% of US homes had a computer of any sort; in 2010, 77% did.

These are all merely statistics about technological saturation; they tell us only as much as the figures about factories in England between 1769 and 1810 told us. But we don’t need to dig very far to understand that this technological change has radically altered what it means to be a human in a capitalist society.

For instance: before cellphones, you could only be reached at home. That meant if you needed to wait for a call you had to stay by the phone, but it also meant that your life was less likely to revolve around the ability of someone to get a hold of you immediately. There was no expectation that your attention could be gotten at any hour of the day because such a thing was impossible.

Before texting and email there were letters. You had to take the time to decide what you were going to say to someone, write it out on paper, post it in the mail, and then wait some amount of time for a reply. Thus human interactions were slower and more ponderous and most of all more intentional. Even the angriest of letters wouldn’t arrive until the next day at the earliest, and this slowness meant there was always at least a little time to rethink your immediate fury, unlike now with our instantaneous ‘send’ buttons.

Social media, however, probably represents the largest shift in how we relate to each other and also how we see ourselves. To have large groups of friends you had to do stuff for them, and with them, call them on weekends or send them letters, catch up with them for coffee or go to their parties or invite them for dinner, take vacations to see them or host them in your home. Now you need only post an update and read theirs to feel you’ve performed acts of friendship.

Accompanying that shift has been an increasing feeling of isolation and alienation. So many people now self-diagnose with introversion (as with trauma, or social anxiety, or many other ailments) that one wonders how humans ever managed to talk to each other before the internet.

The general response to this apparent increase in alienation is to state it has always been there, that being connected to each other more via the internet has helped us talk about it more, and that anyway we are #Blessed the internet came around to let us all be social despite our fear and misanthropy.

But in this case particularly, those of us who stand on the same threshold of change that the Luddites also stood upon cannot help but remember—*we all did fine without social media*. Better, even. We got over our shyness and anxiety because we had to, and the internet appears to have merely enabled us to *not* get over such things, to *not* address our social anxiety and fear of rejection and instead hide safely behind a screen.

Before the internet, binge-watching television ("Netflix and chill") or staring at a screen for hours a day was a sign you'd given up on yourself and the world around you, were depressed and really just needed a friendly face or to go for a walk. They were symptoms of serious depression, indications that some large issue in your life has been unaddressed for too long and the things to 'get you through' had become addictions which prevented you from seeking help.

Now those things are all proud marks of 'self-care' enabled by technology without which we'd all surely be miserable, lonely humans. Nevermind that we are still miserable, lonely humans, and probably more so now.

Non-binary Poly Radical #blessed Vegan Cruelty-free #resister Queer Theorist Influencers Unite!™

Less controversial but even more unaddressed is what this new 'technological revolution' has done to our ability to survive, to earn enough money to eat and pay rent. The much-vaunted and ridiculous 'internet of things' has made it so we rarely get to 'own' the things we pay capitalists for, and must re-sell parts of ourselves constantly in order to compensate for dwindling wages and no savings. This is the curse of the 'millennial' (a marketing term that, like so much else, somehow became a 'fact' in capitalist society)—to have no steady income but to have thousands of Instagram followers in the hopes of one day having enough to be an 'influencer'. To face insurmountable college debt and no way to secure housing but to get thousands of retweets on Twitter.

It is not just the fate of millennials. I've had two posts shared over 100,000 times and one seen by 1.5 million people. And yet I haven't been able to afford eating more than twice a day in years, and have been nomadic for the last five years because *1.5 million views doesn't pay rent*.

The answer to the poverty experienced by more and more people (again—not just millennials) is to 'monetize' your life. Or as put in a rather brilliant essay about nomads like myself at It's Going Down ("Living In A Van Down By The Instagram"):

The point here is not to whine about how we all can't be special snowflakes or social media super-stars; the point is to state that capital is colonizing all aspects of our lives, including online worlds, and attempting to make us in turn generate profit, content, and value during all waking moments, either online or off. And, there's no better backdrop to do this than when we are constantly traveling, as we in turn are utilizing and activating our social networks for the sake of monetizing them. Thus, we are pushed to take photos and tag corporations in the hopes that maybe one day we could get \$50 for a sponsored post. To fundamentally turn ourselves, and our lives, *into brands*.

As was pointed out in the new book, *Now*, by the Invisible Committee, this has become both the economic baseline as well as central anxiety of our time. We aren't just driving somewhere and enjoying a podcast or randomly picking up a hitch hiker, we are instead missing out on an opportunity to sell our labor power for Uber or Lyft. We aren't taking photos to share with loved ones, we are building up our brand and trying to gain followers, which we will then sell to multinational corporations. This is the logic of the gig economy applied to all aspects of our lives, at all times, and in all scenarios.

To monetize yourself, though, requires you make yourself more sell-able, becoming a brand, a product, constantly adapting to market demands. Or as Badean wrote in "Identity In Crisis:", in the Journal of Queer Nihilism:

"The collapse of traditional subject positions is managed through the proliferation of a new positions: app designers, graphic designers, cyber sex workers, queer theorists, feminist publishers, social network engineers, trend hunters, eBay sellers, social justice activists, performance artists, porn directors, spammers, party promoters, award winning baristas.

We are forced to continually define ourselves, to enact countless operations upon ourselves so as to produce ourselves anew each day as someone worth taking to market — our basic survival depends on the ceaseless deployment of increasingly discreet technologies of the self.

Everything is for sale: our sex appeal, our fetishes, our tattoos, our radicalism, our fashion sense, our queerness, our androgyny, our fitness, our fluidity, our abnormality, our sociability. Facebook and Twitter function as the new resume.

We are caught in the unending necessity to be continually educating, training, exploring, perfecting, and fine-tuning ourselves. Our continual self-invention is both economic imperative and economic engine.”

No doubt this seems dire enough, but one more dark truth emerges from this constant race. Because if we are constructing our identities in order to become more sale-able to people (be that for money or Facebook likes or even just to be noticed in this new hyper-gendered micro-radical hierarchy of new identities), how do we even know who we are anymore?

To be honest, *I don't always know*. I am a radical queer anarchist pagan nomad punk fag brother boyfriend theorist bard druid, but none of that actually tells me what I am, only the hashtags people might use to define me on a social media post. Labels that once gave meaning now become indelible brandings. Try to shift any of those identities and the world (or the social media world, anyway) pushes back...hard. And just as often, those labels themselves are fiercely contested: I cannot count how many times I've been told I'm too 'masculine-presenting' to be allowed to use the term queer.

So who am I? Who gets to decide? And why are we using capitalist tools to mediate those discussions in the first place? Or is it possible it's those very tools which have triggered these crises in the first place?

Not All Revolutions Are Good

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

(The Communist Manifesto)

The shift wrought by internet technology wherein identity is now the very battlefield of our ability to survive in the world may seem utterly different from any other struggle which has come before. In context of the struggle the Luddites and the early communists and anarchists fought, however, not much has really changed.

The rise of industrial capitalism triggered vast shifts in social relations which are to this day still being constantly disrupted. It should thus be no surprise to us that 'disruptive technology' is a statement of pride for many of the new architects of this current upheaval, an upheaval in which we also take part when we celebrate the destruction of older forms of relating (binary gender, hetero-normative society, class-based politics). What 'good' comes from these disruptions unfortunately seems fleeting and probably is. Because while it is a beautiful thing that acceptance of gender variance and queer sexuality have become so prominent, it's a sick joke to say a poor queer or trans person desperately trying to pay rent by sleeping on a friend's couch while letting out their bedroom on AirBnb, turning tricks on TaskRabbit or bareback hookup apps, and desperately looking for the perfect filter to get their Instagram account another 100 followers has somehow had their life 'improved' by these disruptions.

Yet, to this current horror in which we all find ourselves, perhaps the Luddites might shrug and say, "*at least you didn't have time forced upon you.*" Because along with 'disruption' of the factory from hand-craft and laborer to factory and wage-slave came the beginning of an oppressive *order of time*.

Clocks became no longer curiosities but requirements. Suddenly, knowing if it was half-past eight or just 'morning' became the crucial difference between feeding your family for a day or starving on the street. Time literally had to be disciplined into us during the birth of industrialization, often times by christian moralists like John Wesley working on behalf of the factory owners. Time became something that you "spent" rather than something that passed, work became measured not by what needed doing according to the season but what the factory boss demanded you do within a set number of hours.

Before industrialization, work was task-oriented. You planted at some times of the year, harvested at others, ground wheat and fixed carts, wove cloth and made clothes not when an arbitrary number declared it was 'time' to do so but when *the thing itself needed doing*. And work itself was determined by how long you wanted to take doing the task, not how many hours the boss said you needed to stand at a counter or else be fired.

When attempting to imagine what that world was like (not very long ago), we tend to imagine it for ourselves, what our own life might have been like. Harder to imagine, however, is what all of society itself was like without clocks as over-seers. Imagine then what life would be like if not just you but

all your friends and all the people in your town lived life without clocks, and you get a little closer to understanding precisely what the Luddites were fighting for.

A New Luddite Rebellion

It was against such radical, world-altering shifts that the Luddites broke into factories at night, smashing looms. One imagines they wanted their time back, they wanted their children and parents back, wanted the ability to survive without working in factories back. They wanted back the rich texture of a society where you knew the people who made your clothes, talked to the people who grew your food, or were those people themselves.

We are living in another such time. People older than me lived most of their childhoods without the internet and do not (or cannot) adapt to a world where everything about them is on display, sold piecemeal through Facebook updates and Instagram photos.

Those much younger than me do not know a world without cellphones, do not remember that it was possible to make new friends and meet amazing lovers without connecting first to an always-on device in your pocket. How many of them know you can arrive by train to a foreign city with just a paper map and a notebook and have the best trip of your life? How many will ever get a chance to experience what it was like to not just survive but actually have a pretty decent life in a city on less than full-time, barely-above minimum wage as I did in Seattle 15 years ago? And most of all, how many of them will ever know that risk and uncertainty is not something to be avoided at all costs but very often the thing which makes life worth living in the first place?

I barely remember what that was like.

I also barely remember what it was like to be anonymous, to have hours and hours of free time without devices I felt like I needed always to be looking at, constantly notifying me that emails and texts and retweets and messages are coming in. To have long conversations with strangers while waiting for a bus, to make new friends on the walk to work or find an awesome lover by chance while whiling away the day at a cafe. And most of all, I barely remember what it was like to know who I am without labels—to not need to call myself anything but my name, and have that be enough.

I want that all back. If you are close in age to me, you probably do to. If you are younger than me and don't know what that was like, perhaps my telling of it is enough to entice you to want it also, and if you are older than me you might be shaking your head, having already mourned what's been lost.

More than anything, we **need** this all back. Not just our time (consumed constantly by always-on devices and relentless updates). Not just our Selves (boxed in, categorized, labeled and shelved by any number of 'identities.'). Not just our ability to pay rent and eat and still have enough money left over to enjoy the ever-dwindling number of months and days we have on this earth. Not just all that, but we need our will back, our reckless desire to act in the face of risk and uncertainty, the chaotic and unscripted interactions between ourselves and the world which make our lives not just exciting, but mythic.

And therein's the key to the ritual invocation we must perform to take back what we've watched slowly sold off of our lives with each new screech of the devil's bagpipes. There are spirits, gods, and ancestors who keep the memory of the old worlds even as we forget. Ludd was one, and though his followers failed to stop the horror born of the factories in England, some of us still remember their attempt. Be it Ludd or the Raven King, Brighid or Dionysos, or perhaps all the old gods and heroes summoned together, we can make another go at stopping this new horror waking upon the world. From the shattered remains of the past we can reconstruct a new resistance against this increasingly senseless drive towards self-as-product.

And if we fail, we will no doubt be smeared by many for being 'anti-modern' just as the Luddites were, dismissed and forgotten by many others, but definitely remembered by some, just as the Luddites are still remembered now.

We may indeed fail. The risks are very, very great, and there's no Trip Advisor listing to assure us that there will be good food and pleasant ambiance after our uprising. Perhaps our failures will be re-tweeted across the world, Facebook Live videos streaming our defeat to countless millions using greasy thumbs to scroll through the comments. We'll lose Instagram followers and potential Influencer sponsorships while the rich and powerful of the world destroy more forests, gun down more poor people, and start more wars.

We probably won't win. But I'm gonna try anyway, because I want my life back.

And maybe you do, too.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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A Beautiful Resistance

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