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The Luddites War on Industry: A story of machine smashing and spies

Do or Die

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spies
1997

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An article from Do or Die Issue 6. In the paper edition, this article appears on page(s) 65–71. This article started off as a review but soon turned into some sort of synopsis arising from the reading of two books, both written by radical ecologists. “Rebels Against the Future” by KirkPatrick Sale, published in 1995. This is the most recent in depth book on the subject and it’s written in an exciting, but well sourced way. Like the best novels you can’t wait to turn the pages. John Zerzan’s two essays, ‘Who Killed Ned Ludd?’ and ‘Industrialisation and Domestication’ are dryer but his analysis is sharp. They were first published in book form in 1988.

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flames first from our dwelling. It is now nine o'clock at night, and I learn the mob are more outrageous than ever..."¹⁵

Part I: The Luddites' War on Industry

¹⁵ *Rebels Against the Future*, p.132

‘Chant no more your old rhymes about bold Robin Hood, His feats I but little admire, I will sing the achievements of General Ludd, Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire’

In fifteen months at the beginning of the second decade of the last century a movement of craft workers and their supporters declared war on the then emerging industrial society.

The movement spread across the Northern counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. It smashed thousands of machines, looted markets, burned down factories and spread hope of a way out of the bleak future being offered the majority of the British people. It was a movement that, in the words of the late radical historian E.P. Thompson; “in sheer insurrectionary fury has rarely been more widespread in English History.”

It is important to understand the birth of Industrialism. If we are to successfully dismantle the present system, it is essential to know how – and why – it was constructed.

The Birth of the New Society & the Destruction of the Old

The elites that built up Industry had been growing in power, and the ideas and technologies that allowed them to grow had been festering for centuries. Its conception may have been long before, but its birth was a sudden calamity that accelerated change in society at an unprecedented rate. The Industrial Revolution, from roughly 1780 to 1830, mutated everything. It altered the way the majority of people lived, first in Britain and now all over the world. Just as societies are being shaped all over the globe into one monoculture; so the life systems of the planet are also changing unrecognisably. The results of the society that was born in those 50 years will re-

Love or Machinery

The Bill to make frame breaking a capital offence was unopposed in the House of Lords. Save the romantic poet Byron, whose close friend (also a great poet) Percy Shelley set up a fund for Luddite orphans. Largely in reaction to Luddism his wife, Mary Shelley, wrote ‘Frankenstein’, still the most eloquent and beautiful treatise against the machine. Interestingly her parents were William Godwin, one of the founders of anarchism, and Mary Wolfenscraft, the founder of feminism.

In a further historical twist, Byron left his first wife and his daughter was brought up to hate the values he stood for, nature and love; growing up instead to be obsessed with machinery and mathematics. Working with Babbage, inventor of the first computer, she founded programming. In honour, the US nuclear missile control computer is named after her.

NOT a good day for Goodair

John Goodair had a factory in Stockport, Cheshire, the size of a city block with eight thousand spindles and two hundred looms. On April the 14th 1812 a mob of two to three thousand (in a parish of only fifteen thousand) descended on his mill and mansion after smashing the windows of other industrialists’ houses. At noon, led by two men dressed as women who proclaimed they were ‘General Ludd’s wives’, the crowd stormed his mansion. The following is part of a letter written by his wife.

“Everything, I have since learnt, was consumed by the fire, and nothing left but the shell. The mob next proceeded to the factory, where they broke the windows, destroyed the looms, and cut all the work which was in progress; and having finished this mischief, they repeated the three cheers which they gave on seeing the

The Lancashire Mills and the Devastation of the Colonies

Even at this early stage in the Industrial Society, capitalists defended their interests internationally. The British mills started processing a crop which up until then was a luxury imported from the Orient: Cotton. The creation of plantations meant the eviction of millions of small farmers all over the globe. A process of enclosure already carried out in Britain.

Just as the British factory owners had deliberately gone out to destroy the Lancashire outworkers, 'In India, the British set about the deliberate destruction of the indigenous industry... The British owned East India Company was able to exert coercive control over India's handloom weavers, who rapidly lost their independence as producers and in many instances became waged workers employed on terms and conditions over which they had no control....When the East India Company's monopoly was abolished in 1813, Indian weaving was too debilitated to resist the flooding of the market with inferior products from the Lancashire mills...[This process was carried out all over the world and]...within the space of less than a hundred years, the Lancashire cotton industry had consigned to extinction countless native textile [production systems] whose techniques and designs had evolved over centuries ...

In the early 20th Century, Gandhi organised a boycott of British made cloth and championed the spinning wheel as a means of reviving the local economy. In public meetings he " would ask the people to take off their foreign clothing and put it on a heap. When all the hats, coats, shirts, trousers, underwear, socks and shoes had been heaped up high, Gandhi set a match to them"...The spinning wheel remains upon the Indian flag as a reminder of the traditional industries and markets that were consumed by the cotton industry.' — from 'Whose Common Future?', *The Ecologist*, p.28, available from Dead Trees Distribution.

bound through millions of years of evolutionary change. Norman Myers, a leading biodiversity scientist, has said:

"The impending upheaval in evolution's course could rank as one of the greatest biological revolutions of paleontological time. In scale and significance, it could match the development of aerobic respiration, the emergence of flowering plants and the arrival of limbed animals."¹

Change beyond imagination.

But change has to burst forward somewhere, and it burst forward here in Britain.

Lancashire, say 1780:

"The workshop of the weaver was a rural cottage, from which when he tired of sedentary labour he could sally forth into his little garden, and with the spade or the hoe tend its culinary productions. The cotton wool which was to form his weft was picked clean by the fingers of his younger children, and the yarn was carded and spun by the older girls assisted by his wife, and the yarn was woven by himself assisted by his sons..."²

A family often had no single employer but hired its looms, supplied with the raw materials by businessmen who then marketed the finished products. Workers had a large amount of control over their own labour. They produced only enough to keep themselves comfortable and if the fancy took them they might not work for

¹ Norman Myers, "A Winnowing For Tomorrow's World", the Guardian, London, 24.4.92.

² Quoted in "Rebels Against the Future", by Kirkpatrick Sale, London 1995, p.25

days. Even after the enclosures took away large amounts of common land they subsisted for a great percentage on what they grew in their gardens. Basically they shaped their work around their lives, rather than their lives around their work. These were a strong people.

Lancashire, say 1814:

“There are hundreds of factories in Manchester which are five or six stories high. At one side of each factory there is a great chimney which belches forth black smoke and indicates the presence of the powerful steam engines. The smoke from the chimneys forms a great cloud that can be seen for miles around the town. The houses have become black on account of the smoke. The river upon which Manchester stands is so tainted with colouring matter that the water resembles the contents of a dye-vat...To save wages mule Jennies have actually been built so that no less than 600 spindles can be operated by one adult and two children...In the large spinning mills machines of different kinds stand in rows like regiments in an army.”³

Insurrections and riots were so common throughout the preceding centuries that the English poor have been characterised as one of the greatest mobs of all time. The spectre of revolution in France and America left the English rich with the realisation that they were walking on a knife edge: or more accurately that of a guillotine.

Enclosure had given the new ruling class greater control over the land but crafts people still constituted a major counter current to the prevailing order. They had to be domesticated.

³ Ibid

Part II: Appendix

nate connection with the rest of life. Walking the streets of Manchester or Leeds, knowing that you walk the same streets as machine-destroying, free-food distributing, prison-breaking crowds, gives one a feeling of being rooted.

Machine haters walk again in the Luddite Triangle, in fact some of our movement's most dramatic moments have been there. The successful campaign in the early 90's to stop peat extraction on Thorne Moors just outside Leeds, came to a close when saboteurs destroyed 100,000 worth of machinery. Two weeks later the company (Fisons) sold up. The Lancashire M65 campaign (see DoD 5) was a turning point in tree-based campaigns, and before the A30 Fairmile eviction was the longest eviction in British history.

Early this year the Director of Manchester Airport and newly elected Labour MP Graham 'Two Sheds' Stringer spluttered that the anti-airport activists were 'just Luddites'. The one thousand hectares of land that he wants to destroy lies in Cheshire — one of the bastions of the original 'luddite mobs'. As small groups, 'with scarves to cover their faces', 'march out from strong communities', to 'pull down fences and destroy machinery', Stringer would do well to remember what happened the last time someone poured scorn on the Luddites who roamed Cheshire, (see bottom box).

As we dance with the ghosts of our political ancestors our struggle for life and our struggle to live illuminates a future world.

"Down with all kings but King Ludd!"

Factories were not built simply because of technological innovations, but more as a project of social control to limit the power of the 'poor'. To break their spirit.

In 1770, a writer envisioned a new plan for making the poor productive: The House of Terror, in which the inhabitants would be obliged to work for 14 hours a day and controlled by keeping them on a starvation diet. His idea was not that far ahead of its time; a generation later, the House of Terror was simply called a factory. Andrew Ure, one of the greatest proponents of Industry, wrote in 1835:

"If science was put to the service of capital, the recalcitrant worker's docility would be assured."

Factories meant regimented and unprecedented work hours, horrific pollution, dangerous working conditions, unsanitary living space with virulent diseases, early death, a starvation diet and a total lack of freedom. Nobody entered the factory system willingly. Men, war widows, young women and very often children, lived in a system one Yorkshire man described in 1830 as: "*a state of slavery more horrid than ... that hellish system — Colonial Slavery*".⁴ These workers, who one doctor surveying Manchester in 1831 described as "*a degenerate race — human beings stunted, enfeebled, and depraved*",⁵ were the refugees of a destroyed society.

Just as small farmers had been pushed off their land by enclosure, so the crafts people were purposefully pushed from relative autonomy to a situation of dependence. Whole regions, thousands of communities were broken up and reorganised to suit the wishes of the factory owners. Much of the populace were thrown aside to starve, or forced to become wage slaves in factories literally modelled after prisons. Cities and misery multiplied.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

Petitions were handed to parliament, meetings and rallies were held but nothing came of it. With nobody to turn to but themselves, the weavers took direct action.

The Birth of Luddism

“The night of November 4th, a Monday, was cloudy but still not winter-cold. In the little village of Bulwell, some four miles north of Nottingham, a small band gathered somewhere in the darkness and ... blackened their faces or pulled up scarves across their faces, counted off in military style, hoisted their various weapons – hammers, axes, pistols, “swords, firelocks, and other offensive weapons” (as one report had it) – and marched in more or less soldierly fashion to their destination. Outside the house that was most likely the home of a master weaver named Hollingsworth they posted a guard to make sure no neighbours interfered with their work, suddenly forced their way inside through shutters or doors, and destroyed half a dozen frames... Reassembling at some designated spot, the little band responded in turn to a list of numbers called out, and when each man had accounted for himself a pistol was fired and they disbanded, heading home.

A week later, this time on a Sunday night, the workers attacked again: same procedure, same target, only this time Hollingsworth was ready. In preparation for a renewed attack, he had sent some of his frames to Nottingham for storage and had arranged for seven or eight of his workers and neighbours to stand watch with muskets over the seven frames remaining. When the attackers approached the house they demanded that Hollingsworth let them in or surrender his frames, and when he refused a shot rang out and a fusillade of eighteen or twenty shots was exchanged.

One young man, a weaver from the nearby village named John Westley was shot – while “tearing down the window shutters to obtain entrance by force” ... before he died he “had just time to

The internalisation of industrial logic by ‘liberation’ movements would lead to the ‘revolutionary collectivisation’ of the Soviet peasantry and its associated gulags, and many of the worst moments of the 20th Century. Whole generations were held both in slavery to industry and in awe of it.

The Rebirth of Luddism?

But many of us have begun, in recent years, to see industry for what is. To reject industrial logic and embrace our desires. Both Sale and Zerzan end on a positive note. Sale sees an upsurge in luddite like resistance in direct action/radical ecology, indigenous struggle and in many third world movements. Zerzan says that those who now reject ‘the new society’ have also rejected the old ideologies of the left.

The ‘new society’ worships all that is new. Buy new Ariel automatic. Buy new activist – fully body pierced for a limited period only. We are told by the media – the advance guard of the spectacle – to constantly change so that we can continue to be news. But nothing is truly new – with the exception of the scale and complexity of the problem. Our struggles are recent battles in an old war.

The spectacle attempts to destroy its real history and that of its opponents while creating a sanitised version of the past, which it can then sell back to consumers as a commodity. When we learn about OUR history, our ancestors, it is both inspiring and instructive. By looking at past conflicts we can learn more about our ‘new’ ones. By learning about the mistakes of the past we may avoid making them in the future.

As rebels, revolutionaries and romantics we are citizens of a future society we have yet to give birth to. Feeling out of place in this society, alienation is very painful. Much like realising that we are descended from apes, in fact are apes, gives us a feeling of in-

Less than a decade later, in 1825, the unions were officially recognised by the repeal of the Combination Acts — a measure supported by the majority of the British state.

The insurrection never came and Luddism slowly died, not with a grand finale but more with the actors leaving the stage one by one. The final event that can be accurately named Luddite came in June 1817. A state infiltrator named ‘Oliver’ convinced two hundred people from Pentrich, Derbyshire, to march out and join “a cloud of men” sweeping down from Scotland & Yorkshire on their way to London. Instead they were met by two mounted magistrates and a company of soldiers. Forty six were arrested, three of which were executed, fourteen transported to Australia and nine imprisoned.

Luddism was the last fitful struggle before, like a broken in horse, the English poor lay down, resigned to wage slavery. The meagre struggles that followed rarely aimed at reclaiming peoples’ lives from work; but merely getting a better deal for the slaves.

The poor started to identify themselves more and more with the idea of work, abhorrent only 50 years before. Concepts like the ‘dignity of labour’ and ‘laziness is sin’ multiplied. As Leopold Roc put it, *“There is always a tendency to rationalise insults when revenge does not take place.”* The strange belief spread that technologies created to bolster obedience and elite power were ‘neutral’ — and could exist in a free world — in fact were the key. The idea that we should organise our lives around work was the very opposite of what the Luddites stood for.

The workers’ internalisation of industrial logic would be more disastrous than any army the manufacturers could muster. Even when the ‘workers’ movement seized power, its aim became to run industrialism itself. Revolutions came and went but to paraphrase the Anti-Election Alliance, ‘Whoever you deposed, the industrial system always got in.’ Party and trade union leaders easily made the transition to factory managers.

exclaim ‘Proceed, my brave fellows, I die with a willing heart!’” His comrades bore the body to the edge of a nearby wood and then returned “with a fury irresistible by the force opposed to them” and broke down the door while the family and the guards escaped by the back door.

They then smashed the frames and apparently some of the furniture, and set fire to the house, which was a gutted ruin within an hour; the men dispersed into the night, never identified, never caught.

That same night just a few miles away in Kimberly, another group of men raided a shop and destroyed ten or twelve frames...

On Tuesday a cart carrying eight or nine looms to safety from the Maltby and Brewwet firm in Sutton, fifteen miles north of Nottingham, was stopped ... and men with their faces blackened smashed its cargo with heavy hammers, bent the metal parts to uselessness, and made a bonfire of the wooden pieces in the middle of the street.

That evening a thousand men descended on Sutton from nearby villages, assembling at a milestone on the main road to the north, and marched on the town with their axes and pikes and hammers; about three hundred of them were said to be armed with muskets and pistols. The number of machines they broke is given as somewhere between thirty-seven and seventy, said to be “the frames of the principal weavers” of the town, one of whom, named Betts, whose shop was completely destroyed, was reported to have died soon after, “deranged.”⁶

Luddism had begun.

An Outrageous Spirit of Tumult & Riot

With weavers’ taverns acting as rallying points, news spread from village to village. Inspired by the success of the first actions,

⁶ Ibid, p.71

communities all over the North started to act. At least a hundred frames were attacked in the last week of November, another hundred and fifty or more in December.

“There is an outrageous spirit of tumult and riot,” *the magistrates of Nottingham told the public in November 1811*. “Houses are broken into by armed men, many stocking frames are destroyed, the lives of opposers are threatened, arms are seized, haystacks are fired, and private property destroyed.”⁷

The spirit of rebellion rapidly spread across the Northern counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.

Posters were pinned up on the doors of offending workshops, warning them to concede to the demands of ‘Ned Ludd’s Army’ or suffer the consequences. For many businessman the threat worked as well as the act.

Most luddite literature makes reference to ‘General Ludd’ but there was no such leader. Instead it was a reference to a (conceivably true) folktale of the time. The story goes that a Nottingham lad at the end of the previous century had been enraged with his loom and had set his hammer to it.

Machine destruction had been a tactic of the weavers and their kind since at least midway through the previous century. What was different about the Luddites was exactly the opposite of how many imagine them. Read many accounts, especially those written by supporters of the trade unions, and the Luddites come across as mindless and disorganised, who if born a few centuries later would probably be kicking in bus shelters. True, Luddism was not the act of pre-organised political groups. However it was often much more powerful; a defensive reaction of communities under threat.

⁷ Ibid p.79

*and ammunitions in most towns, and in Huddersfield of ‘all of the arms’ ... ‘every article of lead’, wrote a correspondent from the West Riding, ‘such as pumps, water spouts is constantly disappearing to be converted into bullets.’*¹²

According to one Luddite letter:

“He [*General Ludd*] wishes me to state that though his troops here are not at present making any movement that is not for want of force — as the organisation is quite strong in Yorkshire — but that they are at present only devising the best means for the grand attack.”¹³

The turn to openly revolutionary strategy must have put many Luddites off, who instead set their hopes once again on reformism. If a regional insurrection with little communication with the rest of Britain was unlikely to defeat the Manufactures, how much more likely was it that they would kneel before petitions to Parliament?

Although unions were technically illegal under the Combination Acts, courts often held them to be legal. Many voices within the establishment saw the unions as a way to pacify the workers. When you’re talking, you’re not fighting. The unions themselves (then as now) told the workers to stay away from sabotage, and to negotiate with the factory owners rather than fight the system itself. In Zerzan’s words:

“Unionism played the critical role in [Luddism’s] ... defeat, through the divisions, confusion, and deflection of energies the unions engineered.”¹⁴

¹² Ibid p.161

¹³ Ibid p.151

¹⁴ *Elements of Refusal*, p.149

suburb of Manchester, had 1,500 (10% of the male population); Manchester itself had 4,000; and Nottingham had around 1,000.”¹¹

Armed municipal watch brigades roamed many towns; as did manufacturer-organised goon squads.

Professional spies were brought in, informers paid. Generous bribes for information (in what was for many a famine) were posted up. Communities, for the most, stayed strong. Surprisingly few turned traitor. However, many in the movement were scared into the inactivity. Luddite attacks on frames decreased. But this wasn't solely because of the state. Trye, the towns were awash with soldiers, but there weren't that many frames left to smash. Luddism changed form.

The Death of Luddism

To attempt to repeat the actions of the previous months would have been mad. Those luddites still active (a considerable number) changed tactics. Understanding that the rich had quite literally declared war, Ned Ludd's Army began to arm itself. Luddite gangs roamed through the counties gathering, by force, guns from any source they could.

“[John Lloyd a government agent], told the Home Office that ‘bodies of a hundred and upwards ... have entered houses night after night and made seizures of arms’... Vice-Lieutenant Wood the same month reported that there had been ‘some hundreds of cases’ ... leading him to fear it would all end ‘in open rebellion against the government of the country...’ A Parliamentary Committee reported in July ‘considerable’ theft of guns

¹¹ Ibid p.149

The blackfaced figures marching over fields towards the hated factory had probably known each other since they were kids. They had played at similar ‘games’ (maybe ‘hunting the French’) as gangs of children. They had been brought up with stories of struggle, in which the actors were as often as not their parents, grandparents or ‘im down the pub’.

Though actions in nearby villages would often be done at the same time to stretch the soldiers, there is no evidence to suggest that there was any serious co-ordination across the counties. But such co-ordination was probably unnecessary and dangerous.

Many Luddite attacks included women (although unsurprisingly this was not the norm). On the 24th April 1812, a very successful attack was carried out on a mill outside Bolton only an hour or so after the soldiers sent to protect it had left.

*“About fifty assembled near the mill... [descending on it]... they smashed through the gates and started to break windows in the mill, led by two young women, Mary Molyneux, 19, and her sister Lydia, 15, who were seen, according to court papers, “with Muck Hooks and coal Picks in their hands breaking the windows of the building”... shouting “Now Lads” to encourage the men on. With the windows broken, men took straw from the stables and set a series of fires inside: “The whole of the Building,” wrote the Annual Register correspondent, “with its valuable machinery, cambrics, &c, were entirely destroyed.”*⁸

The spirit of revolt spread well beyond the confines of the textile workers. Riots broke out in many towns and food was redistributed. The whole of the north-west was verging on insurrection.

Hangmen, Prison Ships, Spies and Battalions: The State fights back

⁸ Ibid p.143

‘Those villains, the weavers, are all grown refractory,
Asking some succour for charity’s sake —
So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory,
That will at once put an end to mistake.

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

Some folks for certain have thought it was shocking,
When Famine appeals, and when Poverty groans,
That life should be valued at less than a stocking,
And breaking of frames lead to breaking of bones.

If it should prove so, I trust, by this token,
(And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)
That the frames of the fools may be first to be broken,
Who, when asked for a remedy, send down a rope.’⁹

— *Byron*

Battalions of soldiers were sent to the North. But with the eyes and ears of the community protecting them, the Luddites were often one step ahead. No intelligence system in the world is better than the collective solidarity of a community. Byron joyfully summed it up:

⁹ *London Morning Chronicle*, March 2nd 1812

“Such marchings and countermarchings! From Nottingham to Bulwell, from Bulwell to Banford, from Banford to Mansfield! And when at length detachments arrived at their destination, in all “the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war,” they came just in time to witness what had been done, and ascertain the escape of the perpetrators, to collect ... the fragments of broken frames, and return to their quarters amidst the derision of old women and the hootings of children.”¹⁰

The state dramatically raised the stakes. Frame breaking itself was punishable only(?) by 14 years transportation to Australia. On March 5th 1812, a bill was passed to make the breaking of machines an offence punishable by death. (See *Love and Machinery*.)

With the normal means of suppression failing the state organised an army of occupation in the north-west. More and more soldiers were sent. By May 1812 there were 14,400, including thousands of cavalry men and full artillery units. Three months before, the Home Secretary had admitted that the force sent to crush the Luddite rebellion in Nottinghamshire was the largest ever used in the history of the country. But as of the 1st May, an army seven times as large was operating in the ‘Luddite Triangle’. The scale of the presence was such that one out of every seventy people in the counties was a soldier. There were a thousand soldiers stationed in Huddersfield, a town of only ten thousand.

On top of the army were the voluntary militia, an early version of the Territorial Army. It had around twenty thousand in the affected area. On top of them the magistrates had a small amount of constables. On top of these were the ‘special constables’.

“By May it was said, Bolton had 400 special constables making rounds every night, usually armed; Salford, a

¹⁰ *Rebels Against the Future*, p.97