

Happy Birthday, King Ludd!

The Luddites' 200th birthday

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2012

In the waning moonlight, three bands of sullen men with ash-blackened faces stealthed through the woods and dales of central Yorkshire, one of the first counties in England to industrialize.

Quietly, the three groups, each traveling from different villages, picked themselves through paths they traversed since childhood and assembled in a clearing near their target. Though they passed outlying cottages, no dogs betrayed them.

The villagers all round brought in their animals that night. A quick count to assure themselves that their numbers, over a hundred, could do the job quickly and thoroughly and they were off again, now as a solid, intense phalanx.

A few more yards down from the meadow to the river and across and they were in front of a red brick structure—their target: a recently built textile mill with power looms.

The bolt securing the gate delivered the entrance with one well-directed blow of an Enoch, the enormous sledgehammer the half-dozen men each carried, and which was named after the blacksmith who fashioned them. A few more blows to the front entrance and they were in.

Each knew his task and they quickly dispersed throughout the three floors. The huge and heavy hammers did the most effective destruction, but the pikes, the axes and the smaller hammers contributed to the devastation of the mill.

The men could hardly contain their glee at their work, but they remained silent as they tasked methodically and efficiently. The wood and metal machines shattered under their blows with surprisingly little sound. No one lived nearby, but even if the splintering of wood and cracking of metal was heard that night by the sleepless, they knew enough to turn over and forget they heard anything.

The mill owner lived on a splendid, wooded estate over a mile away. He would hear nothing at all until morning and then only bad news. In minutes, for that's all it took, the proud craftsmen left the factory in shambles. Quickly they retreated back to their homes to be in bed for morning awakenings by the hapless authorities looking for the villains.

These machine breakers, all textile weavers, were the 19th century followers of King Ludd, their mythic leader. 2011 marked their two hundredth anniversary.

The Luddites fought the imposition of new technology. The new weaving machines, by producing shoddy goods, were an affront to their craft standards. More importantly, the simple tasks of machine tending required little skill. As a result of the new technology, families and villages collapsed into a spiral of degradation.

The depiction above is informed fiction; the written record of the Luddites' nocturnal adventures is basically non-existent. The only published account of their destructive exploits by a participant comes from an aged villager as he remembered them as a boy fifty years previously.

Charlotte Bronte, in her novel *Shirley*, fictionalized their most catastrophic defeat, when Ludd's redressers were ambushed at a mill and two wreckers were killed outright and a half dozen sustained gunshot wounds.

The Luddites burst from the Northern English meadows of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire like wild flowers in the spring of 1811, but unlike blossoms, their span lasted 18 intense months. These men, and only men took part in the machine destruction, were the anonymous actors of history that historians E. P. Thompson and Howard Zinn in the past, and Peter Linebaugh and David Roediger today, celebrate.

Before wrecking machines, the weavers and other tradespeople sought redress of their grievances from the king and parliament, but their victimization was ignored and so they chose a more effective course—direct action. In the three county area, thousands of machines were wrecked and the march of capitalist progress was temporarily stalled, but in the end at great sacrifice to the Luddites.

Six months after the weavers started their campaign 12,000 British troops were garrisoned in the three counties, more troops than battled Napoleon in Spain at that time, to assure that factory-based production could proceed without interruption.

The military occupation of the villages took its toll with daily military patrols to harass and curtail assemblies. However the grassroots nature of this struggle, where craftsmen knew each other and whole communities backed their actions by maintaining complete silence, prevented infiltration and arrests.

The central government in London threw its legislative artillery against the populace by passing the Frame Breaking Act and the Malicious Damage Act of 1812 decreeing machine breaking a capital offense and followed with a campaign of yearlong ambushes, torture and judicial killings to defeat the weavers.

Seventeen men were executed after an 1813 trial in York, many more jailed, and hundreds were transported to Australia. The bloody repression clamped a lid on the movement in northern England. However, a few years later, following the example of the weavers, agricultural workers in the south of England began smashing recently introduced threshers. Along with the wrecking, the agriculturalists adopted the Luddite mockery of power by creating their own mythic hero, Captain Swing.

Given this rebellious history it is regrettable that the Luddite heritage has been incorrectly interpreted. The Luddites were not reactionaries naively opposed to technology in their supposed flight from history and progress.

It comes as no surprise that this spurious interpretation arose as a reaction to the technological imperative that dominated the US by the middle of the 20th century: automation took off in the 1950s, displacing thousands of workers; engineering sequestered the popular imagination in the 1960s with the race against the Soviets for space exploration; and in the 1970s, petrochemical-based research seized Wall Street investors like a passion.

The dark side of this technological enthusiasm—unemployment, pollution, and misdirected federal funds—coupled with the rising fear of nuclear war, laid a heavy pall shrouding all contemplation of a better future. The ensuing universal foreboding generated, among some, hostility to all technology.

In this caldron of anxiety, the Luddites were resurrected from historic obscurity to serve as emblematic rebels against technology by writers such as Kirkpatrick Sale in his 1995, *Rebels Against the Future*. Neo-Luddism arose in a shutter of fear for a technological future that some mistakenly imagined had exact historic precedents.

However, the weavers did not take up their Enochs to blindly attack technology. Some machines, innocent of the charge of capitalist banditry, were spared and others were adapted for use in cottages and small workshops.

Their hammers, tools themselves, were raised not simply to smash the new world taking shape around them, but also to re-fashion it. Technology per se was not their target. Their target was the intention behind its introduction. In contrast to the greed of the capitalists, the weavers attempted to reassert their “commonality,” as they termed their social solidarity and coherence, as the shaping force for a new society that would incorporate mechanical advances as tools to their benefit.

The skilled textile workers had no illusions about reclaiming the tempo of their grandparents’ lives—a fabled Golden Age of small-scale capitalism. Through the centuries, cottage industrial life was no idyll. The previous era may have been more humane (even though the whole family worked, they worked together), but only a few master craftsmen had any real control over production. The weavers and other textile workers had little leverage, since they had to depend on contracts with merchants. Work was still drudgery in the cottages.

So what was the trajectory of their insurrection, so devastatingly cut short? What greater relevancy, beyond symbolism, do they hold for us?

At first sight it would seem questionable that they hold any lessons for us. After all, technology dictates our life choices in a way the Luddites would have considered a nightmare. We, like the weavers two hundred years ago, face an epic struggle to transform technology to serve our needs.

To delve a little deeper, there can be little argument that, unlike many of us, the Luddites had a more lavish palette of significant social experiences to draw upon. The rich oral continuity that defines traditional societies was theirs. Pre-industrial village life sustained communal practices, rituals, and festivals brought song, dance and follies of all kinds.

It is this social complex that the workers carried with them as their heritage, what they referred to as their commonality, that served as a foundation for their resistance to attacks from the capitalists.

What appeared on their horizon was a beast not clearly perceived, but sensed as both forceful and evil. Their old compacts with the king, that protected their ancestors in a limited way from capitalist expansion of machine production for over a century, were dust and no new compacts would be considered. They were at the mercy of the rising bourgeoisie, no longer limited by traditional restrictions on their quest for wealth and power, and who, consequently, speedily disabused themselves of a moral center.

Doesn't this sound familiar? Like the Luddites, we, too, are on the precipice of an ominous future of technology gone out-of-control, in a precise meaning of the phrase. Two examples, suffice: synthetic biology, from bio-fuels to GMO foods, and nano-engineering.

And, like the Luddites, we are becoming aware that we face a momentous transformation on every level of existence. For us, the eco-catastrophe we face obviously is greater, but we can't discount that village life—the weavers' environment—was threatened from one side by industrial agricultural and on the other by industrial manufacturing.

When facing our prospects for overcoming the economic, environmental and political challenges we are at a disadvantage compared to the Luddites. They lacked our sophisticated technical resources, but they did possess deep bonds of trust, forged over generations of communalism, while we stand atomized, alienated and closed down, fearful of every encounter.

Their defeat, probably foredoomed, nonetheless was a great historic loss. If in one time-warping leap they had adapted the new technology to reclaim the old village life on a new basis of greater freedom and leisure and thereby created a truly human society, today we would not be enclosed by the logic of technology as it expedites the capitalist addiction to endless growth. Instead, we could be living a life based on social and individual fulfillment.

There is some faint hope for us moderns since it is true that catastrophes tend to break old habits of isolation and spontaneously evoke solidarity, as if out of the ether. However, waiting on heavenly disasters is no solace. Hopefully, the pre-revolutionary uprisings in North Africa and Europe, and the Occupy movement in the U.S. may temper this bleak appraisal. The "Politics of the Squares"—the instant mobilization of previously apolitical masses, the quickly organized support systems to maintain continuity in public squares and spaces, the meticulous concern for unhindered speech and more—is historically unprecedented on this world scale.

These events should assure us that to fight for a better life by reviving trust from its long slumber, releases deep reservoirs of desire to reclaim and secure our common humanity.

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