DK: This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

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How might Luddism be relevant today?

1779, in the village of Anstey, near Leicester, a young apprentice named Edward Ludd is learning to use a wide stocking frame. The machine is designed to knit stockings and can easily be operated by unskilled workers. It turned out standardised products, of lesser quality than the stockings that were still made by traditional craftsmen in their own homes. Adoption of the machine had been strongly resisted by traditional stocking workers but it was well-suited to being installed in factories that brought workers and machines together in a centralised location and this apprentice's master was just such a factory owner.
Operating the machine was a monotonous job. You worked to the rhythm and demands of the machine and Ned, as he was nicknamed, did not like the work. His master complained of his indolence and the local magistrate recommended he be whipped to increase his productivity.
In a fit of rage he returned to the factory, took a hammer and smashed the machine to pieces.
This became the legend of Ned Ludd, the fictional avatar and namesake of the Luddites.

As the C19th began, England experienced a drive by manufacturers for increased productivity through mechanisation and industrialisation. The use of water and then steam power, the deployment of machinery to automate manufacturing processes, the construction of factories to concentrate production and the routinisation and standardisation of production practices enabled manufacturers to produce greater volumes. Automation and standardisation of complex tasks allowed factory owners to staff their factories with cheaper, less-skilled and more replaceable employees who they could pay far less or even replace with child labour. However, introduction of these new technologies led to job losses and wage reductions and hardship, even starvation, particularly across parts of the midlands and north of England where the textile industry was a major employer.

Workers objecting to the automation process were active through the latter part of the 18th century and on into the 19th, but in 1811 the Luddite uprising began in earnest in Nottingham, where stockingers raided a factory to smash new stocking-making frames. From there the action spread to Yorkshire where croppers, who worked with wool cloth, smashed new shears that automated and deskilled their jobs, and to Lancashire with power looms the main focus. Factory-owners and the government were harsh in their reprisals with troops deployed to the north and midlands, the Frame-Breaking Act of 1812 making machine breaking a capital offence and mass executions and deportations in 1813 bringing this major rebellion to an end.

The word Luddite has entered popular discourse meaning someone who is too stupid to use a new piece of technology, yet this radically misrepresents what the Luddites stood for, and in the couple of hundred years since, historians and activists have found inspiration in the struggle of the Luddites and attempted to rescue the term. I want to focus on three aspects of the Luddism that I find arresting and look at the lessons and inspiration we might draw today.

Luddism as a critique of technology

The Luddites were not opposed to technology as such. On the contrary, they were skilled as operators of looms, stocking-making frames and as croppers and workers were themselves innovators and improvers of the machines they worked on.
Instead, what workers objected to was the type of technological change being initiated. The new machines were specifically designed to exclude skilled workers from the manufacturing process. Their jobs were being replaced by unskilled, mundane and soulless jobs attracting lower wages or increasingly by child labour. The products of the machines were of inferior quality but they could be produced in greater volume and more cheaply and the factory owners seemed, with a few exceptions, keen to make greater profits regardless of the catastrophic effects on their workers. All the benefits of the supposed improvements to production were extracted by the capitalists to the detriment of the workers both in terms of jobs and the products sold to them and thus to their whole community. This critique is captured by a phrase in a letter written by Luddites to a factory owner in 1811 where they call upon the government to pass a law putting down ‘machines hurtful to commonality’. Commonality here means a sense of shared purpose and community and a life worth living for all members of society.
The Luddites recognised that technology is not neutral, rather it serves the purposes of those who own and implement it and comes with entailments that in the case of the machines being introduced by capitalists included factory organisation, regulation of time, standardisation, increased exploitation and reduced freedom.

Gavin Mueller, in his book Breaking Things at Work, sees the process of automation as a colonisation of workers’ knowledge. The machine designers would watch workers in order to copy their skills and the tricks of the trade they had learned and then incorporate these into their machines thus extracting all the knowledge built up and its value. The Luddites were attacking those same machines and reclaiming the skills for themselves and refusing to be the pliant subjects of the inevitable progress of automation that the factory owners were presenting as the future.

In short, the machines were being introduced by capitalists intent on extracting profit; the concern of the Luddites was community and commonality.

If we apply the lens of Luddism to our modern world, there are links here between the idea of machines hurtful to commonality and the idea of Tools for Conviviality I shared in an earlier episode on the work of Ivan Illich. The new machines the Luddites objected to made life for the community worse, like Illich in a later century, they were arguing for technologies and ways of life that supported community and cooperation.

In his book “Blood in the Machine”, Brian Merchant identifies the Luddites as the origins of our current rebellion against big tech and the algorithms that increasingly influence our lives. He makes the link between the Luddites and workers in the gig economy now whose working lives are controlled by apps in the case of a company like Uber or automated algorithms in a place like Amazon. He writes:

> *The biggest reason that the last two hundred years have seen a series of conflicts between the employers who deploy technology and workers forced to navigate that technology is that we are still subject to what is, ultimately, a profoundly undemocratic means of developing, introducing, and integrating technology into society.*

He describes how Uber has worked to undermine the protections that ensured the rights of taxi drivers in many cities by bribing and bullying local authorities, and attracting drivers with better wages. Then once the markets in those cities are open to them, earnings for drivers fall as the app calculates moment to moment the minimum it can offer drivers. Technology in the hands of capitalists, he shows, still acts in a way to immiserate workers and enrich the elite. The mass of a society has no say in the creation and deployment of new technologies, leading to an increasing inequality in the distribution of wealth and power.
So while Luddism had an immediate concern with attacking the machinery taking their jobs, their broader concern was opposing the domination and exploitation that machinery enacted, the second issue to which we now turn.

Luddism unites people in opposition to domination and exploitation

The Luddites did not set out to enact a revolution. They were driven by a sense of grievance and by the very real experience of poverty and hunger. The Luddites attacked factories of employers that introduced the new machines and left untouched those owners that they felt respected workers.
To the Luddites, the actions of the capitalists and the government that supported them seemed like a betrayal of the social contract. Workers who had spent years apprenticing to learn the skills of a trade were suddenly rendered obsolete by machines. The Combination Laws that prevented workers and employers banding together in common cause were enforced to arrest Luddites but ignored when factory owners collaborated to set wages or organise the protection of their factories. The army was deployed to protect the factory owners leading to executions, floggings, imprisonment and transportation, while little was done to support starving workers.
The Luddites were attempting to hold on to ways of life that they felt were fair and they were rebelling against exploitation and domination by the elite. In their endeavours they garnered support from the wider community and rarely did anyone come forward to identify machine breakers or support the authorities- the broader community of working people could see clearly that the capitalists were the only ones to benefit from the new machines.

In wider society the Luddites had some support too. The poet Lord Byron used his maiden speech in the House of Lords in 1812 to support the Luddites, asking his fellow lords if the wellbeing of the working poor of the country were not of

"greater consequence than the enrichment of a few individuals"

In his pamphlet on the Luddites, the historian Peter Linebaugh locates Luddism in a wider struggle against enclosure and extraction, and links the Luddites to slave rebellions in the Americas in the early 1800s where the cotton coming over to England originated. He frames Luddism as part of the wider process of the formation of an international working class, where a sense of common purpose and a common experience of exploitation brought workers, and others supportive of their struggle, together.
These principles: fair treatment, fair pay, a say in the technology used and a sense of value in the work done and the quality of the end product, distinguished the Luddites from the prevailing capitalist view which valued only efficiencies and cheap labour and would happily use child labour and slavery for greater profit.

Brian Merchant claims that Luddism was a moment that brought a consciousness of common cause to the fore, just as the struggle against tech billionaires and corporations like Meta and Amazon is now. The arguments of the original Luddites echo today as the same discourse that technological improvement is inevitable and a sign of progress is challenged by the continuing struggle which we might now frame as the 99% against the 1%. The last aspect of Luddism I would like to focus on concerns the practical organisation of the movement and its implications. .

Luddite tactics

Ned Ludd was a mythic figure but his name and story became a meme and avatar for the movement. Leaders within Luddism signed their letters from Ludd the clerk, King Ludd and General Ludd. This made it easy for the movement to be decentralised and principled. The core mythic figure of Ned Ludd inspired the members of the movement and his story expressed the key principles of Luddism and captured its emotional weight.

Solidarity was a key feature of Luddism: recruits made an oath committing themselves to each other and the authorities found infiltration very difficult. The broader community was supportive and there were fundraising efforts to support those thrown out of work.

Luddism was a movement with multiple strategies. Through letter-writing they argued their case with factory owners, government and the Prince Regent. Workers' leaders sought to use parliament. Workers supported each other financially and with sympathetic actions. But sabotage was the main tool of the Luddites. Sabotage has its impact at the workplace itself which the saboteurs knew well. It hit the factory owners financially where it was felt most immediately. It protected the working population from the poorer quality products of the industrial process itself and it brought a sense of common cause and consciousness.

Linebaugh describes the Luddites as taking a creative and constructive approach to technology based on a vision of society that preserved fair and ethical relations.
This same creativity is needed now and the echoes of Luddism are evident in movements around the world.
A contemporary example is the following: The Guy Fawkes mask from the comic book V for Vendetta was adopted by hacktivist group Anonymous and by activist movements throughout the world such as in Thailand in 2012 and Brazil in protests about spending on the World Cup. The mythic figure who encapsulates rebellion and justice while allowing anonymity and a movement that eschews centralised leadership links Ned Ludd and Guy Fawkes.
Brian Merchant in his book and broader reporting as a tech journalist has reported the attempts by Uber drivers to hack the app to improve their own conditions and the struggles of Amazon workers to unionise to fight for better conditions.
We can also think of artists creating masks to disrupt facial recognition software as an act of creative sabotage and of the 2023 Writers' Guild strike in Hollywood as a successful act of collective bargaining.

Slow technology movements, buy local schemes, repair cafes, Local Exchange Trading Systems and other mutual aid networks are contemporary examples of technologies that promote the commonality the original Luddites argued for.

Luddism can offer us a powerful lens today. Do our technologies support commonality, or do they enrich the elite at the expense of the poor. Do we have a say in what technologies we develop and deploy? The value of this lens means many today are happy to wear the label of Luddite. As Chellis Glendinning writes in Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto,

> *We have nothing to lose except a way of living that leads to the destruction of all life. We have a world to gain.*

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