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Reviewed Work(s): Rebels against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age by Kirkpatrick Sale

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Source: *American Quarterly*, Dec., 1997, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Dec., 1997), pp. 866-873

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/30041816

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Luddism and its Discontents

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***Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age*. By Kirkpatrick Sale. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1995. 320 pages. $24.00 (cloth). $13.00 (paper).**

IF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION BROUGHT UNPRECEDENTED SOCIAL dislocations and environmental devastation, the effects of what Kirkpatrick Sale now calls the second Industrial Revolution are the more subtle for being more pervasive. *Rebels Against the Future* joins a growing body of scholarship critical of the "high-tech" revolution in Western society generally and America specifically. This scholarship serves witness beyond the pale of academia to an emerging American subculture, with an attendant set of assumptions, that is variously dismissed by liberals as reactionary or praised as "radical and leading edge," as one of Sale's reviewers wrote. A contributing editor to *The Nation*, Sale writes his books on a typewriter, repudiating computers as does Wendell Berry. He is the author of several studies of Western imperialism, along with several more recent books about the environmental movement.[1] While distrust of technology continues to burgeon among Greens in the West, the present book explores an origin of that distrust in early nineteenth-century England and extracts a series of "lessons" to guide today's tribe of aspiring neo-Luddites.

The uprising began in England in 1811 with the advent of steam looms that supplanted skilled laborers in the textile industry, particularly in the lace and stocking trades. One consequence was that children as young as four and five, along with women, "came to make up roughly four fifths of the textile labor force by 1833, a population both easier to exploit and cheaper to hire than adult men" (33). Mortality rates were high, and life expectancy rates were low. Employment levels rose and fell to match the changing fashion trends. Exceedingly harsh legal penalties attended these

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conditions in Britain, including death for the theft of a five-shilling pair of boots (82). Milder grievances were punishable by "transportation," to the Australian colonies in this period, to the American colonies earlier, as fictionally befalls the heroine of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), who is rusticated to America after stealing a bundle of lace. High literacy levels were raising laborers' awareness of the causes and effects of the American and French revolutions; Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* "sold an astonishing 200,000 copies in Britain in 1793" (120). As skilled craftspeople became compelled to retool and transformed into mere attendants on machines—"a grueling process of deskilling, depersonalizing, demoralizing, and degrading . . . whose primary economic achievement was not even productivity but labor discipline" (200)—their indignation and resistance arose. This resistance took the form of systematic campaigns in the English Midlands to halt the mechanization of the textile industry.

The rebellion was confined to the counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire. Roving bands at night broke into factories and smashed the frames of steam-driven looms. They carried knives and pistols and threatened those who guarded the machines. They set fires and stole food and guns. Some of these rebel bands were reported to be at least 2,000 strong. They addressed pseudonymous letters of warning to manufacturers through the editors of newspapers who printed them; they posted bills and manifestoes in public places. All this was occurring in the same general area in which the Robin Hood legend had flourished for six hundred years. But the origins of the name "Ludd" are lost hopelessly in the fogs of legendry and old time. Among the several learned conjectures, one that seems plausible comes from Puritan poet and historian John Milton who connected King Lud of Britain's first-century B.C. "in legend with the Celtic god Lludd," who "'was hardy, and bold in Warr, in Peace a jolly Feaster'" (78). Variant denominations throughout the Luddite uprising included "General Ludd," "King Ludd," and "Ned Ludd." Anonymous verses remain to celebrate this short but fierce feud—which quickly took its place in Midlands mythology and continues today in the American environmental movement—but a fragment of one of the most telling of those verses reads:

> Chant no more your old rhymes about bold Robin Hood
> His feats I but little admire
> I will sing the Atchievements of General Ludd
> Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire. (81)

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More militantly, the first Luddite manifesto ("declaration: Extraordinary Justice. Death or Revenge") indicts anyone who would "gain riches by the misery of his Fellow Creatures" (74). So they construed the mechanization trend. Another, a pamphlet with more overtly revolutionary allusions, urged: "Come let us follow the Noble Example of the brave Citizens of Paris who . . . brought a Tyrant to the Ground" (116). English nobility listened closely. Once the violent backlash turned to murder, the government began to act.

By May, 1812, some 14,400 troops had been sent from London to the Midlands counties to quell the Luddite uprisings, a reaction occasioned in part by the murder near Huddersfield of manufacturer William Horsfall. By December of that same year, sixty-four men had been jailed. Within months, the list of casualties for rebels and sympathizers had risen to between fifteen and thirty-six "souls killed in action," twenty-four strung up on the public gallows, twenty-four "clapped in prison," and thirty-seven transported to Australia (148). Poet Percy Bysse Shelley "was so upset over the fate of these men that he immediately began a fund for their children, to which he forced all his friends to contribute" (183). The response of the English literati to these matters is instructive. While Byron, Carlyle, Cobbett, and Shelley objected in person and in print, "Jane Austen, busily transcribing the dreams of the delicate gentry, and Walter Scott, busily creating the dreams of a mythical past, had nothing to say" on the matter and in fact showed no signs of having been at all aware (198). (The modicum of social conscience that Austen's work admits in the cinema today is more an interpolation of the directors than part of her novels themselves.)

The responses of the English Romantic writers brought some of the larger problems of period Britain into focus. George Gordon, Lord Byron, then just ascended to his seat in the House of Lords, "made the Luddite cause the subject of his maiden speech," and later shared with his peers his sorrow over "men sacrificed to improvements in mechanisms" (68n., 89). But Byron's views did not prevail, and harsher laws were enacted against all Luddism. In the London *Morning Chronicle* Byron anonymously published an ironic poem in 1812 about public hangings of the Luddites that included,

> Men are more easily made than machinery—
> Stockings fetch better prices than lives—
> Gibbets on Sherwood will heighten the scenery,
> Showing how Commerce, how Liberty thrives!

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Two years later, in *The Excursion*, William Wordsworth would express his grief at viewing industrial pollution and other "such outrage done to nature as compels / The indignant power . . . to avenge her violated rights. . . ." Written after the Luddite uprising as they were, these lines resonate with a belief that comeuppance should be exacted by humans on behalf of nature. Byron again, in a different set of verses, these sent to his friend Thomas Moore in 1816, sympathetically adopted the voices and causes of the Luddites themselves:

> As the Liberty lads o'er the sea
> Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
> So we, boys, we
> Will die fighting, or live free,
> And down with all kings but King Ludd!

Two years later *Frankenstein* was published, "Mary Shelley's prescient tale of techno-madness," a warning about the dangers of runaway science, a book of fiction that appealed to the emotions of readers to make its critique (16).

Luddism thus, in its English inception, was full of the rhetoric of the class struggles that were besetting Britain during the reign of King George III—who was officially declared insane in 1811—and the Prince Regent his son, "the Prince of Pleasure." Luddism also was informed by the historical precedent of the successful breakaway of the colonial rebels in the American Revolution, followed by the more bloody and capricious French Revolution. At stake as well was the ability of English workers in general to unionize or, in period terms, form "combinations." But, according to Kirkpatrick Sale, the Luddite uprising was above all a skirmish to determine the willingness of workers to accede to the demands of capital and its manufactories. Sale admires the Luddites for remaining true to their secret oaths not to reveal one another; for organizing skillfully enough to force the government to call out 14,000 troops; and for the courage it took to resist the mechanization of an industry in which families had been working manually for generations. In its historical form, Luddism was "a strain of opposition to the domination of industrial technology and to its values of mechanization, consumption, exploitation, growth, competition, novelty, and progress" or, in summary, "a deep distrust of technology and resistance to its promises" (16).

From the outset a disclaimer in the "author's note" makes evident that Sale is sympathetic both to the plight of the Luddites in England and to the

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neo-Luddites today. Without elevating those workers displaced in the wake of the Industrial Revolution—without making Romantic heroes of them—he manages persuasively to see inside their motives and to condemn the violent and reactionary measures taken by Parliament. The shock of these reprisals was matched only by the poverty the people were forced to endure. In a powerful way Sale recreates the historical context through which latter-day Luddism can be understood. One glaring omission in *Rebels Against the Future,* however, is that no mention is made of Karl Marx, who not only was aware of the Luddites and their grievances but who in *Capital* extensively discussed the revolts of European workers against machinery and large-scale industry. From the early seventeenth century on, Marx notes, capital had overcome resistance to the advent of its machines only with great difficulty. To have noted so would seem to have added to Sale's arguments. Perhaps his disposition as a neo-Luddite is so far at odds with Marx on the original Luddite uprising that he chose not to discuss it. Of that event Marx says,

> It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilizes these instruments.[2]

Here and elsewhere, Marx spoke dismissively of both the causes and effects of the Luddite rebellion. Rather than constituting a high point in the history of workers' rejections of technology, as Sale construes it, Marx sees Luddism as an ignorant early phase in the evolution of the revolution that would inevitably take shape.

Quite apart from the Luddite war in England, period American writers were questioning technology's sway over the natural world. The impact of plow, axe, and gun upon native peoples and ecosystems in early America has been well documented, and early naturalists lamented the loss of species numbers and diversity as early as the seventeenth century.[3] A champion of the pastoral tradition in America, Thomas Jefferson almost certainly would have regarded with suspicion the decline of the small farm and the rise of mechanized agribusinesses today. Nathaniel Hawthorne cast a skeptical eye upon the applied sciences in several of his tales, including the hillside lime kiln in "Ethan Brand" where that character incinerates himself; the steam engine whose sight sickens Owen Warland, the engineer of a mechanical butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful"; and Aylmer's love of experimental science that causes him to kill his wife while striving

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to remove her blemish in "The Birthmark." Henry David Thoreau fulminated against the increasing mechanization of civilization, and his early death to tuberculosis may have been hastened by the fine graphite dust he inhaled while working in his family's pencil factory.[4] Most will remember how Ishmael in "The Try-Works" chapter of *Moby-Dick* swoons from gazing overlong at the rendering furnace of the *Pequod*—Ahab's doomed whaling ship named for the tribe massacred by the Puritans in 1638, a maritime vessel of destruction that used harpoons rather than muskets to conduct its hunt. In 1861 Rebecca Harding Davis published *Life in the Iron Mills*, her fictional account of "the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed, that goes on unceasingly from year to year."[5] The setting for this novella—the Ohio River at what is now Wheeling, West Virginia, with its blast furnaces and smelter mills—likewise negatively inspired poet James Wright one-hundred years later. In these classics of American literature a recurring theme is the dehumanizing aspects of technology and industrial production.

Neo-Luddism has forged some enigmatic alliances. A silent resistance to technology long has guided the Amish, Quakers, and Mennonites, whom visitors to the Midwest may be surprised to find continuing to drive horse-drawn buggies and going without electricity in their homes. Wendell Berry has the protagonist of his novel *Remembering*—who despairs of chemically intensive farming and loses a hand in a threshing machine—regain faith in farming by meeting an Amish family who do not routinely use chemicals to grow crops. Berry long has spoken for folks who would recuse themselves from the cycles of technology. But decisions to unplug are not based alone on fears that auto emissions and electromagnetic fields are going to harm us. It is also the loss of community, family, and human touch that is at stake. The lessons of so-called Agrarians or Fugitive poets pertain. In the 1920s and 1930s this group wrote poetry and cultural criticism in the American South that promoted a return to regionalism as a stay against the rise of corporate industries. Their manifesto—"symposium," as they preferred—was named *I'll Take My Stand*. In northern circles their work has been discredited due to their affiliation with New Criticism, which now has been all but supplanted by poststructuralist and postmodern thought. With their emphasis on small-scale farms and sustainable economies, the Agrarians most resemble the bioregionalists of the environmental movement today.

What would constitute a neo-Luddite strain of literature or culture? In the wake of the bombings of the World Trade Center and the Murrah

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Federal Building in Oklahoma City—not to mention almost routine mass murders by gunfire in America's heartland and the rise of citizens' militias—it is hard to imagine a critique of technologies and economies that will not degenerate potentially into violence. Most problematic of all today in any discussion of neo-Luddism is the terrorism of the Unabomber—allegedly the Harvard-eduated former math professor Theodore Kaczynski—who killed three and wounded twenty-three in an eighteen-year campaign against American industrialists and businessmen. His 35,000-word manifesto makes evident his contempt for leftists, however, complicating any alleged alliances with environmental groups like Earth First!. Moreover, Earth First! campaigns have been wholly non-violent, despite media distortions to the contrary.[6] Reasonably enough, tree spiking and machine wrecking do not qualify as violence in the minds of modern Luddites, nor has anyone been hurt as a consequence of these activities. The injury of George Alexander, a mill worker in northern California whose saw blade hit a tree spike, did not implicate the activities of Earth First![7] Hasty generalizations and charges of guilt by association will still continue to be made. Where is the common ground? Psychologist Chellis Glendinning has taken the first step toward codifying a set of Neo-Luddite philosophical principles.

In "Notes Toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto," which Kirkpatrick Sale celebrates as a "remarkable document," Glendinning speaks for many Americans of differing political persuasions who agree in trepidation that "technologies created and disseminated by modern Western societies are out of control and desecrating the fragile fabric of life on Earth" (238).[8] And Sale, in *Rebels Against the Future*, expands on Glendinning's manifesto with eight of his own "lessons" or planks of a Neo-Luddite platform on which many Greens and other members of this growing American subculture agree:

1. Technologies are never neutral, and some are hurtful.
2. Industrialism is always a cataclysmic process, destroying the past, roiling the present, making the future uncertain.
3. Only a people serving an "apprenticeship to nature" can be trusted with machines.
4. The nation-state, synergistically intertwined with industrialism, will always come to its aid and defense, making revolt futile and reform ineffectual.
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.

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6. Politically, resistance to industrialism must force not only "the machine question" but the viability of industrial society into public consciousness and debate.
7. Philosophically, resistance to industrialism must be embedded in an analysis—an ideology, perhaps—that is morally informed, carefully articulated, and widely shared.
8. If the edifice of industrial civilization does not eventually crumble as a result of a determined resistance within its very walls, it seems certain to crumble of its own accumulated excesses and instabilities within not more than a few decades, perhaps sooner, after which there may be space for alternative societies to rise. (261–79)

Scholars who hope to understand the hermeneutics of suspicion now known as Luddism or neo-Luddism—who want to learn more than the newspapers can offer about what went into the Unabomber's world view—would do well to read these important works by Kirkpatrick Sale and Chellis Glendinning.

NOTES

1. *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (Philadelphia,1985); and *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962–1992* (New York, 1993).
2. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York, 1977), 554.
3. See especially, Charles F. Carroll, *The Timber Economy of Puritan New England* (Providence, R.I., 1973); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983); and Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500–1800* (New York, 1990). John Josselyn noted flocks of passenger pigeons five miles long upon his first visit to New England, but within thirty years wrote, "of late they are much diminished, the English taking them with nets," in *John Josselyn, Colonial Traveler: A Critical Edition of "Two Voyages to New-England,"* ed. Paul J. Lindholdt (Hanover, 1988), 71.
4. This according to Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (New York, 1982), 56–57.
5. Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills, or, The Korl Woman* (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1972), 19.
6. See, for example, Joe Klein, "The Unabomber and the Left," *Time*, 22 Apr. 1996, 39.
7. Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago, 1990), 76–77, demonstrates that a sheriff's investigation of Alexander's injury did not implicate environmental groups.
8. Chellis Glendinning, "Notes Toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto," *Utne Reader*, Mar.–Apr. 1990, 50. Also see her book, *When Technology Wounds: The Human Consequences of Technology* (New York, 1990).

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