

If only the Luddites had Won

Robert Knox

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a review of

Blood in the Machine: The Origins of the Rebellion Against Big Tech by Brian Merchant. Little, Brown & Company, 2023

A February arson attack by a mob of Lunar New Year revelers in San Francisco on a Google driverless taxi, to the cheers of onlookers, brings to mind the early 19th century assaults on factories and industrial machines by newly-marginalized workers who came to be known as Luddites. The attempt of these workers to hold on to social solidarity and community is the subject of Brian Merchant's timely offering.

I didn't pay enough attention to the subtitle. On the front flap, we're given this summary: "the story of the first time machines came for human jobs—and how the Luddite uprising explains the power, threat and toll of Big Tech today."

There are two problems with that precis. Machines don't come for our jobs, at least not until the AI robots take over; machines don't do anything on their own. It's the billionaires who seek to eliminate human workers and replace them with hi-tech replicas—the algorithms, self-driven vehicles, endless assembly line speedups, and union busting that eliminate jobs and oppress workers. It's Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and their ilk.

Merchant says this in his book's Afterword: "Robots are not threatening your job. Gig app executives who sense an opportunity to evade regulations and exploit tradition-bound industries are threatening your job."

What's happening today, right now, not what the Luddites did over two centuries ago is the purpose of this book. You can tell. When the author gets to the current day, the writing becomes urgent, the author's voice stronger, the message clearer.

Still, the rationale for writing this book is expressed in that subtitle "the origins of the rebellion against big tech." These origins lay in the Luddite violent response to the new machines that were mechanizing the processes of making fibers into cloth, and cloth into clothing.

This mechanization sacrificed quality, but also undermined the work that skilled English craftsmen (and women) had performed for centuries, generally in their own homes. The skilled weavers formed a kind of artisan middle class in the countryside of England's prosperous industrial North. England long dominated the world market in the production of textiles and in the early 19th century began importing American-grown cotton (grown by you-know-who) as a further stimulus to its own prosperity.

Whitney's cotton gin caught the attention of the money-making class in England, these artisans faced the loss of their livelihood. The *nom de guerre*, Lud, was used by the guerrillas struggling to preserve their jobs and the way of life of England's textile artisans by destroying the new, larger machines gathered into factories hurriedly thrown up by profiteering owners.

If they destroyed the machines, night-raiding bands of workers reasoned, literally breaking them apart with heavy hammers, the owners and merchants would have to restore the old way of producing cloth. The artisans would keep their skilled jobs, the source of their economic self-sufficiency, social status, and self-respect. They

lost all of these material and social goods when they became laborers, made to work long hours on what were comparatively menial tasks that could be performed by children.

In fact, the tasks of serving the new machines often were performed by children. When weavers refused to give up the satisfactions of performing high-quality skilled work and become mere cogs in the big machines of the factories, the owners hired children (often procured from orphanage workhouses), working them to death by long days and poor conditions.

The similarities of this birth of the Industrial Revolution to the current day's technology revolution are worth pursuing, although the connection is more analogous than causal. Struggling to preserve their way of life and the ability to support their families, weavers petitioned the English Parliament for material relief, food, and workplace protections. Many had their rights to the use of common land taken away by the Enclosure Acts of the previous generation.

But Parliament was a rich man's club, its agenda controlled by the men of wealth who built the factories. While the workers who banded together to raid factories, destroying machines and sometimes burning down buildings, had many local successes, scaring off some would-be factory owners, the British government responded to their cries for assistance by increased repression. Government spies eventually infiltrated Luddite cells, soldiers killed workers in one highly publicized shootout, and some Luddite leaders were jailed, tried, and hanged.

Merchant's book covers only a narrow spectrum of labor history. Anyone interested in the history of workers' insurgency can find it in books like Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!* and his anthology, *Root and Branch*.

The recorded history of the Luddite movement reads like a series of incidents that amount to a failed rebellion. Nevertheless, they were relevant. The "explosive campaign" of Lancashire Luddites, for example, "delayed the mass adoption of power looms for several years." Some of their tactics, Merchant tells us, were "novel and influential."

As if searching for relevance or some stronger hook to claim our attention, the book swerves into an account of famous and glamorous figures of the period, namely Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. Byron stood up in Parliament to defend the right, and necessity, of displaced workers to look to government for relief. Parliament found it easier to blame the victim. Besides, the Luddites' acts of violence resembled the French Revolution. More intriguing is Merchant's notion that Mary Shelley's conception of Frankenstein's monster draws on her society's fear of the machine as an inhuman, unstoppable force.

The 19th century factory, Merchant writes, closely resembled England's "poorhouse...or a jail." More interesting is the book's swing, after three hundred fifty pages, to the abysmal working conditions in today's factories, warehouses and other dangerous jobs.

Merchant discusses a 2018 Facebook post by livery driver Doug Schifter: "Companies do not care how they abuse us so long as the executives get their bonuses," Schifter wrote in an attack on the replacement of unions and small independently owned companies by the low-paid contract workers of "gig app corporations like Uber" and the politicians that empower them. This critique of gig app companies exposes their war on unions, the changes in workplace law that allows corporations to abuse workers as they further concentrate wealth in the hands of the few, and the stunning lack of governmental and regulatory response not much different from 200 years ago.

The belief that new technology and the progress it allegedly brings must always be protected over the interests of change's victims, regardless of the social consequences and the threat to democracy posed by the power of concentrated wealth is the true value of *Blood in the Machine*. The real question the Luddites' history raises is this: If we don't wish to pay with our own blood to stop, or slow, the economic and political trends that constitute the contemporary machine, what paths are available to us?

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