

Luddites, or the Politics in Technology
An Introduction

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People and organizations resisting (particular aspects) of modern technologies have often been referred to as Luddites or Neo-Luddites. Carrying a pejorative connotation, this term is used to blame the accused for their anti-technology attitude. The term Bio-Luddites has now been introduced for those displaying an anti-biotechnology attitude (e.g. the ETC group, formerly RAFI, has been referred to thus¹). Contrary to common belief, however, Luddites are not against technology itself but rather reject technology used as means of social domination. An important aspect of Luddite thought, if one may call it this, is the rejection of the claim that technology is essentially both 'value free' (a set of tools which can be used for either good or bad) and also developmentally 'autonomous' (an independent entity, not controlled by outside forces). The concern of the Luddites was that certain technologies do, in fact, have an inherent tendency to reinforce or undermine particular values and interests, and that the course of technology development is indeed a matter of agency.

The Luddites were a well organized movement of machine-breakers that spread across southern England between 1811 and 1813. It is important to note that although the Luddites and the practice of machine-breaking have become synonymous with each other, actually machine breaking had been a widespread practice in England long before the Luddite movement. Machine breaking started around 1640-1660, a period in which the attitude of the State towards machinery changed, and the 'hostility towards devices which take the bread out of the mouths of honest men, gave way to encouragement of profit-making enterprise, at whatever social costs" (Hobsbawm 1964: 15). The Luddite movement came to an end in the second half of the 19th century, after a combination of severe repression and the transformation of secret committees dedicated to machine-breaking into legal organizations involved in the politics of social reform and labor unions.

¹ See: <http://www.changesurfer.com/>

Machine-breaking, and in particular the Luddites, had been ignored at large in historiography. According to Eric Hobsbawm this is due to the fact that the movement and all it stands for did not fit the new emerging discourses of liberalism and socialism, the first praising the triumph of mechanization and the pioneering-industrialists, the second rejecting strong-arm methods and self-organization in labor action. It became a dominant and widely shared view that machine-breaking was pointless and that those who engaged in it were fighting with their backs to the future, facing only an inevitable defeat. The machine-breakers became a footnote in history.

Few historians have engaged in serious research on the phenomenon of machine-breaking, although those that have done were some of the most outstanding of their time, including Hobsbawm, Rudé and Thompson (Hobsbawm, 1964; Hobsbawm and Rude, 1969; Thompson, 1965). More recently Kevin Binfield (Binfield, 2004) and Kirkpatrick Sale (Sale, 1996) have taken up the issue of the Luddites. These studies reveal not only the popular character of the Luddite movement and its extensive repression (with mass-trials and death-penalties in 1813 along with the deployment of 12,000 troops, a number which exceeded that of the army Wellington had taken to the Iberian Peninsula in 1808 during the Napoleonic Wars) - they also reveal the importance of the phenomenon of machine-breaking for the study of science and technology. The Luddites did not only engage in politics by wrecking, but also must be considered as *re-designers*, a term used to indicate social practices directed against the politics of domination embedded in technology with the aim of changing the social code of technology (Ruivenkamp, 2005).

It was Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1964) who first distinguished re-designers ('bargainers', as he termed them) from mere machine-breakers. The bargaining kind of machine-breaking became an established part of social conflict during the early period of industrialization. Trade unions were forbidden at that time; workers and artisans organized in secret committees and machine-wrecking was a means of '*collective bargaining by riot*', i.e. coercing the owners of machines into granting concessions with regard to wages and other matters. This type of machine-wrecking was focused on but not limited to cloth-making machines. Throughout the 18th century there were numerous accounts of miners burning (pit-head) machinery or shearmen burning hayricks, barns, and kennels, or destroying mills and large quantities of cloth, in order to force employers to raise wages or pay higher prices. In none of these cases was there

hostility against the machines as such. Wrecking was simply a technique of early trade-unionism, as reflected in a Luddite document from 1812 (Binfield, 2004: 182):

"Sir: If you don not advance the wages of all our workmen at Holywel, you shall have all your mills burnt down to the ground immediately. It is harder upon many of us here than upon those who receive parish relief. We are starving by inches by reason of our small wages & provisions so high. You had better be content with a moderate profit, than have your mills destroyed. You know how it is with Burton & Goodier & many others, it will be the same with you in a few days, if you don not advance all hands. All the Miners and Colliers are ready to join us. 3,000 men can be collected in a few hours.

*The poor cry out for bread
Prince Regent shall lose his head
And all the rich who oppress the poor
In a little time shall be no more*

Take care you be not in the number of the oppressors. We cannot wait but a very few days, we are ready for blood or bread, anything is better than starving by inches."

Notwithstanding this long and wide-ranging history, resistance to the *politics* embedded in new machinery (used for manufacturing cloth) coalesced with the Luddites², the name given to a movement of machine-breakers in south England in the period 1811-1813. The text of a Luddite song (Binfield 2004) reads thus:

*"You tyrants of England, your race may soon be run
You may be brought unto account for what you've solely done*

(...)

*And now, my lads, for to conclude, it's time to make an end;
Let's see if we can form a plan that these times may mend"*

² The name Luddites is derived from Ned Ludd, a legendary figure of questionable existence, but whose name appeared on many letters in which the movement communicated with factory owners and political authorities.

The Luddites were a well organized network of secret committees, resisting the new form of domination symbolized by the factory system and factory production in textile production. New cotton mills had recently been established in south England, where the employment of child labor was used to lower wages and prices. (Thompson, 1965: 548-9). This emerging factory production system undermined the then prevalent standards of craftsmanship and resulted in a beating down of wages of workers and prices of self-employed artisans. It destroyed the 'customs of trade' (often described as a moral economy), replacing them with a philosophy of profit-above-all and unrestricted competition. The new technology also changed localities, where production was community-controlled, into production-sites, where people were transformed into a labor-force.

The new factories were described as 'centers of exploitation, monstrous prisons', where hired workers were subject to harsh order and discipline. For the craftsmen, the difference between the working standards they had been used to and the new subjugation was wide enough to cause them to rebel. As was written in a letter signed by Ned Ludd:

"We will never lay down Arms [until] The House of Commons passes an Act to put down all Machinery hurtful to [the common people], and repeal that [law] to hang Frame Breakers."

Local communities sided with the Luddites. In public opinion, it was the factory owner, not the Luddites, who was considered as engaging in immoral and illegal practices. The Luddites resisted the politics of domination embedded within the new technology, and the community gave them support. Between 1811 and 1813 thousands of machines and even complete factories were destroyed, sometimes by groups of a couple of hundred masked and armed men (no women were allowed). However, their rage against the machine was by no means blind fury. Machines were destroyed that were - in Luddite terms - violating 'commonality'. In the words of the historian E.P. Thompson (Thompson, 1965: 554). 'every attack revealed planning and method'. A report on a machine-wrecking event reads:

"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 belonged to masters who had not lowered their wages, they did not meddle with."

The Luddites were not unsuccessful (Hobsbawm, 1964: 17), and although they and their struggle were repressed, they also managed to transform social relations (Thompson, 1963: 602) and many former Luddites became principal political leaders of the *Hampdon Clubs*, committees campaigning for social reform. Much is there to be learned from a histiography of the Luddites, not so much from the attention to the act of wrecking itself, but rather from the politics behind it and the (local) consequences in transforming the interrelation between society and technology development. For example, while Hobsbawm argues that the wrecking of machines had a profound and long term impact, specifically by changing the intensity of their implementation, it has not been sufficiently clarified how social relations in these areas have been affected by the wreckers and their actions and whether new trajectories of technology development have been launched as a result. The reduction of child labor in mid 19th century England and the redesign of textile machines to the height of the new (adult) laborers is just one example which may contribute to an analysis of the Luddites as social-constructivists and re-designers. Finally, in the field of bio-technology, those who charge groups with the crime of Bio-Ludditism may also profit from a reconsideration of this social history.

References

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