

The 200th Anniversary of the Luddite Uprisings: The Politics of Technology Then and Now

November 2011 – January 2013 is the 200th anniversary of the Luddite uprisings: a great opportunity to celebrate their struggle and to redress the wrongs done to them and their name. Today science and technology raises many more critical social, environmental and ethical issues, but from GM food and eugenics to plans for engineering the planet's climate, from surveillance to nuclear power, these issues are rarely addressed properly, partly because anyone who raises criticism is denigrated as a 'luddite'. History has been written by the victors and the Luddites are portrayed as opposed to all technology and progress. It is ironic that while the ideology of progress through technology (Vorsprung durch Technik as the Audi car advertises) has hardened into a rigid dogma, which must condemn all critics as 'anti-science', in fact the Luddites opposed only technology 'hurtful to Commonality', (ie. the common good). They destroyed some machines whilst leaving others: in their spirit, we make no apology for calling for real democratic control over science and technology.

Who Were The Luddites?

The Luddites were textile workers in Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Lancashire, skilled artisans whose trade and communities were threatened by a combination of machines and other practices that had been unilaterally imposed by the aggressive new class of manufacturers that drove the Industrial Revolution.

In Nottinghamshire, where the Luddite attacks began in November 1811, the 'framework-knitters' or 'stockingers' had a number of grievances, including wage-cutting, the use of unapprenticed youths and the use of the new 'wide frames', which produced cheap, inferior quality goods.

In Yorkshire, the Luddites were led by the croppers, highly skilled finishers of woolen cloth. For the past decade they had petitioned Parliament to enforce obsolescent legislation enforcing apprenticeship, and against 'gig mills', and the shearing frames that eventually almost entirely displaced them over the next ten years. In 1809, under pressure from the manufacturers, Parliament repealed all the old legislation, thus removing the artisans' last hope of redress for their grievances by legal and democratic means.

The Lancashire cotton weavers and spinners were, like the stockingers, mainly outworkers, producing cloth on hand looms in their own homes. Their overall conditions and status as artisans had been eroding for several decades, partly as a result of a huge influx into the trade of unapprenticed workers, many of whom had been forced off the land by the Enclosures. The factory system, with its vast mills and steam-powered looms, and its cheaper cloth that undercut the cottage weavers, was exacerbating the decline in their conditions.

At the time the cloth trades were depressed due to the wars with France, and unemployment often meant destitution and starvation. Throughout this period, in addition to the Luddite

attacks there were many food riots throughout the North of England, which were also partly due to high food prices caused by poor harvests. In the period before 1811, many petitions to parliament by the weavers, asking for help from starving communities were ignored by Tory Governments obsessed with the then-new laissez-faire economic doctrine.

Machine Breaking

The uprising began in Nottingham in November 1811, and spread to Yorkshire and Lancashire in early 1812. The Luddites' main tactic was first to warn mill owners to remove the frames: if they refused, the machines were smashed in nocturnal raids. Such methods had been employed many times in earlier disputes, but never in such an organised way. The Luddites were a secret society which administered oaths of silence which were extremely effective in preventing capture: for nearly a year, despite flooding the North of England with spies, and more troops than were currently fighting Napoleon in Spain, the authorities made only a few arrests. It is widely agreed that the Luddites' leader, in whose name their proclamations were issued, known as 'General Ludd' did not actually exist. (The name is said to derive from one Ned Ludd, an apprentice weaver,



A contemporary cartoon showing the 'Leader of the Luddites'

who some years earlier smashed a power loom in a rage at his master.)

Although there were already many laws on the statute books making the Luddites' activities capital crimes, in February 1812 the Government passed the Frame Breaking Act, which specifically introduced the death penalty for frame breaking. In the West Riding of Yorkshire attacks on shearing frames began in January 1812, and were highly successful in the smaller workshops. However, resistance from some of the larger mill owners, supported by magistrates was stronger. The most famous attack, by around a hundred men on William

Cartwright's Rawfolds Mill in April 1812 was unsuccessful, since Cartwright was aware of the Luddites' plans and the troops that he had installed in the mill killed two of the Luddites. After these deaths, and the outrage they caused among the Luddites' supporters, for the first time the Luddites turned to assassination. They failed with Cartwright, but succeeded in killing William Horsfall, another large mill owner and an outspoken anti-Luddite. After this the Luddite attacks on machines declined, and some Luddites turned to night-time raids on armouries, in the hope that a general armed insurrection could be mounted. But in October 1812, the authorities finally arrested George Mellor, a key leader of the Yorkshire Luddites. He and 13 others were hanged together in York in January 1813.

By the end of the uprisings, thousands of frames, a significant proportion of the total number in England, had been smashed. Although it is often argued that the Luddites failed, it seems that in Nottinghamshire many of the master hosiers were sufficiently intimidated that the wide frames were not widely used for some years and wage levels were considerably restored.

The cause of the uprising was the imposition of the new free-market/industrial regime including the introduction of new machines by the manufacturers. The machines were perhaps the sharpest edge of the new regime and were chosen as targets because they symbolised the power of the new masters. As the great apologist for industrialism, Andrew Ure, wrote in 1835, 'This invention confirms the great doctrine already propounded, that when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility.' Because the Luddites so shockingly exposed this best-kept secret of industrial capitalism, that science and technology are not 'neutral', they have been subjected to the harshest ridicule, and have been portrayed not just as another bunch of upstart troublemakers, but as idiotic opponents of progress, people who 'want to go back to the stone-age'. The uprisings can be seen as the last gasp of the old order, a howl of protest against the Industrial Revolution, or, as the writer Kirkpatrick Sale puts it, 'a rising not against machines but against The Machine'.

The politics of technology today

This anniversary comes at a timely moment, because, at the beginning of the 21st century, the consequences of the whole industrial capitalist system that began with the Industrial Revolution, are becoming so severe that they can no longer be ignored. From global warming, resource depletion and biodiversity extinction to epidemics of mental and stress-related illness, drug addiction and crime, the downsides of industrial capitalism are leading to disillusion with the myth of progress. Now, as then, along with their benefits, science and technology often empower the powerful and marginalise the weak, create unemployment, deskilling and dependency, destroy whole ways of life and communities based upon them and create massive environmental and health damage, generally to the most vulnerable. In the current public sector cuts, we are again seeing technology being deployed to displace workers' jobs.

Since the Industrial Revolution, science and technology have become the crucial drivers of capitalist development, which is defined as progress. Because of the centrality of science, a class of technocrats have arisen, as well as a technocratic ideology that sees science as the way to manage society, and the solution to all social problems. The result is an endless cycle of technological 'fixes', (normally in the form of a product that can be sold by corporations), rather than a process of democratic decision-making about the central process by which our society develops. In turn, this democratic deficit often leads to a backlash, such as against GM food. As one of the Luddite songs says, 'that *foul Imposition* alone was the cause, which produced these unhappy effects'.



Image from cover of Housmans Peace Diary 2012 <http://www.housmans.com/diary.php>

But while more democracy is essential, the crisis of industrial society forces us to address the question of which technologies and economic and social structures we need for a sustainable and just world. While the Luddites were not anti-technology, their example calls us to look for paths away from industrial capitalist modernisation and its fetish of progress through science. Our task is to go forward, but in doing so we should not be afraid or ashamed to, in part, seek inspiration from the technologies and social forms of pre-industrial society. But in our times the challenges are different, and will require new technologies, such as renewable energy. Like the Luddites, one way in which we should judge those new technologies is whether they foster or are hurtful to Commonality.

In the meantime, we face the threat of technologies, such as genetic engineering, nuclear power, nanotechnology and 'geoengineering', that extend our manipulation of nature to new levels and consequently pose huge new risks and social issues. These issues are so big that dealing with them cannot be left to scientists, corporations and governments. We must overcome the mythologies of the 'neutrality' and 'inevitability' of technology, as well as fears of being called a 'luddite', and assert our right of democratic control over science and technology.

Resources

Rebels against the future Kirkpatrick Sale Quartet Books 1996
Writings of the Luddites Kevin Binfield The Johns Hopkins University Press 2004
The Making of the English Working Class E.P. Thompson Penguin Books 1991
www.thelandmagazine.org.uk. Special issue on the Luddites.
<http://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com/>

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