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DEBATE/DÉBAT

Luddites Past and Present

F.K. Donnelly

THE WORDS "LUDDITE" and "Luddism" are widely used in labour conflicts, especially those involving technological innovation, to categorize one of the contending parties. Perhaps it is to a recognition of the revolutionary implications of computer and robotic industrial applications that a term from the classic period of the British Industrial Revolution owes at least part of its contemporary relevance. Unfortunately the use of the words "Luddite" and "Luddism" has tended to be arbitrary or partisan, or both. A few examples from the last dozen or so years will illustrate the point.

In April 1984 the Toronto *Globe and Mail* denounced Arthur Scargill, the leader of the British coal miners' strike, as a "Pithead Luddite." Its editorial attacked the leftist leader of the National Union of Mineworkers for using "flying pickets," promoting illegal strikes away from the collieries and "economic vandalism."[1] At issue was the policy of economic "rationalization" of the coal mining industry imposed by the National Coal Board and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Most mine workers and their leaders saw this as an ill-advised programme of pit closures that would ultimately cost some 20,000 jobs.

Back in 1975 Prime Minister Harold Wilson used the word in the British House of Commons to refer to a dispute in the automobile industry. In a rather cryptic remark he noted that "there were Luddites on both sides" of the conflict. This set the correspondent of the *Sunday Times* wondering what the prime minister meant and whether his usually solid historical research had failed him.[2] Wilson simply meant that there were those opposed to technological

[1] "The Pithead Luddite," editorial, *The Globe and Mail*, 8 August 1984, 6.
[2] Peter Kellner, "Nice to Be a Luddite," *Sunday Times*, 16 November 1975, 62.

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innovation on both sides in this dispute and in this he probably followed the comment of a leading labour historian.[3] Also in 1975, *Time* magazine labeled a group of American printers the "Washington Luddites" for damaging presses in a dispute over the introduction of photographic printing technology. For the benefit of readers not familiar with the term, the editors defined Luddites as "*workers who smashed machines in a vain attempt to halt industrialization.*"[4] A decade later the resistance of Britain's printers to computer technology has led a government official to proclaim that "Fleet Street is one of the great bastions of Luddism."[5]

Recently the word "Luddite" has also been used in contexts external to the traditional industrial arena. Late in 1983 an article in a leading American science magazine labeled those opposed to genetic engineering as "the new Luddites."[6] Meanwhile a prominent Canadian professor of English literature confessed his attitude to one type of technological change with these words: "I'm afraid I'm still a Luddite in regard to computers."[7] And in 1984 a British publishing executive, worried about the loss of revenue through illegal photocopying, protested: "Photocopying is clearly an essential means of making information available and we are not trying to be luddite at all."[8]

All of the above uses of the word Luddite have two things in common. First, they place strong, if not exclusive, emphasis on the anti-technological or anti-progress aspect of Luddism. Second, apart from this anti-technological emphasis, a precise definition is lacking. Regardless of one's personal view of Mr. Scargill's contribution to the British coal mining strike in 1984, his efforts bear no resemblance to those of the historical Luddites of 1811 to 1817 whose tactics included not only machine wrecking but also the occasional assassination attempt on mill owners. By contrast the American science magazine takes to task those opposed to genetic engineering for their use of "legal action or the threat of it in an effort to hamstring research."[9] This latter application of the Luddite label to a non-violent, legal opposition is at odds with both historical and contemporary notions of Luddism as a violent protest movement. The word Luddite has simply devolved into a non-specific term of opprobrium to be tossed into debates on technological innovation in an effort to stake out a position or to discredit opponents.

[3] E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," in his *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London 1968), 15.

[4] "Washington Luddites," *Time* (Canadian edition), 13 October 1975, 77 and 79.

[5] *Time*, 3 March 1986, 45.

[6] "The New Luddites," *Discover*, December 1983, 8.

[7] Northrop Frye quoted in Paul Wilson, "In the Mode," *Books in Canada*, March 1984, 11.

[8] Clive Bradley quoted in Kenneth Gosling, "Publishers act to curb illegal photocopying by universities," *The Times*, 11 May 1984, 4.

[9] *Discover*, December 1983, 8, and see also the critical letter to the editor of *Discover*, February 1984, 6, "Defending Lud," by Chris A. Raymond.

Even those sympathetic to the position of labour occasionally employ the word Luddite in a loose manner. The author of a World Development Movement pamphlet writes of the rich part of the world divesting itself of "its Luddite fear of machines causing unemployment," while retaining its "modern Luddite equivalent" in the fear of imports from the Third World.[10] Similarly, a scholarly study of dockers distinguishes between their response to containerization in the 1960s and "mere Luddite intransigence."[11] More recently a New Democratic Party member of the Canadian parliament has argued for worker participation in decisions to implement new technology to prevent them from "turning into Luddites."[12] Likewise a recent Canadian radio interview with an expert on the adverse effects of computer applications in the workplace started with the distinction between a constructive criticism of the new technology and Luddism.[13]

By contrast historians usually employ the terms "Luddite" and "Luddism" in a much narrower sense to refer to events in the industrial districts of England in the second decade of the nineteenth century. The Luddite movement involved several intense outbreaks of disturbances in the counties of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, and Lancashire in the years 1811 to 1817. Other similar disturbances in this same region are usually assigned different names. Thus the destruction of labour-saving textile machinery in Lancashire in 1826 is known as the "power-loom riots," not Luddism. Likewise most dictionaries and encyclopaedias define Luddism as a chronologically and geographically limited phenomenon.[14]

Several years ago, Professor Malcolm Thomis noted that some historians had accepted the word Luddite as the "generic term for machine-breakers

[10] Rupert Pennant-Rea, *Workless of the World* (London 1973), no pagination.

[11] David F. Wilson, *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London 1972), 142.

[12] Michael Cassidy, "I lost my job to a green machine . . . Banking and the Impact of Technological Change," in Calvin C. Gotlieb, ed., *The Information Economy: Its Implications for Canada's Industrial Strategy* (Ottawa 1984), 222.

[13] Peter Gzowski, CBC radio interview with Craig Brod, author of *Technostress: The Human Cost of the Computer Revolution* (Don Mills 1984), re-broadcast on 22 August 1985.

[14] According to a traditional account, the word derives from the surname of one Ned Lud, a half-witted Leicestershire lad who destroyed his employer's machinery in 1779. The name was applied to the disturbances of 1811 with the troubles variously attributed to Ludds, General Ludd, Lady Ludd, King Ludd, and the Luddites. See J.A.H. Murray *et al.*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 12 vols. (Oxford 1933), VI, 489; Ivor H. Evans, ed., *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (New York 1981), 690; *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago 1968), vol. 14, 402, which is a sympathetic account by Asa Briggs; *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (New York 1965), II, 757; *New Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York 1975), 1626; *Penguin English Dictionary* (Harmondsworth 1971), 440; *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA 1967), 1344, and *World Book Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Chicago 1975), II, 1230.

whatever their time and place."[15] Regrettably this appears to be a tendency within social and labour history.[16] One form it takes is the comment that there was little or no Luddism in industrializing America or late nineteenth-century Britain.[17] Another is the direct application of the terms "Luddism" and "Luddist" to machine wrecking in early nineteenth-century France.[18] Meanwhile a Canadian labour historian refers metaphorically to machine-wrecking Toronto shoemakers as "Ned Ludd and his followers."[19] These usages take Luddism out of its strict geographical and chronological setting, while retaining the practice of machine wrecking as the common link. More recently a British labour historian has labeled current industrial relations tactics such as overstaffing, go-slows, and strikes as "modern Luddism."[20] Far worse is the addition of the adjective "cultural" to Luddites. A modern German historian has used the expression "cultural Luddites" to refer to certain intellectual precursors of the Nazi movement, "who in their resentment of modernity sought to smash the whole machinery of culture."[21]

It is a commonplace to point out that the popular notion of Luddites or Luddism bears little resemblance to the historical phenomenon of Luddism. The current popular usage betrays an unsympathetic, if not openly hostile, attitude to the dilemma of labour in the face of rapid technological change. Yet a violent protest against technological innovation in certain textile trades was only one aspect of historical Luddism. Some of the machinery destroyed by the Luddites had been invented a century earlier and it is more accurate to see a part of their activities as "collective bargaining by riot."[22] More controversial is the assertion by a leading Marxist historian that Luddism was also a "quasi-

[15] Malcolm I. Thomis, *The Luddites: Machine-breaking in Regency England* (Newton Abbot 1970), 11-2.

[16] E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London 1969), 17, where the agricultural disturbances of 1830 are referred to as a form of Luddism and see also the jacket of the book which states, "The Real Name of King Ludd Was Swing."

[17] Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York 1977), 57 and 59; Ross McKibbin, "Work and Hobbies in Britain, 1880-1950," in Jay Winter, ed., *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge 1983), 137.

[18] David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge 1969), 294, and Michelle Perrot, "Workers and Machines in France during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," unpublished paper presented at Western Society for French History, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1977.

[19] Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), 47.

[20] A.E. Musson, "Technological Change and Manpower," *History*, 67 (1982), 250.

[21] Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley 1974), xvii.

[22] Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers."

insurrectionary" movement with basic political objectives.[23]

This terminological dilemma can be seen in David Noble's recent, stimulating analysis of technological innovation in which he argues that workers and historians have too easily accepted "the hegemony of apologetics for unrestrained technological progress." He views today's workers who resist the adverse effects of technological change as "latter-day Luddites" and quotes an Australian labour leader who recently called for "a little creative Luddism" to *gain some time to respond* to labour-saving innovations. These uses of the terms Luddite and Luddism display an appreciation of historical Luddism in early nineteenth-century England. At the same time David Noble is well aware that the word Luddite soon "became an epithet, a convenient device for disparaging and isolating the occasional opponent to progress and a charge to be avoided at all costs by thoughtful people." The Luddite label thus has been applied to both trade union militants and to the lawyers representing those opposed to the construction of nuclear power plants because "we have inherited the views of those who opposed machine breaking." They created the myth that the Luddites were "mistaken, pathetic, dangerous and insane."[24]

There is a basic problem here for labour historians, trade unionists, and labour commentators in the use of the terms Luddite or Luddism. If we use these as generic terms to refer to machine wrecking regardless of time period and geography, then we risk conflating historical Luddism with the current popular misconceptions of Luddism to the disadvantage of the interests of labour. Indeed, we lend support to an hegemonic tendency to shape our perceptions, our vocabulary, and our language that is diametrically opposed to labour's position in this particular type of economic conflict.[25] For the labour historian the problem could easily be eliminated by resisting the romantic urge to label every episode of machine wrecking as Luddism and instead to confine that term to the English phenomenon of 1811 to 1817.

[23] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 604-5, and on the problems of interpretation see my "Ideology and Early English Working Class History," *Social History*, 2 (1976), 219-8; J. Dinwiddy, "Luddism and Politics in the Northern Counties," *Social History*, 4 (1979), 33-63, and Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago 1982), 60-72.

[24] David Noble, "Present Tense Technology," *Democracy* (Spring, Summer, and Fall 1983), 8-24, 70-82, and 71-93, respectively. See also his *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York 1984), 249 and 352.

[25] Anne S. Sassoon, "Hegemony," in Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge, MA 1983), 201-3, and Gwyn A. Williams, "Gramsci's Concept of *Egemonia*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21 (1960), 586-99.