

In Defense of the Living Earth

Theodore Roszak

Pity the poor Luddites! No movement in history has done more undeserved service as an ideological whipping boy. For nearly two centuries, this small contingent of the doomed and desperate men who struggled across the pages of English history in a few brief outbursts between 1811 and 1816 has been a favorite target for the contempt of fanatical futurists and technological enthusiasts. The Luddites are indeed held in such contempt that their critics have never felt the least need to find out who they really were and what they wanted. Recall the famous Groucho Marx quip: "I'd never join a club that admitted people like me." I suspect many of those who are out to bash the Luddites would invoke the same paradox: "I wouldn't waste my time studying people as crazy as that." As "crazy" as what? It doesn't really matter. If the Luddites had never existed, their critics would have to invent them. Those who favor indiscriminate industrial growth need an opposition that is just as indiscriminate in its hostility to industrialism—the better to score easy points.

Briefly, then, for the record: There has never been a movement that simply and unthinkingly hated machines and set about destroying them. There has never been a movement that called all technology evil and demanded its repeal in favor of reverting to fingernails and incisors. There has never been a movement that suggested that we live in caves and do without running water. The original Luddites were not such people. The Neo-Luddites who have produced this book are not such people. The Ur-Luddites of the English Industrial Revolution were angry

weavers who had been “downsized” out of their jobs by factory owners who ousted them in favor of power looms and knitting frames. The weavers, the first victims of technological unemployment, with no union to speak for them and no welfare benefits to draw upon, understandably found this unfair. They appealed for justice, first to the owners, then to Parliament. Their petitions, regarded as illiterate and presumptuous, went unanswered. Only then did they go underground and resort to guerrilla tactics. As followers of the mythical General Ned Ludd, they declared themselves an “Army of Redressers” and threatened to sabotage any owner who refused to bargain with them. That is how they got involved in machine wrecking. Yes, they did burn down a few machine sheds. But there is only one instance of violence against people—an owner who was killed. The Redressers never harmed the person or property of those who negotiated with them. In any case, they were soon suppressed by armed force; several were hanged for destroying private property; the rest dispersed.

That small, futile gesture of defiance at the outset of the Industrial Revolution was enough to earn the original Luddites a place in history. They were the first to make it clear that industrialism is not an unmixed blessing, that technology is not neutral. They had learned in the school of hard knocks that there can be such a thing as inappropriate technology: machines and systems of machines that sacrifice the public good to enrich a selfish few. A simple point, but one that continues to get buried in the propaganda of “progress.” Beyond that, the first Luddites were, in fact, so moderate in their demands that I suspect the Neo-Luddites you will find in this collection would be sorely disappointed in them if they once more walked among us. I think the Luddites of 1811 would have settled for a living wage and some job security. Their protest arose not from philosophical first principles, but from the anxiety and indignation of the hungry men. Had their grievances been met with a fair response, they might well have deemed steam technology beneficial. The new power looms, after all, did a good job of producing cheap cottons. Cheap cottons meant clean underwear, and clean underwear meant healthier people.

Neo-Luddites, who are mainly academics and writers, take a vastly more critical view of technology. As they should. Two centuries into the Industrial Revolution, we have far more experience to draw upon—especially the experience of megatechnology and multinational corporate control, forces that go far beyond the struggling little textile mills of

Manchester and Leeds. Above all, we have the experience of rampant biospheric degradation, an issue that belongs distinctly to our time. The first reports we find of environmental impact in the industrial records describe the pall of smoke that could be seen at a distance over the factory towns of the English midlands. At the time, some observers identified that as an exciting sign of progress, and so, too, the railroads that put the steam engine on wheels and soon took it across the landscape at ten, twenty, thirty miles an hour. These were wonders of the world in their time and not easily dismissed with philosophical disdain.

Today, the inhumanity and destructiveness of industrialism take different and subtler forms and have reached global proportions. One has to be on the far side of the Industrial Revolution to see such issues clearly. And what those issues illuminate is the problem of *scale* in human affairs. *Bigness*: That is the devil that lies waiting in the details of every good thing we invent or merchandise. A program, a project, an invention may seem benign and constructive. But build it on too big a scale—as is bound to be the case where profit is the measure of progress—and it will turn on you like Frankenstein’s monster.

In confronting that monster, some of my fellow Neo-Luddites can be sweeping in their prescription for technology withdrawal. Perhaps they are right in their absolutism. Maybe our species cannot be trusted with anything that gets much beyond water wheels and windmills. But then there are those in the conflicted middle, who, for all their principles, boarded a 747 to attend the conferences where these discussions took place, who employ word processors to write their critiques, and who use e-mail to keep in touch across the world. I count myself among these. I have no choice but to be conflicted. The only reason I am alive to write this essay today is because several years ago an ingenious new surgical procedure saved my life. Some years later, another medical miracle saved my wife’s life. For this, I am grateful. Without pharmaceutical support for my asthma, I would probably stop breathing tomorrow—though I more and more suspect that the industrial pollutants that come with the pharmaceuticals were responsible for the disease in the first place.

And beyond dire necessities, I confess to finding both pleasure and fascination in much modern technology. I think motion pictures are a magnificent art form, I believe electricity is a marvelous convenience. I even enjoy good television—when I can find it. I regard the science behind that technology as the most enthralling intellectual adventure of

our age. I can even admire the genius that built the word processor I am using to keystroke this essay, though I live in fear that our growing computer dependence will spell disaster at some point not far down the line.

I say all this to raise an issue. Can a Neo-Luddite make so many compromises with Modernity? I would say yes, because I believe wisdom in these matters lies precisely in the conflict. Tearing as it is, the conflict comprehends the whole of human nature, the compassionate and the demonic, the mad and the magnificent. The talents of *Homo faber* are not the whole of human culture, but they account for many of our greatest achievements. I cannot write them off. But nothing debases those talents more readily than the arrogance of insisting that they, and the corporate forces that control them, can be trusted to prescribe their own values and limits.

The Neo-Luddite critique is utterly rational and realistic. Owning machines is a form of power. Using those machines to drive people off the land or out of a job, to cheat them in the marketplace, or to desecrate the natural environment is an abuse of power. Neo-Luddites know that true progress—improvements in the quality of life, not the quantity of goods—never grows from machines, but from the judgment and conscience of our fellow human beings. Technological enthusiasm clouds that judgment; profiteering corrupts the conscience. By way of an alternative, Neo-Luddites opt for prudence and the human scale. Theirs is a simple program: scale down, slow down, decentralize, democratize. Sound views, humane values, but hardly as thrilling as the promise that corporate chieftains and technophilic enthusiasts make to those who will sell them their souls. At the beginning of the modern era, Sir Francis Bacon authored the mission statement of “the New Philosophy.” It was nothing less than “to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe.” The oldest temptation in the world. “*And ye shall be as gods.*”

High tech, the subtlest and most seductive stage of industrialism, has sweetened that temptation to the maximum. It has made so much seem so possible! It seems to offer us nothing short of magic. By clicking buttons and flicking switches, we can create our own virtual universe and bend nature to our will. Breed perfect babies, enjoy medical immortality, redesign the plants and animals to our specifications, globe-trot the planet on economy fares, lunch at the Ramada Antarctica, tune in to a thousand channels of nonstop entertainment, colonize the cosmos. There has never been so intoxicating, nor so deluded, a program.

There is a note of extremity to much of the discussion in this volume.

That is understandable. What have Neo-Luddites to hold against the Titanic powers and infantile obsessions of the industrial establishment? Not much, it would seem. A plea for living within limits, an appeal for loyalty to place, a respect for the natural order of things that was here before us and never needed us. These are easily drowned out by Promethean sound and fury. But to despair is to overlook the fact that Neo-Luddites have a powerful ally. She is called Earth. Her life-enhancing capacities are robust and deeply rooted; they have triumphed over numerous planetary emergencies: the taming of the oxygenated atmosphere, innumerable meteor collisions, ice ages, “Great Dyings.” The environmental limits that Neo-Luddites would have us respect are Earth’s, not ours, and they will not long be violated. Some postmodernist thinkers, hopelessly sunk in the dazzling theatrics of the urban world, believe we are as free to fabricate values as to change last year’s fashions or pick numbers in a lottery. They are wrong. Life and mind emerge from an evolutionary history and remain ecologically contextualized. There are limits to our “dominion over the universe.” Those limits are, I suspect, generously broad, but they are not infinite. Eventually our excesses will be balanced out. Does that sound consoling? It shouldn’t. When the balance is struck, the casualties of the adjustment may include *us*, our species as a whole, the innocent and the guilty alike. We do well to recall that no species, not even our two-legged, wordy-headed own, can live beyond the means afforded by the biosphere, and none are exempt from extinction.

The Neo-Luddites, the spiritual descendants of St. Francis and William Blake, Tolstoy and Kropotkin, William Morris and Martin Buber, Black Elk and Gandhi, are the only biocentric political movement we have. Theirs is a defense of the living Earth. They alone have bravely faced the great moral challenge of our time: the creation of a sustainable postindustrial culture, a culture that will serve all people for all time. It is the one movement in the world today that transcends the mystique of progress and links us to life at large on the planet. The task is great, but we are not alone in undertaking it.

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Turning Away From Technology

A New Vision for the 21st Century

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