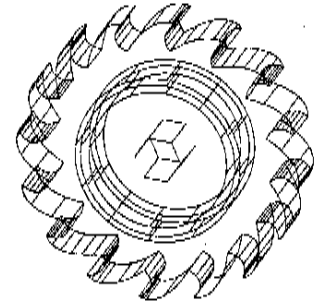


CHAPTER SIX



Luddism

IN PART I, WE INTRODUCED WHAT WE CALL the received view of technological culture: the beliefs, practices, and experiences that constitute the dominant cultural sense of culture and technology. It is the commonsense version that most of us have been exposed to, within which we negotiate a relationship with technology. That commonsense version, we have argued, posits technology as the source of inevitable progress, as the vehicle for making life better by making it more convenient, as the driving causative force of “civilized” Western culture, and as the mechanism for exercising control in and over the world. Even those who critique technology often launch their theories from within the commonsense version of the story. In such cases, the “problem” concerning technology is the fear that technology controls us, rather than the other way around, or that progress has undesirable “side effects” that we have to deal with. However, in the received view, these problems are seen as playing the role of minor nuisance in an overall endorsement of the storyline.

We have offered criticisms of the received view as we introduced it and have begun to introduce our theoretical alternative to it; but we have not yet laid out for you the components of our proposed alternative, which we do in Part III. Here, in Part II, we take you through what we think of as an *intermezzo*: in musical terms, a short movement between the major sections of a composition. This movement is meant to acknowledge that historically there have been important critical responses to the received view that have *not* been argued from within its logic. While there certainly have been more than the three responses we consider here—Luddism, Appropriate Technology, and the Unabomber—we have chosen these three because they represent a range of responses from which there is something significant to learn. Each is problematic in its own way; but each also offers important insight: first, into the ways people have been blinded and/or blind-sided by the received view; and second, into some of the crucial components with which we construct our approach. Therefore, even if we do not identify with Luddites, Appropriate Technologists, or the Unabomber (indeed, least

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of all the Unabomber), there is something that each of these responses can offer in piecing together a cultural studies approach to technological culture.

To be labeled a Luddite, in common parlance, is to be accused of being rabidly and ignorantly anti-technology and anti-progress. Luddites, popular usage suggests, are machine haters, sometimes machine breakers, sometimes anarchists, but always dangerously misguided souls who would reverse the flow of progress and have us “go back to the cave.” Today they are often labeled as “terrorists.” For example, environmental activists opposing development projects are often called Luddites, implying that they are just simply and indiscriminately anti-technology, anti-development, anti-progress, and therefore, anti-the-good-life. If permitted their way, the story goes, they would destroy all the good that industrial progress has brought and render life, once again, mean, lean, and inhumane. Luddites would bring back the days of high rates of infant mortality, a short life expectancy, hard physical labor, debilitating pain, and suffering. While the efforts of Luddites may sometimes seem good natured or even quaint, they are, most people conclude, fundamentally misguided. Given the meanings the term is assigned, it is not surprising that the phrase, “I’m not a Luddite, but...” gets used often before critiquing technology, as if to be seen as a Luddite must be avoided at all costs.¹ This characterization of Luddism as a technophobic response to new technology—and, therefore, to progress—is unfortunate, but it is hardly surprising. Given the power of the received view to frame any criticism of technology as irrational, futile, and fatuous, it makes a type of perverse sense that what is really a fascinating and instructive moment in the history of technological culture would be reduced and misunderstood in this way. An understanding of the Luddite movement, achieved by listening seriously to the issues it raised, rocks the received view to its core.

To learn from the Luddites, we turn to the careful work of historians who have been willing to look past the summary dismissals of the Luddites—dismissals which were shaped by a blind commitment to the received view. To look with fresh eyes at the history of the Luddites, we draw, most notably, on the work of E.P. Thompson, in his monumental study *The Making of the English Working Class*, and Eric Hobsbawm, in his meticulously researched article “The Machine Breakers.”²

Historical Luddism

It is difficult to characterize the Luddites and the Luddite movement for several reasons. Foremost among them is the fact that it was dangerous—even illegal—to be a Luddite. During the height of the movement, Luddites were hanged. By necessity they were secretive about their activities. Second, there are no surviving, comprehensive, and written accounts by those who considered themselves Luddites, if indeed any were ever written. A few reminiscences written in the late 1800s claim to be penned by or based on the stories of Luddites; but even if true, these accounts were constructed nearly sixty years after the fact.³ The histories of the Luddites on which we draw are the result of painstaking archival research sifting through letters, press coverage, public documents, and even literature written

during the period. Third, evidence suggests that the Luddite movement might have consisted of different, perhaps even relatively autonomous movements, rather than a single movement with a single coherent story. Finally, the story of the Luddites was from its inception caught up in a difficult political moment in which an allegiance to the received view of technology and culture was already at stake. Interpretations of their story have always depended on where one stood politically with respect to that view. Consequently, accounts of historical Luddism that presume to dismiss them out of hand, or oversimplify their significance, should be held in suspicion.

Luddism refers to a movement or movements of skilled workers and artisans in England in 1811–1817 in the textile industry, principally croppers, stockingers, and weavers.⁴ The difficult political moment within which Luddism arose as a response involved a major shift in the nature of capitalism, the changing role of workers in the development of industrialism, and the development of new technology. Prior to this time, there was an understanding that the relationship between an industry and its workers was one of mutual support and obligation. Industry provided a livelihood for its workers; workers provided skill with dedication to the craft.⁵ Textile manufacturing was craft work, carried out by skilled laborers brought up through an apprentice system and protected by what Thompson calls “paternalistic legislation.”⁶ To be a craft worker meant that the workers themselves largely shaped the knowledge, execution, and control of the labor process. Craft work may be difficult, but it is nonetheless creative.

A crisis in this situation was provoked by the gradual encroachment of the practice of laissez-faire capitalism, which shifts the idea of mutual support and obligation by arguing that, theoretically anyway, the overall economic situation of the country improves when the owners of industry are permitted free rein to maximize their profits, and when the quality of life and work of the individual worker is not given highest priority. It is not possible, however, to discount the motive of simple greed, which government policies and cultural practice had previously curbed. Nor is it possible to discount the motive of survival in what might have been, in effect, a coercive situation. As some manufacturers developed a competitive advantage using modern factory techniques, others might have felt “forced” to do so to survive.⁷ Whatever the mix of motives, the paternal relationship with workers and their independence as craft workers were seen as hindrances to the maximization of profits. In response, manufacturers fought—eventually with success—government intervention and sought to rationalize the production process to minimize their expenses. To that end, it was desirable to exert control over the labor process by developing a factory system; replacing workers with machines wherever possible, deskilling the nature of the work, and keeping the cost of labor low.

The success of the manufacturers was hard won, and depended, in the end, on the voice and force of government adopting the voice and interests of the manufacturers.⁸ It has been estimated that there were 12,000 troops deployed against the Luddites in the six counties where they were active,⁹ and a number of Luddites were killed. Laws were eventually passed that resulted in deportation, jailing, and

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even hanging of many Luddites.¹⁰ The Luddites did not set out to kill anyone or to destroy property indiscriminately; their actions had, for the most part, all the marks of a defensive rather than an offensive strategy. So it is astonishing when you think about the fact that machine-breaking became a capital offense. It indicates just how strongly the culture of the time was threatened by the challenge to the narrative of progress.

But what did the Luddites do? Although it is debatable just how well organized they were, they resisted the changes being imposed on them by the manufacturers. Thompson calls them a “*quasi-insurrectionary movement*, which continually trembled on the edge of ulterior revolutionary objectives.”¹¹ They objected to the deskilling of their jobs, the replacement of workers by machines, the extraction of exorbitant rents on the machines they used, the reduction of wages, and their overall subjection to the modern factory system in which they were treated more like servants than craft workers. Their resistance took many forms: negotiating, bargaining, striking, burning, rioting, and machine-breaking. These last (what protesters today would call “direct action”) are what live in the popular memory as the legacy of the Luddites: riot and the destruction of machines. But in a very real sense, their insurrectionary resistance was part of a long tradition of “collective bargaining by riot” in which rioters would do whatever they deemed effective in their effort to gain concessions, including wrecking private property, finished goods, and machines.¹² However, even though the motives of rioters would surely have been mixed, Luddite activities were characterized by legitimate motives that were widely shared. As Thompson writes:

What was at issue was the “freedom” of the capitalist to destroy the customs of the trade, whether by new machinery, by the factory-system, or by unrestricted competition, beating-down wages, undercutting his rivals, and undermining standards of craftsmanship. We are so accustomed to the notion that it was both inevitable and “progressive” that trade would have been freed in the early-nineteenth century from “restrictive practices,” that it requires an effort of imagination to understand that the “free” factory-owner or large hosier or cotton-manufacturer, who built his fortune by these means, was regarded not only with jealousy but as a man engaging in *immoral* and *illegal* practices.¹³

Luddism was thus a highly significant “transitional” conflict, one that “looked backward to old customs and paternalist legislation which could never be revived.” At the same time, “it tried to revive ancient rights in order to establish new precedents.”¹⁴ Luddites were fighting for a way of life in a changing world, and they recognized that machines, and their incorporation into a system of work, were a crucial component of that way of life.

It is perhaps a prejudice of twenty-first century Americans to think that industrial workers in the early 1800s were probably pretty slow witted. But the history of the Luddites suggests otherwise. As Thompson concluded:

the character of Luddism was not that of a blind protest, or of a food riot... Nor will it do to describe Luddism as a form of “primitive” trade unionism...

[T]he men who organized, sheltered, or condoned Luddism were far from primitive. They were shrewd and humorous; next to the London artisans, some of them were amongst the most articulate of the "industrious classes." A few had read Adam Smith, more had made some study of trade union law. Croppers, stockingers, and weavers were capable of managing a complex organization; undertaking its finances and correspondence; sending delegates as far as Ireland or maintaining regular communication with the West Country. All of them had had dealings, through their representatives, with Parliament; while duly-apprenticed stockingers in Nottingham were burgesses and electors.¹⁵

Luddites did destroy machines, but for the most part only those machines that embodied the offenses of the way of life they saw being forced on them. In case after case, the Luddites thoughtfully discriminated regarding which machines were to be destroyed. As one account at the time in the *Leeds Mercury* reported:

They broke only the frames of such as have reduced the price of the men's wages; those who have not lowered the price, have their frames untouched; in one house, last night, they broke four frames out of six; the other two which belonged to masters who had not lowered their wages, they did not meddle with.¹⁶

The Luddites were not anti-technology; they were concerned, as Thompson concludes, that "industrial growth should be regulated according to ethical priorities and the pursuit of profit be subordinated to human needs."¹⁷ That surely strikes us as an admirable goal.

But what of the commonly held view, with its echoes in the present, that protest against progress is pointless, and that the efforts of the Luddites were futile? Was "the triumph of mechanization" inevitable, despite the fact that "all but a minority of favoured workers fought against the new system"?¹⁸ To these questions we have two responses, both of which contribute to the cultural studies approach to technological culture that we develop in Part III. First, it is incorrect to think that the Luddite movement was completely ineffective. While it certainly did not hold up the general advance of industrial capitalism, there were many small victories in which the voice of the workers mattered. For the most part, Luddism segued into legal parliamentary forms, thus making it difficult to determine how influential the Luddite spirit was in the troubled political landscape after 1818. The Corn Laws, passed in 1815, which kept corn prices artificially high, thus literally starving the working classes, were eventually repealed after a protracted struggle. Other reform bills during the 1820s and 1830s helped to alleviate deplorable working conditions and to assuage working-class resentment to the extent that England did not have a revolution, as did other European countries at that time.¹⁹ The efforts of the Luddites may have counted for something. Indeed, this is not a matter of the triumph of manufacturers versus the triumph of the workers. The role of workers in the evolving technological culture is never a "done deal," but an ongoing and changing relationship, within which the sites of and reasons for struggle shift dramatically. There have always been those who have argued for prioritizing ethics and human needs over profit;

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and their efforts, no doubt, have kept industrial capitalism from denigrating the life of workers more than it has. The Luddites exemplify the need to keep up the pressure.

Second, the Luddites provided a potent alternative to the concept of technology and culture in the received view, at a time when the received view was gaining acceptance. They knew from their daily experience that technology is never neutral, never merely a tool. They knew that technology is woven into the fabric of daily life and that it is to be judged in relation to the quality of everyday life. It is never automatically progress. They knew that what constitutes convenience for some might have undesirable consequences for others. Further, as their activities make clear—activities in which they risked their lives—they knew that the development and implementation of technologies were not inevitable, and that human choices and actions are shaped by conscious political interventions. It is unfortunate that so much of what else they might have to say to us has been lost in the vicissitudes of political power, that their voices were silenced, and that they have not been taken more seriously. It is certainly within our power, however, to take seriously any lessons we have gleaned.

Contemporary Luddism

Along with growing concerns about the effects of unbridled technological “progress,” and the revised understanding of the history of Luddism, Luddism has become something of a contemporary rallying cry for a number of individuals and groups engaged in analyzing and/or resisting technology in some form or another. There is at certain times even a certain cachet attached to the claim of being a Luddite. Kirkpatrick Sale draws the parameters of what he calls neo-Luddism with a broad brush, “ranging from narrow single-issue concerns to broad philosophical analyses, from aversion to resistance to sabotage, with much diversity in between.”²⁰

When Nicols Fox went in search of modern-day Luddites, and wrote about them in *Against the Machine: The Hidden Luddite Tradition in Literature, Art, and Individual Lives*, she found:

That what accommodations they make to civilization vary from individual to individual and from year to year. Sometimes the goal is to avoid certain technologies, sometimes it is independence, sometimes it is to live more lightly on the earth for environmental reasons. Other times it has nothing to do with the environment.²¹

It is important to remember that the Luddite movement was conjuncturally specific: It made sense within a particular historical moment, and that moment has passed. Today, those who claim allegiance to the Luddites occupy a spectrum so broad as to guarantee little about their position beyond a willingness to challenge technological development in some form. Consequently, it does not provide a platform on which to build a response to technological culture that can take us very far.

For example, Frank Webster and Kevin Robins conceptualize an analysis of information technology as “a Luddite analysis,” which, for them, means

that it “refuses to extract technology from social relations,” and insists instead that technology “must be regarded as inherently social and therefore a result of values and choices.”²² In contrast to this more philosophic variant of neo-Luddism, “ecotage” of the kind sometimes practiced by groups like Earth First! and romanticized by Edward Abbey in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and other works, also receives the imprimatur of the Luddite.²³ Mark Engler, Senior Analyst at Foreign Policy in Focus, writes that “Those of us who have been involved in global justice protests have gotten used to being labeled as Luddites by advocates of corporate globalization.”²⁴

In June 2013, economist Paul Krugman expressed “Sympathy for the Luddites” in a *New York Times* Op-Ed Column in which he embraces an understanding of Luddism consistent with our own.²⁵ He notes that since around 2000 the distribution of income in America has shifted significantly, with labor’s share falling sharply. Referring to the May 2013 McKinsey Global Institute Report on “Disruptive Technologies: Advances That Will Transform Life, Business, and the Global Economy,” Krugman notes that there are “a dozen major new technologies...likely to be ‘disruptive,’ upsetting existing market and social arrangements” and that “some of the victims of disruption will be workers who are currently considered highly skilled, and who invested a lot of time and money in acquiring those skills.” He continues, still drawing on the report, “we’re going to be seeing a lot of ‘automation of knowledge work,’ with software doing things that used to require college graduates. Advanced robotics could further diminish employment in manufacturing, but it could also replace some medical professionals.” At stake is “a society in which ordinary citizens have a reasonable assurance of maintaining a decent life as long as they work hard and play by the rules.” He also notes that this is not a uniquely American phenomenon but a global technological trend. While he does not propose an activist response of the kind the historical Luddites engaged in, he does, in his calls for “a strong social safety net,” with guaranteed health care and minimum income, sound very much like a Luddite himself.

In fact it has become commonplace to consider “The Luddites Revisited” or to ask “Where Are the Modern Day Luddites?” or even “Is It OK to Be a Luddite?” because increasingly we recognize that they have something to teach us and some spirit that merits building upon.²⁶

The particular Luddite propositions with which we have most sympathy in developing an alternative to the received view are those proposed by Chellis Glendenning in 1990. Summarized here by Sale, Glendenning resists the blind allegiance to progress, rejects the sense that technologies are neutral tools, and calls for critique that places technology fully within its cultural context. She calls for:

1. Opposition to technologies “that emanate from a worldview that sees rationality as the key to human potential, material acquisition as the key to human fulfillment, and technological development as the key to social progress.”
2. Recognition that, since “all technologies are political, the technologies created by mass technological society, far from being “neutral tools that can be used for good or evil,” inevitably are “those that serve the perpetuation” of that society and its goals of efficiency, production, marketing, and profits.



3. Establishment of a critique of technology by "fully examining its sociological context, economic ramifications, and political meanings...from the perspective not only of human use" but of its impact "on other living beings, natural systems, and the environment."²⁷

We conclude, then, that we have much to learn from the Luddites about the possibilities of resisting progress blindly, about recognizing the political nature of technology, and about understanding and critiquing the integration of technology into everyday life. In Part III, we talk about this integration in terms of articulation and assemblage. However, it is important to recognize that Luddism, as a historical movement, must be understood within the historical conjuncture that made it a meaningful response. We can learn from the Luddites to keep asking important questions about contemporary technological culture; but the specific conjuncture within which we live requires responses crafted to address the present.