19.6 Luddism: An Assault on Technology

Anti-technologists of the late-twentieth century were foreshadowed over 150 years earlier by the Luddites: traditional English framework knitters who felt threatened by labor-saving machines and the trend towards the domination of the factory, mass-producing economy. Some framework knitters and sympathizers resorted to surreptitiously sabotaging machines and factories. Many Luddites were never apprehended; even the origin of the term is uncertain, though theories, such as the one advanced in this pamphlet, have been presented. The most frequent instances of Luddite activity occurred between 1810–1840; thereafter they petered out.


LUDDISM

It will no doubt, be gratifying to some Readers, to be made acquainted with the origin of Luddism. From the enquiries I made in Nottinghamshire, where Luddism originated, I learnt the following particulars, namely, that a good many years ago, there lived a poor man at Loughborough, in Leicestershire, about fifteen miles from Nottingham, whose name was Edward Ludd: This man was not one of the brightest cast; in regard to his intellects; and, as is commonly the case with such characters, was of an irritable temper. This Edward Ludd, called by his neighbours Ned Ludd, was by trade a Frame Work Knitter: or in plainer language, and which is all the same, a Stocking Weaver. This man, being irritated, either by his Employer, or his work, or both took the desperate resolution of avenging himself, by breaking his Stocking Frame. As the value of a common Stocking Frame is considerable, being not much less than Forty Pounds, Ned’s exploit was much more admired for its tenuity than its utility.

However, the consequence of this affair was, a Bon Mot: for, whenever any Stocking Weaver was out of patience with his Employer or his Employment, he would say, speaking of his Frame, I have good mind to Ned Ludd it:” meaning, I have a good mind to break it, &c.

About the latter end of the year 1811, the Stocking and Lace Weavers of Nottingham, having been for a long time harrassed by abridged wages, and want of employment, in whole or in part, and consequently with want of bread, entered into a combination, (as report says, upon oath) to break certain proscribed Frames. But it should here be observed, that the interdicted Frames were not all of a new-invented kind, there being many destined to destruction for the sake of their own, the owner having rendered himself notorious by abridging the workmen’s wages, and underselling other manufacturers: therefore many Frames of an ordinary construction were broken.

These Frame-Breakers assumed the name of their proto-type Ned Ludd. Hence when they entered a house in order to break Frames, they would say Ned Ludd or General Ludd, commands us to break these Frames, &c. These men, collectively, were therefore called Luddites, and their system was, and is, called Luddism.

This system has been communicated to thousands; and as rumour says, to hundreds of thousands, and is still in existence. But it does not always exist where report places it; for every thief and highwayman now takes the name of Ned Ludd in his mouth when he is about to commit his depredations; and News Printers seem very willing to have it so; most of them caring very little about the difference betwixt truth and falsehood; their drift too commonly is, to enhance the value of their Papers, by saying something that will surprise and astonish their readers. The old and stale names of thief, highwayman, and robber, will not now adorn the great news columns of those Papers which are ever seeking to treat their Readers with a mess of Wonderment! Therefore Ned Ludd being a new character, is made to bear the heat and burden of the day; for whatever enormities are committed in the counties where Ned lives, they are, for the most part, very carefully ascribed to him.

Of the fourteen unfortunate men who were executed at York, on the 15th Jan. 1813, not one-half of them, as I am informed, were in reality Luddites. Either five or six of them were Luddites, who were convicted of entering houses and demanding fire-arms, or breaking, or attempting to break machinery; part of them upon one charge, and part of them upon the other. As to the rest of the fourteen, they were, as I am informed, utter strangers to the system of Luddism: but knowing something of Luddism by popular rumour, they had designated themselves Luddites. Wherefore on entering a house they would preface their demand of money, by telling the people General Ludd was come: or that Ned Ludd had sent them to make such and such demand. Information of the transaction soon reached the ears of a News Printer: who, glad enough of something fresh to tell his Readers, soon laid it before the public: his fellow News-men would copy his statement, and thus this wonderful news which was half true and half false, ran, in the compass of a week, all over the three kingdoms.

With regard to the conduct of the Luddites in breaking machinery, I wholly disapprove of it: it is altogether condemnable: for in my opinion, Machinery Ought to be encouraged to any extent whatever. It is also my opinion, that every
man that invents any thing that will lessen human labour, is a benefactor to mankind, and ought to be rewarded, not by a patent, as is commonly the case, but out of the national purse, in order that he and others may be encouraged to new exertions, and the public benefitted by the free use of such inventions!

I pity the poor, and should hardly think myself innocent if any man felt more for them than I do; but the remedy for their grievances, lies not in the destruction of Machinery. They are oppressed exceedingly, but not by Machinery. Those who accuse Machinery of causing any part of the distresses of the poor, have very contracted views and narrow minds, and see but a little way. They do not seem to consider that almost every thing was new Machinery once. There was a time when corn was ground by the hand; and when Cora Mills and Wind Mills were first invented they were New Machinery; and therefore why not break and burn these as soon as any other kind of Machinery; for if they were all stopped, and corn again ground by the Hand, there would be plenty of employment; for many hands! Much the same observations might be made respecting every other kind of Machinery, and I have asked this question in order to shew the silliness of the practice.

The grievous distresses of the poor are occasioned by the Monopolization of Landed Property Rack Rents—Large Farms—War, and its Concomitants, Bad Trade and Excessive Taxation. The remedy for all which is, PEACE and REFORM; without these, bad will become worse and worse will be utter ruin!

Nor can I forego the present opportunity of noticing the practice that has long obtained among Journeymen of various callings, respecting Apprentices. Ever since I can remember, feuds and quarrels have subsisted betwixt the Employers and the Employed respecting workmen called illegal men; and also an allowed number of Apprentices: and the proper, or lawful time of servitude in Apprenticeships, &c. &c. To me these altercations have always appeared highly reprehensible because at the best they originate in ignorance, and not unfrequently in something less excusable. But be their origin what it may, they commonly generate litigations and enmity; and sometimes they separate chief friends, and greatly exasperate and injure individuals.

Now, is it not folly, or something worse for one man to, vex and harass another, either respecting his servants as a Master, or his servitude as an Apprentice? What right, either in law or reason has one man to tease and distress another on these considerations? There is nothing, there can be nothing but what is both unjust and unreasonable in such conduct. With regard to Apprentices, there ought in reason to be no constraints or restrictions laid upon them or their Masters, respecting the length or shortness of their servitude: let the parties concerned arbitrate the conditions according to their own discretion.

And is it not notorious also, that there are some branches of trade, some arts and callings, that are not half so mysterious and difficult of attainment as others? and some young men there are who by dint of superior gifts and mental endowments from nature will learn a trade in three, or even two years, as perfectly as others will learn the same trade in seven years. Is it not unjust these, is it not highly unreasonable that the narrow minded policy of selfish ignorance, should institute schemes of restriction to supersede the bounties of nature. Would it be equitable to compel a man of two yards high, to take as many strides in walking a mile, as a man of five feet? And is it any more equitable to compel young men of all geniuses and capacities, to run over the same precise round of seven years in the acquisition of a trade. It is in vain to declaim against aristocracies and privileged orders, until this selfish and vexatious conduct be abandoned: for what are all these petty monopolies and sinister exclusions, but the exhibitions of aristocracy in low life!…

Questions:
1. What does the author postulate as having been the origins of Luddism?
2. What is the author’s position, and what arguments does he bring out, pro-and-con, concerning the Luddites?
3. Does the author view Luddites as criminals or victims? Explain.