

A TRADITION OF HATE FOR UNABOMBER

Stevenson Swanson and Gary Marx

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Three FBI agents stood before several dozen teachers at Niles North High School last Friday morning and sketched a word portrait of the Unabomber and his boiling hatred of science and technology.

The exercise, part of an investigation that is focusing on whether the bomber once lived in the northwest suburbs, was intended to jog the teachers' recollections of any students in the 1970s who might have espoused what the agents call the Unabomber's "catastrophe theory"-their name for a current incarnation of the anti-technology tradition that was born in the early days of the Industrial Revolution.

According to the Unabomber, modern society is dangerously unstable, the agents told the teachers at the Skokie high school. The human race, in his view, is heading to certain disaster and taking the natural environment down with it.

Earlier this summer, the Unabomber revealed his cataclysmic philosophy in a 35,000-word manuscript, in which he attempted to justify the bombings that have resulted in three deaths and 23 injuries over a 17-year career of terror.

The Industrial Revolution has been a "disaster for the human race," he wrote. "The technophiles are taking us all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown."

Such hatred of science and technology is the latest example of a centuries-old resistance to new technology that stretches back to the Luddites, the oft-mentioned machine-breakers of the early 19th Century.

But the Unabomber's manifesto, excerpts of which have been published in some newspapers, is also an extreme extension of a feeling shared by many Americans today. Whether it is something as quotidian as a card-eating cash machine or a tragedy on the scale of the Chernobyl or Bhopal environmental disasters, science and technology can seem to be bigger hindrances than helpers in an increasingly complicated world.

"There are very few Americans who are hostile to science and technology per se, but increasingly they are not as prone to see science and technology as panaceas," said Howard Segal, a history professor at the University of Maine and author of "Future Imperfect: The Mixed Blessings of Technology in America."

"People in everyday life experience too many technological problems to believe the Disneyland vision of this wonderful, scientific world."

In fact, disaffection with industrial society has led to a movement of neo-Luddites, who call for a return to a tribal society of close-knit communities where the residents care for themselves and each other. To them, technology has created a violent society of anonymous individuals whose insatiable consumption of natural resources is stripping the planet bare and driving other species to extinction.

Taking the computer as the chief symbol of high technology, neo-Luddite Kirkpatrick Sale smashed a laptop computer with a sledgehammer at a May conference of neo-Luddites in New York.

"It's a gesture meant to make a point; it's not an intellectual argument," said Sale, an author who recently published "Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution." "For the intellectual argument, you have to buy the book."

Resistance to-or at least fear of-change has been part of the human psyche for millennia, but real opposition to science and technology could not develop until science and technology themselves had developed. The 17th Century saw the beginnings of the scientific revolution with the development of a rational, empirical method for testing a hypothesis by performing experiments. And Isaac Newton's discovery of gravity and the laws of planetary motion decoded many of the mysteries of the universe, which became a kind of predictable, mechanical clock.

"One of the things that happens around the 17th Century is a conscious attempt by many people to do what they call 'extend man's dominion over nature,' " said Alan Marcus, an Iowa State University history professor who is writing a history of technology. "If there's a contrary point of view, it's that nature is God's creation. To deal with it is to go against God."

But for the most part, the people of the late 17th and 18th Centuries embraced rational, scientific thought. By the end of the 18th Century, practical applications of scientific developments had progressed to the point of starting to change the way goods were manufactured. Instead of small-scale craftsmen who painstakingly made things by hand, large factories evolved where workers performed repetitious tasks producing cheaper, but often shoddier products.

The Industrial Revolution was gathering steam. But the old way of working did not go away without a struggle. Starting in 1811, textile workers in the north of England raided the new factories at night and broke up the machines that were taking away their livelihoods. They said they were followers of Ned Ludd, who was probably a fictitious person.

Soldiers killed a number of Luddites the following year, and in retaliation a factory owner was murdered. Parliament made machine-breaking a capital crime, and by 1813, 24 Luddites had been hanged and many others had been deported to Australia. The Luddite rebellion sputtered out a few years later.

But the poets and writers who came to be called the Romantics took up their cause. Lord Byron's maiden speech in the House of Lords was a defense of the Luddites, and Mary Shelley's gothic horror story "Frankenstein," about a scientist who creates a man, was an early warning about the arrogance of science.

"Romanticism has a strong identification for the anti-technological spirit," said Sale. "It has always stood for nature over against machine. The price when society buys into the machine is very high, and the romantics are around to remind us of that."

But industrialization was inexorable, making its way through Europe and across the Atlantic to New England and the rest of America. Acts of sabotage-the word comes from the sabots, or wooden shoes, that French workers threw into machines-occurred, but not on the scale of the Luddite rebellion.

In fact, most Americans embraced the machine age, and by the mid-20th Century, America was the dominant industrial nation on earth. But then, in the 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War, with its napalm and defoliants and other technological weapons, led to a questioning of the merits of industrialization.

“We’ve seen the damage and the limitations of technology and the damage to the environment,” said Segal.

Environmental groups such as Earth First! have provided the best-known recent examples of Luddism. Among other techniques, Earth First! members have spiked trees with metal rods to keep them from being cut down. The group now disavows that practice because the rods, meant to ruin chain saws, have caused the death of some loggers.

Segal notes a key difference between the original Luddites and their modern counterparts.

“The Luddites were not anti-technology,” he said. “They were hostile to those forms of technology that were going to drive them out of their jobs and maybe even their homes.”

True, replied Sale, but one of the lessons of the Luddites is that smashing a machine will not stop technology.

“It seems very hard to imagine how any kind of petty sabotage is going to make any difference,” he said.

Instead, the Unabomber’s manifesto and the neo-Luddites condemn industrialization in toto. Sale concedes nothing to the last 200 years of science and technology, not even the medical advances that have extended life expectancy.

“Medical advances and increased longevity mean that we have more people living longer, and that is the worst thing we could have happen to our earth,” said Sale. “It’s the dominance of our species that has meant the extinction of other species. The more comfort we have, the less healthy and stable the earth.”

The neo-Luddites call for a return to what they call “human scale.” In a post-industrial world, humans should live in small communities of no more than about 5,000 people-self-contained units that exist in harmony with nature.

Such a society is unlikely to evolve easily from our present, high-tech, high-stress society, Sale acknowledged. The fissures in industrial civilization will widen as ecological disasters and civil unrest grow to global proportions.

“There will be no mistaking these tragedies when they come,” said Sale, who predicts the collapse will come within 25 years. “I only hope we neo-Luddites will have gotten our message across by then so that out of the ashes of this defunct civilization, we can create a new nature-based, community-based civilization.”

And yet Marcus, the Iowa State professor and himself no fan of the computer, noted that American agriculture is less dependent on chemicals now than it has been in the last 20 years.

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<chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-08-29-9508290324-story.html>

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