

ARTICLES.

■ LESSONS FROM THE LUDDITES

Setting Limits On Technology

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As Newt Gingrich has assured us, and as our own daily experience has convinced us, we in the industrial world are in the middle of a social and political revolution that is almost without parallel. Call it "third wave" capitalism, or "postmodern," or "multinational," or whatever; this transformation is, without anyone being prepared for it, overwhelming the communities and institutions and customs that once were the familiar stanchions of our lives. As *Newsweek* recently said, in a special issue that actually seemed to be celebrating it, this revolution is "outstripping our capacity to cope, antiquating our laws, transforming our mores, reshuffling our economy, reordering our priorities, redefining our workplaces, putting our Constitution to the fire, shifting our concept of reality."

No wonder there are some people who are Just Saying No.

They have a great variety of stances and tactics, but the technophobes and techno-resisters out there are increasingly coming together under the banner that dates to those attackers of technology of two centuries ago, the Luddites. In the past decade or so they have dared to speak up, to criticize this face of high technology or that, to organize and march and sue and write and propound, and to challenge the consequences as well as the assumptions of this second Industrial Revolution, just as the Luddites challenged the first. Some are even using similar strategies of sabotage and violence to make their point.

These neo-Luddites are more numerous today than one might assume, techno-pessimists without the power and access of the techno-optimists but still with a not-insignificant voice, shelves of books and documents and reports, and increasing numbers of followers—maybe a quarter of the adult population, according to a *Newsweek* survey. They are to be found on the radical and direct-action side of environmentalism, particularly in the American West; they are on the dissenting edges of academic economics and ecology departments, generally of the no-growth school; they are everywhere in Indian Country throughout the Americas, representing a traditional biocentrism against the anthropocentric norm; they are activists fighting against nuclear power, irradiated food, clear-cutting, animal experiments, toxic waste and the killing of whales, among the many aspects of the high-tech onslaught.

They may also number—certainly they speak for—some of

those whose experience with modern technology has in one way or another awakened them from what Lewis Mumford called "the myth of the machine." These would include those several million people in all the industrial nations whose jobs have simply been automated out from under them or have been sent overseas as part of the multinationals' global network, itself built on high-tech communications. They would include the many millions who have suffered from some exposure, officially sanctioned, to pollutants and poisons, medicines and chemicals, and live with the terrible results. They include some whose faith in the technological dream has been shattered by the recent evidence of industrial fragility and error—Bhopal, Chernobyl, Love Canal, PCBs, Exxon Valdez, ozone holes—that is the stuff of daily headlines. And they may include, too, quite a number of those whose experience with high technology in the home or office has left them confused or demeaned, or frustrated by machines too complex to understand, much less to repair, or assaulted and angered by systems that deftly invade their privacy or deny them credit or turn them into ciphers.

Techno-resisters could find their most useful analogues, if not their models, in the Luddites.

Wherever the neo-Luddites may be found, they are attempting to bear witness to the secret little truth that lies at the heart of the modern experience: Whatever its presumed benefits, of speed or ease or power or wealth, industrial technology comes at a price, and in the contemporary world that price is ever rising and ever threatening. Indeed, inasmuch as industrialism is inevitably and inherently disregardful of the collective human fate and of the earth from which it extracts all its wealth—these are, after all, in capitalist theory "externalities"—it seems ever more certain to end in paroxysms of economic inequity and social upheaval, if not in the degradation and exhaustion of the biosphere itself.

From a long study of the original Luddites, I have concluded that there is much in their experience that can be important for the neo-Luddites today to understand, as distant and as different as their times were from ours. Because just as the second Industrial Revolution has its roots quite specifically in the first—the machines may change, but their *machineness* does not—so those today who are moved in some measure to resist (or who even hope to reverse) the tide of industrialism might find their most useful analogues, if not their models exactly, in those Luddites of the nineteenth century.

And as I see it, there are seven lessons that one might, with the focused lens of history, take from the Luddite past.

1. *Technologies are never neutral, and some are hurtful.* It was not all machinery that the Luddites opposed, but "all Machinery hurtful to Commonality," as a March 1812 letter to

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a hated manufacturer put it—machinery to which their commonality did not give approval, over which it had no control, and the use of which was detrimental to its interests, considered either as a body of workers or a body of families and neighbors and citizens.

What was true of the technology of industrialism at the beginning, when the apologist Andrew Ure praised a new machine that replaced high-paid workmen—“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”—is as true today, when a reporter for *Automation* could praise a computer system because it assures that “decision-making” is “removed from the operator . . . [and] gives maximum control of the machine to management.” These are not accidental, ancillary attributes of the machines that are chosen; they are intrinsic and ineluctable.

Tools come with a prior history built in, expressing the values of a particular culture. A conquering, violent culture—of which Western civilization is a prime example, with the United States at its extreme—is bound to produce conquering, violent tools. When U.S. industrialism turned to agriculture after World War II, for example, it went at it with all that it had just learned on the battlefield, using tractors modeled on wartime tanks to cut up vast fields, crop-dusters modeled on wartime planes to spray poisons, and pesticides and herbicides developed from wartime chemical weapons and defoliants to destroy unwanted species. It was a war on the land, sweeping and sophisticated as modern mechanization can be, capable of depleting topsoil at the rate of 3 billion tons a year and water at the rate of 10 billion gallons a year. It could be no other way: If a nation like this beats its swords into plowshares, they will still be violent and deadly tools.

2. *Industrialism is always a cataclysmic process, destroying the past, roiling the present, making the future uncertain.* It is in the nature of the industrial ethos to value growth and production, speed and novelty, power and manipulation, all of which are bound to cause continuing, rapid and disruptive changes at all levels to society, and with some regularity, whatever benefits they may bring to a few. And because its criteria are essentially economic rather than, say, social or civic, those changes come about without much regard for any but purely materialist consequences and primarily for the aggrandizement of those few.

Whatever material benefits industrialism may introduce, the familiar evils—incoherent metropolises, spreading slums, crime and prostitution, inflation, corruption, pollution, cancer and heart disease, stress, anomie, alcoholism—almost always follow. And the consequences may be quite profound indeed as the industrial ethos supplants the customs and habits of the past. Helena Norberg-Hodge tells a story of the effect of the transistor radio—the apparently innocent little transistor radio—on the traditional Ladakhi society of northern India, where only a short time after its introduction people no longer sat around the fields or fires singing communal songs because they could get the canned stuff from professionals in the capital.

Nor is it only in newly industrialized societies that the tumultuous effects of an ethos of greed and growth are felt. What economists call “structural change” occurs regularly

in developed nations as well, often creating more social disruption than individuals can absorb or families and neighborhoods and towns and whole industries can defend against.

3. *“Only a people serving an apprenticeship to nature can be trusted with machines.”* This wise maxim of Herbert Read’s is what Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets of the Luddite era expressed in their own way as they saw the Satanic mills and Stygian forges both imprisoning and impoverishing textile families and usurping and befouling natural landscapes—“such outrage done to nature as compels the indignant power . . . to avenge her violated rights,” as Wordsworth said.

What happens when an economy is not embedded in a due regard for the natural world, understanding and coping with the full range of its consequences to species and their ecosystems, is not only that it wreaks its harm throughout the biosphere in indiscriminate and ultimately unsustainable ways, though that is bad enough. It also loses its sense of the human as a species and the individual as an animal, needing certain basic physical elements for successful survival, including land and air, decent food and shelter, intact communities and nurturing families, without which it will perish as miserably as a fish out of water, a wolf in a trap. An economy without any kind of ecological grounding will be as disregardful of the human members as of the nonhuman, and its social as well as economic forms—factories, tenements, cities, hierarchies—will reflect that.

The industrial regime has always had the power of the dominant nation-states behind it.

4. *The nation-state, synergistically intertwined with industrialism, will always come to its aid and defense, making revolt futile and reform ineffectual.* When the British government dispatched some 14,000 soldiers to put down the uprising of the Luddites in 1811 and 1812—a force seven times as large as any ever sent to maintain peace in England—it was sending a sharp signal of its inevitable alliance with the forces of the new industrialism. And it was not above cementing that alliance, despite all its talk of the rights of free Englishmen, with spies and informers, midnight raids, illegal arrests, overzealous magistrates and rigged trials, in aid of making the populace into a docile work force. That more than anything else established what a “laissez-faire” economy would mean—repression would be used by the state to insure that manufacturers would be free to do what they wished, especially with labor.

Since then, of course, the industrial regime has only gotten stronger, proving itself the most efficient and potent system for material aggrandizement the world has ever known, and all the while it has had the power of the dominant nation-states behind it, extending it to every corner of the earth and defending it once there. It doesn’t matter that the states have quarreled and contended for these corners, or that in recent decades native states have wrested nominal political control from colonizing ones, for the industrial regime hardly cares which cadres

run the state as long as they understand the kinds of duties expected of them. It is remarkably protean in that way, for it can accommodate itself to almost any national system—Marxist Russia, capitalist Japan, China under a vicious dictator, Singapore under a benevolent one, messy and riven India, tidy and cohesive Norway, Jewish Israel, Muslim Egypt—and in return asks only that its priorities dominate, its markets rule, its values penetrate and its interests be defended, with 14,000 troops if necessary, or even an entire Desert Storm. Not one fully industrialized nation in the world has had a successful rebellion against it, which says something telling about the union of industrialism and the nation-state. In fact, the only places where a popular national rebellion has succeeded in the past two centuries have been in pre-industrial lands where the nation-state emerged to pave the way for the introduction of industrialism, whether in the authoritarian (Russia, Cuba, etc.) or the nationalistic (India, Kenya, etc.) mold.

5. *But resistance to the industrial system, based on some grasp of moral principles and rooted in some sense of moral revulsion, is not only possible but necessary.* It is true that in a general sense the Luddites were not successful either in the short-run aim of halting the detestable machinery or in the long-run task of stopping the Industrial Revolution and its multiple miseries; but that hardly matters in the retrospect of history, for what they are remembered for is that they *resisted*, not that they won. Some may call it foolish resistance (“blind” and “senseless” are the usual adjectives), but it was dramatic, forceful, honorable and authentic enough to have put the Luddites’ issues forever on record and made the Luddites’ name as indelibly a part of the language as the Puritans’.

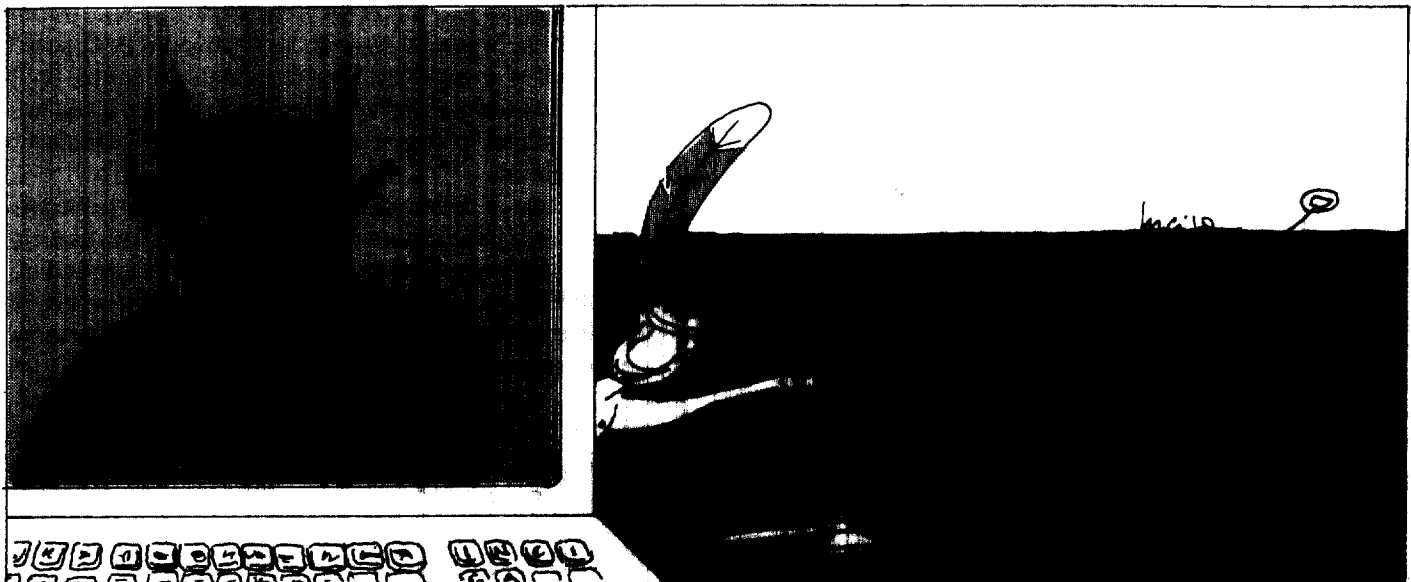
What remains then, after so many of the details fade, is the sense of Luddism as a moral challenge, “a sort of moral earthquake,” as Charlotte Brontë saw it in *Shirley*—the acting out of a genuinely felt perception of right and wrong that went down deep in the English soul. Such a challenge is mounted against large enemies and powerful forces not because there is any certainty of triumph but because somewhere in the blood, in the place inside where pain and fear and anger intersect, one is finally moved to refusal and defiance: “No more.”

The ways of resisting the industrial monoculture can be as myriad as the machines against which they are aimed and as varied as the individuals carrying them out, as the many neo-Luddite manifestations around the world make clear. Some degree of withdrawal and detachment has also taken place, not alone among neo-Luddites, and there is a substantial “counter-culture” of those who have taken to living simply, working in community, going back to the land, developing alternative technologies, dropping out or in general trying to create a life that does not do violence to their ethical principles.

The most successful and evident models for withdrawal today, however, are not individual but collective, most notably, at least in the United States, the Old Order Amish communities from Pennsylvania to Iowa and the traditional Indian communities found on many reservations across the country.

For more than three centuries now the Amish have withdrawn to islands mostly impervious to the industrial culture, and very successfully, too, as their lush fields, busy villages, neat farmsteads, fertile groves and gardens, and general lack of crime, poverty, anomie and alienation attest. In Indian country, too, where (despite the casino lure) the traditional customs and lifeways have remained more or less intact for centuries, a majority have always chosen to turn their backs on the industrial world and most of its attendant technologies, and they have been joined by a younger generation reasserting and in some cases revivifying those ancient tribal cultures. There could hardly be two systems more antithetical to the industrial—they are, for example, stable, communal, spiritual, participatory, oral, slow, cooperative, decentralized, animistic and biocentric—but the fact that such tribal societies have survived for so many eons, not just in North America but on every other continent as well, suggests that there is a cohesion and strength to them that is certainly more durable and likely more harmonious than anything industrialism has so far achieved.

6. *Politically, resistance to industrialism must force the viability of industrial society into public consciousness and debate.* If in the long run the primary success of the Luddite revolt was that it put what was called “the machine question” before the British public during the first half of the nineteenth



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century—and then by reputation kept it alive right into the twentieth—it could also be said that its failure was that it did not spark a true debate on that issue or even put forth the terms in which such a debate might be waged. That was a failure for which the Luddites of course cannot be blamed, since it was never part of their perceived mission to make their grievance a matter of debate, and indeed they chose machine-breaking exactly to push the issue beyond debate. But because of that failure, and the inability of subsequent critics of technology to penetrate the complacency of its beneficiaries and their chosen theorists, or to successfully call its values into question, the principles and goals of industrialism, to say nothing of the machines that embody them, have pretty much gone unchallenged in the public arena. Industrial civilization is today the water we swim in, and we seem almost as incapable of imagining what an alternative might look like, or even realizing that an alternative could exist, as fish in the ocean.

The political task of “resistance” today, then—beyond the “quiet acts” of personal withdrawal Mumford urged—is to try to make the culture of industrialism and its assumptions less invisible and to put the issue of its technology on the political agenda, in industrial societies as well as their imitators. In the words of Neil Postman, a professor of communications at New York University and author of *Technopoly*, “it is necessary for a great debate” to take place in industrial society between “technology and everybody else” around all the issues of the “uncontrolled growth of technology” in recent decades. This means laying out as clearly and as fully as possible the costs and consequences of our technologies, in the near term and long, so that even those overwhelmed by the ease/comfort/speed/power of high-tech gadgetry (what Mumford called technical “bribery”) are forced to understand at what price it all comes and who is paying for it. What purpose does this machine serve? What problem has become so great that it needs this solution? Is this invention nothing but, as Thoreau put it, an improved means to an unimproved end? It also means forcing some awareness of who the principal beneficiaries of the new technology are—they tend to be the large, bureaucratic, complex and secretive organizations of the industrial world—and trying to make public all the undemocratic ways they make the technological choices that so affect all the rest of us. Who are the winners, who the losers? Will this invention concentrate or disperse power, encourage or discourage

self-worth? Can society at large afford it? Can the biosphere?

7. *Philosophically, resistance to industrialism must be embedded in an analysis—an ideology, perhaps—that is morally informed, carefully articulated and widely shared.* One of the failures of Luddism (if at first perhaps one of its strengths) was its formlessness, its unintentionality, its indistinctness about goals, desires, possibilities. If it is to be anything more than sporadic and martyristic, resistance could learn from the Luddite experience at least how important it is to work out some common analysis that is morally clear about the problematic present and the desirable future, and the common strategies that stem from it.

All the elements of such an analysis, it seems to me, are in existence, scattered and still needing refinement, perhaps, but there: in Mumford and E.F. Schumacher (*Small Is Beautiful*) and Wendell Berry (*The Unsettling of America*) and Jerry Mander (*In the Absence of the Sacred*) and the Chellis Glendinning manifesto (*Utne Reader*, March/April 1990); in the writing of the Earth Firsters and the bioregionalists and deep ecologists; in the lessons and models of the Amish and the Iroquois; in the wisdom of tribal elders and the legacy of tribal experience everywhere; in the work of the long line of dissenters-from-progress and naysayers-to-technology. I think we might even be able to identify some essentials of that analysis, such as:

Industrialism, the ethos encapsulating the values and technologies of Western civilization, is seriously endangering stable social and environmental existence on this planet, to which must be opposed the values and techniques of an organic ethos that seeks to preserve the integrity, stability and harmony of the biotic communities, and the human community within it.

Anthropocentrism, and its expression in both humanism and monotheism, is the ruling principle of that civilization, to which must be opposed the principle of biocentrism and the spiritual identification of the human with all living species and systems.

Globalism, and its economic and military expression, is the guiding strategy of that civilization, to which must be opposed the strategy of localism, based upon the empowerment of the coherent bioregion and the small community.

Industrial capitalism, as an economy built upon the exploitation and degradation of the earth, is the productive and distributive enterprise of that civilization, to which must be opposed the practices of an ecological and sustainable economy built upon accommodation and commitment to the earth and following principles of conservation, stability, self-sufficiency and cooperation.

A movement of resistance starting with just those principles as the sinews of its analysis would at least have a firm and uncompromising ground on which to stand and a clear and inspirational vision of where to go. If nothing else, it would be able to live up to the task that George Grant, the Canadian philosopher, has set this way: “The darkness which envelops the western world because of its long dedication to the overcoming of chance”—by which he means the triumph of the scientific mind and its industrial constructs—“is just a fact. The job of thought at our time is to bring into the light that darkness as darkness.” And at its best, it might bring into the light the dawn that is the alternative. □

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