

A Nod to Ned Ludd

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But to return to the Luddites. The danger is of the most imminent kind. I would hang about a score in the country, and send off ship loads to Botany Bay; and if there were no other means of checking the treasonable practices which are carried on in the Sunday newspapers, I would suspend the Habeas Corpus. Shut up these bellows-blowers, and the fire may, perhaps, go out.

—Robert Southey (future British poet laureate), in a letter to his brother, Tom Southey, May 12, 1812

Robert Southey and his fellow reactionaries were right to be affrighted in May 1812. The day before he wrote the passage above, British prime minister Spencer Perceval had been gunned down in Parliament. And while it quickly became apparent that Perceval’s murder was the work of a lone assailant—and a businessman, at that—the machine wreckers who went by the name of Luddites had been sending death threats to Perceval and others for months.

The destructive swath cut by the Luddites—who smashed hundreds of knitting frames that made stockings and later attacked gig mills and shearing frames—posed such a threat to public order that thousands of troops had already been sent to occupy the centers of machine-wrecking discontent in Nottingham and Leeds. Majorities in both houses of Parliament were spooked so badly by this highly organized campaign of violence against property that they pushed through a bill making Luddism a capital offense.

Flash forward two hundred years. Today’s Luddites (or, as they often self-identify, “neo-Luddites”) pose no threat at all. Their public salvos against technology embrace knotty nuances and eschew the bare knuckles. There’s a touch of *Bartleby the Scrivener* to them: if this be the future, they’d definitely prefer not to. Yet the disquiet apparent even in a watered-down and largely nonconfrontational Luddism still packs a punch, if only in the Luddites’ refusal to bow down before the tech class’s vision of a benevolent, inevitable march toward Total Information Awareness.

In the straitened and highly ritualized discourse of tech boosterism, “Luddite” has become a catchall dirty word for anything that stands in its way. The specter of Luddism is raised and stigmatized again and again as a crank persuasion—the province of the Unabomber and a handful of aging sports columnists loudly proclaiming their contempt for sabermetrics. Indeed, the concept has become so thoroughly muddled in our market-addled age that the cyber-utopians, who would regard the smashing of Windows or Google Glass as a human rights violation, have expanded their Luddite demonology to include the original enemies of the machine wreckers—i.e., government and industry.

Back in ye olde 1998, for instance, John L. Warden, Microsoft’s lead defense attorney in an antitrust lawsuit brought by the Department of Justice, argued that the case wasn’t even an antitrust suit at all. No, no! It was “a return of the Luddites, the nineteenth-century reactionaries who, fearful of competition, went around smashing

machines with sledgehammers to arrest the march of progress driven by science and technology.”

Nor is it only federal regulators who’ve turned saboteur in this through-the-looking-glass version of machine-related protest. The technology vanguard also arraigns “old” industry as Luddism incarnate, a sentiment succinctly summed up last year by Google Plus user Michael Ricard (and shared into the memeosphere by the indefatigable cyber-tout Jeff Jarvis):

Industrialists are the new luddites

The industrial age has gone full circle. Now it is industrialists who fight to keep their machine-like corporate structures and copyright monopolies in place in the face of the democratizing forces of the information age.

The main difference between that time and today being that capital punishment likely won’t be an option (esp. for bankers/financiers).

See? Any reflexive tendency toward criticism, or skepticism about the aims of our confident new digital elite, must be equated with the doomed rebellion of the first generation of English industrial workers. And the distorted memory of that rebellion swells past the point of coherence to absorb any and all perceived enemies of the Information Order.

It seems, then, past time to revisit the original Luddite movement—its devisers, their activities, and the mechanisms of their undoing—and to ask if any facet might be recoverable for critically approaching the imperial gadgets of our own postindustrial machine age. Or failing all that, a basic acquaintance with Luddite history might let us call each other by more accurate names.

Workers’ Breaktime

Workers have intentionally broken machines for as long as there have been machines to break, and the particular rampages of Luddism against looms and factories date back to the seventeenth century in England. But Luddism itself has a distinctive beginning in the spring of 1811, when bands of Nottingham workingmen smashed stocking frames (machines used to make hosiery). These attacks, which took place under cover of darkness, were followed by others not only in Nottingham—as many as forty-four separate attacks on at least five hundred machines in this one city alone between November 1811 and February 1812—but elsewhere for several more years in England’s industrializing north and west.

All of the aggressions carried a message not against “technology” in general but against the repurposing of technology with the specific aim of increasing output. In the Nottingham of 1812, that meant doubling the number of stockings produced (and

reducing their quality) via automation, while putting workers out of work under the rationalizing banner of labor-saving “efficiency.”

About the Luddite opposition to this mode of progress-free innovation, the historian Eric Hobsbawm said it best:

There can, of course, be no doubt of the great feeling of opposition to new machines—a well-founded sentiment, in the opinion of no less an authority than the great Ricardo. Yet three observations ought to be made. First, this hostility was neither so indiscriminate nor so specific as has often been assumed. Second, with local or sectional exceptions, it was surprisingly weak in practice. Lastly, it was by no means confined to workers, but was shared by the great mass of public opinion, including many manufacturers.

Resistance to both practices in Nottingham coalesced under the name of “Ned Ludd,” and a great deal of scholarly effort has been expended in tracing the origins of this apocryphal figure. But in a sense, it doesn’t matter who Ned Ludd might have been, any more than it’s important to certify the corporeal bona fides of the Molly Maguires and Tom Joads and Joe Hills of American labor apocrypha (though for the record, they are fictional, fictional, and actual, respectively).

This particular sustained spate of labor unrest was new, however, in its organization and efficiency. The machine wrecking was not wanton or indiscriminate. The Luddites destroyed frames owned by the manufacturers who doled out substandard wages or paid in goods rather than currency. Within the same room, machines were smashed or spared according to the business practices of their owners. An eyewitness to one attack described the perpetrators as a band of “about Twenty men, some armed with Pistols and others with large sticks and their faces disguised with handkerchiefs over their chins.” They used hammers and other sharp tools and sent threatening letters to specific targets before an attack: “Sir if you do not pull don the Frames and stop pay [in] Goods onely for work or make in Full fashon my Companey will visit yr machines for execution against you—Mr Bolton the Forfeit—I visitd him—Ned Lud.”

How did it come to pass that Luddism is now almost exclusively remembered as a barely rational movement of rampant machine breaking?

Historians have wrangled mightily over what Luddism meant, especially in the three decades after World War II. While Hobsbawm saw it as “collective bargaining by riot,” E. P. Thompson devoted a lengthy chapter in *The Making of the English Working Class* to making larger claims for the movement, which was, he said, “a working-class culture of greater independence and complexity than any known to the 18th century.”

Other scholars, led by Malcolm I. Thomis, argued precisely the opposite—and vociferously. In this view, Luddism was largely a local phenomenon with roots in economic privation, shifting business conditions, and poor trade. Thomis and his cohort believed that Luddism accomplished very little and none of it good, bringing suffering down on the working-class communities of the north while failing to raise the standard of living among workers.

Yet despite this scholarly jousting over what Luddism did or did not mean as a working-class movement, there is one thing on which Thompson and Thomis and their respective acolytes agree: Luddism wasn't a war on machines.

Thomis, the ardent detractor of the movement, insists on this point with particular force, arguing that "the continued enterprise of local workmen in the field of invention and the total absence of attempts to destroy new machinery after Luddism confirm that Luddism neither continued nor inaugurated an anti-machinery tradition."

The War on Terrors

So how did it come to pass that Luddism is now almost exclusively remembered as a barely rational movement of rampant machine breaking? The answer resides, not surprisingly, in the popular history of the movement that the victors of the nineteenth-century's workplace wars have bequeathed to us. Their portrait of the Luddites as little more than a mindless, retrograde mob has proved sturdy enough to resist the revision of subsequent historians.

Luddism's signal political legacy is more readily discovered in the reaction to the machine wrecking than in the wrecking itself. The war waged against the Luddites in industrial England brought us one of the earliest examples of a government corrupting a social movement by force of arms on behalf of private property.

For a time, of course, the dance of authority and rebellion remained local in scope. Nottingham's officials organized a committee to counterpunch the Luddites, funding it with the generous sum of two thousand pounds to buy intelligence and coordinate the defense of vulnerable manufacturers. Luddites got wind of the committee and offered a public riposte on December 23, 1811, under the name "King Lud." It's a document charged with contempt—while also indulging a twist of linguistic humor that seems to come straight out of a Monty Python screenplay. You can almost hear Graham Chapman reading it in voiceover: "I do hereby discharge, all manner of Persons, who has been, employ'd by me, in giveing any information of breaking Frames, to the Town Clerk, or to the Corporation Silley Committee—any Person found out, in so doing ... will be Punish'd with death, or any Constable found out making any enquiries, so has to hurt the Cause of Ned, or any of his army, DEATH."

But the Luddites were quickly victimized by their own successes—in Nottingham and also in Leeds, where croppers began breaking gig mills and shearing frames that were most certainly devised to put them out of work. The number and sheer audacity of the Luddite attacks led the Crown to mobilize thirteen thousand soldiers to police the affronted property and hunt down the breakers. "There were more troops in the troubled areas of the Midlands and north of England than Wellington had under his command in the Peninsular War," writes Brian Bailey in his 1998 account *The Luddite Rebellion*. There were midnight raids and arrests of suspected Luddites, energetically

conducted by men such as Joseph Radcliffe, a magistrate in Huddersfield (near Leeds) who rounded up dozens of suspects and questioned many of them in his own home.

The occupation and interrogations were given additional scope by leaders of Parliament, who passed legislation that made frame breaking a capital offense. George Gordon, aka Lord Byron, spoke against the bill in the House of Lords. Byron knew of the social unrest and crippling poverty around Nottingham, since his estate, Newstead Abbey, abutted Sherwood Forest (the same forest where one Robin Hood had made his home centuries earlier, and a location often invoked by Luddites as their base camp). As Byron wrote in a private letter to a patron, “I have seen the state of these miserable men, it is a disgrace to a civilized country.—Their excesses may be condemned, but cannot be subject of wonder.” Perhaps sensing the futility of his dissent, Byron tempered his sympathy in a postscript: “I am a little apprehensive that your Lordship will think me too lenient towards these men, *half a framebreaker myself*.”

The new law took effect amid the shock of the Perceval assassination. (Though this shock, like most everything else in the industrializing Workshop of the World, was relative to one’s socioeconomic standing; crowds of workers greeted the news of Perceval’s murder with tumultuous raptures in Nottingham and elsewhere, including London.) But the mood of moral panic among England’s mill owners and their earnest propagandists such as Robert Southey was more than enough to confirm the Luddites’ standing as all-purpose enemies of the state. In the popular mind, the early and inchoate impression of Luddites as smashers of machines and sowers of sedition rapidly gave way to an official view of the Luddites as agents of terror.

This was an image the Luddites eventually did much to confirm, as their use of violence degenerated from disciplined attacks on property to assaults on small factories and attempted murder. In short order—a matter of months, in fact—Luddism transformed itself from a social movement that cited royal charters and cleaved to the image of cooperative commonwealth passed down by the radical Protestant sects of the Civil War into one that aimed to overturn the government and assassinate political figures. Luddite propagandists called for the execution of anyone who collaborated with the hated class of owners and political leaders—even fellow citizens serving on juries. “Come let us follow the Noble Example of the brave Citizens of Paris who in the Sight of 30,000 Tyrant Redcoats brought a Tyrant to the Ground. by doing so you will be best aiming at your own Interest,” went a March 1812 letter from Yorkshire. “Above 40,000 Heroes are ready to break out, to crush the old Government establish a new one.”

Nothing so grandiose came to pass. The Luddites’ shift to larger-scale attacks, modeled consciously on military-style rebellion, played into the hands of England’s own campaign of anti-Luddite repression. This embrace of violent terror was nothing short of a godsend to an occupying army and the committees of local businessmen who had been unable to cope with guerrilla tactics in the dead of night. And so the Luddite uprising, marking the historical moment when government power and the labor-saving technology business began to align, moved quickly into a pattern that’s

become wearily familiar to social movements ever since. There is, first off, the top-down, business-directed technological revolution imposed in the name of progress, followed by a spontaneous and semiorganized rebellion from below. Then comes talk of a counter-revolution, which is then met by a counter-counterrevolution organized by an alliance of government and business. This crowning offensive—call it the occupation of historical memory—ensures that the rebels are remembered as destructive, primitive, and retrograde. Ned Ludd, whoever he was, surely was present at the creation.

The Machine, Raging

One of the most notorious features of Luddism was the movement's secret oaths. And those vows largely held. No Luddite leader ever wrote a memoir. Nor did any convicted Luddite offer confessions on the gallows. Even those outside the movement in a position to know its secrets rarely, if ever, spoke up. In this sense, Luddism was a genuine shadowy conspiracy not unlike, say, the Communist cabals that excitable red-baiters mythologized at the height of the Cold War. Luddites enjoyed the passive—and, in some instances, active—support of their downward-spinning, machine-afflicted communities, so the Crown's bounties largely went unclaimed, and the local constabulary and the occupying troops alike never did track down many of the breakers.

Now, however, Luddism is almost entirely pathologized and cut off from anything resembling broad-based communal support. Today we speak of Luddism as a perverse tic of individual resistance to a forward march of progress that all of us regard as foreordained. (Or at least this is the consensus that's taken hold among the meme-creating sliver of the global knowledge elite that has appointed itself the arbiter of history's self-evident telos—and that, apparently, is the same thing as popular consent of the governed in today's machine age.)

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So whereas the first flourish of Luddism was dangerous and potentially violent, the neo-Luddite tendencies we see flashing across our own political landscape are miniaturized into the trivial, and faintly embarrassing, quirks of the backward or the reactionary. An air of disengagement, personal virtue, and “opting out” marks neo-Luddism—using a typewriter instead of a computer, for example, or choosing the no-frills simplicity of a Jitterbug phone over the sticky complexity of a smart phone. And conjuring up the violence that the original Luddites wreaked on machines is little more than a wish-fulfillment fantasy.

In early December 1811, Nottingham town clerk and Luddite opponent George Coldham put his finger directly on the political implications of Luddism when he wrote:

If the People are once taught that they can accomplish the objects of their wishes by a system of Terror I feel assured that they will proceed further

than breaking Frames and it is Difficult to say who may be the next Objects of their Vengeance.

At a distance, it's clear that what gave the first wave of Luddism its power to terrify the capitalists and constables—and what makes the very glimmer of its revival so scary to our present purveyors of technological utopia—is a long-obsolesced set of communal and political impulses. We can't keep our labor organized or our organized labor strong. We can't keep secrets—and the technological sweep of the surveillance state makes it less possible to do so with each passing moment. Campaigns of targeted violence, cloaked in secrecy, have become the more or less exclusive business of our own unending war on terror—and, unlike the early Luddite insurgency, don't much care who they hit. (Nor, it need hardly be noted, does this extremely high-tech crusade enjoy anything like the broad support that Luddism commanded from its host communities.)

The chances of tablets and smart phones getting broken in protest—or even switched to airplane mode for a day—seem minimal. No waves of oppressed workers of the information industry, tired of pressing their intelligence into the shoddy goods of just-in-time (and not a moment more) blogs and other misshapen entities of content production, seem ready to rise up and smash their laptops and take a stand. Many of them are freelancers and contract workers, after all. They'd be destroying their own property, not the bosses' machines.

Meanwhile, we endure the waves of hype and histrionics crafted to herd us into digital pens of eternal disruption. In our intellectual and economic endeavors alike, it seems we're condemned to an endlessly recursive “point-oh-ing” of repurposed ideas and shabby distractions—all aimed at keeping us from apprehending the class and power dynamics actually propelling our common life. In the face of all this towering yet formless techno-propaganda, it's dispiriting to think that the useful lessons from Luddism's history appear to be lost to our popular memory.

Yet Ned Ludd's legacy continues to live on in other ways. Indeed, if one judges by the ferocity of Luddism's hold on the imagination of the tech class, there may be yet some organizing principle and power in the concept. There's something revealing in the compulsion among the front rank of our digital apologists to cast the Luddite spirit widely enough to encompass and demonize anyone who stands in the way of the market's mad, disorganized, and often punitive rush to fulfill its destiny. In this sense, Luddism's dark appeal hasn't changed all that much in the two hundred years since the movement first came into being. Much as it convulsed the vindictive political imagination of Robert Southey, Luddism marks for today's elite guardians of privilege the repressed principles of mass rebellion and economic justice, organized around a set of values they can never afford to acknowledge in full.

Still, the anathemas of a threatened elite remain a far cry from a Luddite revival. Because if history has taught us anything, it's that Luddism isn't really Luddism unless something's actually breaking; breaking, that is, with a purpose—and with the power of determined people behind it.

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