

# Luddites

by Bill Herbst

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In contemporary America, the term “Luddite” is an epithet used to describe a technophobe (meaning anyone with an intense dislike for technology). Generally, it refers to the longing for a return to the way people lived before the first Industrial Revolution radically altered England in the early-19th century, as that country transformed itself over a dramatically short time from a largely pastoral and rural culture, where most goods were produced at home by skilled artisan-craftsmen, to a more urban and industrial landscape, with manufacture of goods mainly in factories via machines operated by lower-wage, relatively unskilled workers.

The “Luddite Rebellion” was a social insurrection that arose in 1811 in the textile industry. Weavers, croppers, and hosiers were upset about the lower quality of fabric and clothing increasingly produced in factories, but their main objection was economic — their livelihoods as independent tradesmen were steadily being undercut. Many were willing to adapt to the mechanization of their trades, but owners of factories were staunchly unreceptive to any collective bargaining over wages, pensions, and better working conditions. Efforts on the part of the craftsmen and workers to secure such benefits were rebuffed.

The term “Luddites” itself came from the presumed leader of the rebellion, one “General Ned Ludd of Sherwood Forest.” Ludd was most likely a mythic figure and convenient fiction, akin to Robin Hood, rather than a real person.

Protests grew over the increasing disparity of wealth between capitalist factory owners and workers. The dissident weavers moved from appeals to threats, then finally to destruction of property. Throughout 1812, groups of angry workers in various English towns broke into some of the new woolen and cotton mills, wrecking knitting looms, smashing other machinery, and even burning down entire factories. In one case, enraged Luddites murdered a factory owner, and that act of violence spurred the English government to send in troops to put down the rebellion, protect the factories and their owners, and restore order.

The conflict escalated quickly. By late 1812, more troops had been dispatched to the heart of England to quell this revolt of British subjects — 14,000 soldiers in all — than were fighting with the Duke of Wellington against Napoleon in Spain. Retribution against the violence was swift and harsh. Numerous Luddites were put to death by the Crown, and dozens more banished to penal colonies in

Australia. By 1813, the revolt had been broken, and the movement began to dissipate. Within a few years, the rebellion had faded into history, although the term "Luddite" was resurrected in the mid-20th century in bastardized fashion. As with so much in culture, the complexity of the historical event that inspired the epithet was reduced to a simplistic, catch-all slogan, weaponized as an insult against the mainstream narrative, a bit like "tree-hugger" in its implication of both foolishness and radical extremism.

I have long considered myself to be something of a Luddite. Not totally, but at least partially, and with certain caveats. I'm not opposed to all technology. For instance, I don't want to get rid of electricity and go back to lighting with whale oil lamps. On the other hand, I don't believe that electric cars and wind farms will prevent us from ruining the planet's ecosystem. Also, I'm certainly not uniformly against progress. From where I sit, striving to make our world better by reducing unnecessary suffering seems like a good idea and a worthwhile effort. But I am increasingly worried about our headlong rush to not only allow but encourage technology, essentially giving the technocrats in Silicon Valley and elsewhere a blank check to shape our future. Think Bill Gates and all the crap that's surfaced recently about the Gates Foundation.

I'm probably not a stereotypical Luddite. I don't long to return to the 18th century (or any earlier epoch of civilization) for two main reasons. The first reason is social: I'm not a fan of slavery, and enslavement has been a mainstay of civilization since it began, 12,000-or-so years ago. Heck, I don't like the whole Us-versus-Them, winners-and-losers game, especially as we play it today, so I'd rather not go back to times where that was almost universally accepted.

The second reason is practical: We'll never get a majority of people to agree to give up all or even most of the many conveniences of modern life. Almost no one is willing to trade washing machines in favor of spending all day once a week down at the river getting clothes clean by pounding them on rocks. Nor will people ever willingly give up modern means of travel — automobiles, trains, and airplanes have transformed modern society, and with it our expectations of what life means.

And yet, so many of the modern conveniences we count on and take for granted are mere contrivances rather than necessities. Indoor plumbing (i.e., toilets) are now standard, but human beings lived comfortably with bed pans for eons. Did society exist before smart phones? Yes. Culture not only existed, but did quite well before there were any telephones at all, much less "smart" ones. I don't want to focus here on consumer products, however. That's not really the issue, just the outward manifestation (symptom?) of something more fundamental in how we humans have gone astray.

The core problem is our extreme disconnect from nature. We don't regard ourselves as part of nature at all, acting instead as if we were completely separate from it. We create artificial environments and spend 99% of our

time in them. For most of us, the natural world is akin to an amusement park we might visit on vacation. And even for that tiny percentage of us who are passionate about activities in the natural world — surfers, mountain-climbers, backpackers and the like — immersion in the wild is too often an invasion of it. 95% of the earth's wild landmass is already gone, taken for use by humans, and we seem hell-bent on getting (and destroying) the last 5%. The oceans are a bigger challenge (literally, since so much of the earth's surface is under water), but we've already fouled the seas and disrupted aquatic life by overfishing and massive pollution.

Any semblance of harmony between humanity and nature seems to me to have reached an all-time low. The disconnect is extreme. Caring about the health of the environment and survival of the natural world is easy to say in an opinion poll, but a lot more difficult to actually practice in real, day-to-day life.

Anyone who has read my commentaries for awhile knows that I tend to lobby for grassroots movements. In this particular arena, however, the solution to our devastation of the natural world doesn't lie in everyone's dutiful recycling of glass, plastic, metal, and paper. Individual efforts to preserve the environment, no matter how laudable, will not be sufficient to make even a dent in the problem, much less solve it. Though we're all complicit to one degree or another of going along with Death Culture, the worst culprits are not individuals, but the collective. All the systems of society, from institutions to infrastructure, have been built around disruption and destruction of the natural environment.

In any given year, the Pentagon and the U.S. Military do more damage to the environment than all the rest of us combined. Please understand, I'm not down on soldiers. It's the institution of militarism itself that I abhor. The same applies to Big Business and the rich. The wealthiest 10% of the world's population accounts for 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions, along with a host of other Death Culture assaults on the ecosystem. Our current economic and social systems do not even consider the health of the natural world. The costs of environmental damage are simply passed on to the public. In fact, over the past half-century, I've witnessed the removal of most of the few and relatively piecemeal efforts we legislated to minimize environmental damage. Why? Because our culture is driven by the dream of material wealth. We (and here I really mean they) are clearly more interested in playing out fantasies than living within any sane reality framework.

Considered as a whole, civilization is a juggernaut propelled by narrow values (mostly money) that inadvertently result in destruction of whatever is not valued. Throughout my lifetime, millions of well-meaning people have worked hard to stop this or change it. Everything we've tried has met incorrigible resistance from other human beings who oppose such limitations. Whether radical or centrist, extreme or mild, revolutionary or incremental, our efforts have failed. The pace of destruction is greater now than when I was born 71 years ago. That's telling.

Here's the hard reality: Modern civilization as humans have created it and practice it is simply incompatible with the natural life-force on this planet. Nothing we can do to reform, transform, or tinker with it to make civilization less destructive will fix the problem and save us from what is coming. OK, I accept that my opinion here is distinctly in the minority. I didn't start out as a doomer, but I've ended up as one.

Still, despite my pessimistic opinion (which has gradually hardened over the past 50 years), I continue to feel that we must do everything in our power to reduce our devastation of the natural world. Is that paradoxical? If I believe that the game is already over (and lost), then why would I lobby for fighting on in the forlorn hope of snatching even small victories from the jaws of defeat? Because it's the right thing to do. From my perspective, the effort to do less harm is at the very heart of spiritual growth. That it might also be linked to humanity's continued survival is icing on the cake.

Mother Nature does not care what we do. She responds and adapts to whatever humanity creates and produces. She is doing so as I write by heating up the planet. In a weird way, though, Nature is now our last, best hope for changing human hearts and minds by forcing us to reconsider Death Culture. No, this intervention is not going to be pleasant or gentle. We won't like it. And the harsher conditions coming over the next decades of this century — hurricanes, floods, droughts, and fires, to list just a few of the natural disruptions to our world — might amount to the final rolls of the dice for humanity. Whether or not we will survive as a species is not yet clear.

Everything I know suggests that it's come down to this: We are now seeing the tragic results of our having become so very powerful, but without the guiding light of sufficient love to use our power wisely and with grace. What do I mean by that? Power is the ability to alter any environment. Love is the recognition of perfection, harmony, and connection to what is beyond ourselves. Power requires will. Love requires empathy. Love without power leads to despair. Power without sufficient love produces chaos and destruction.

Over the past three centuries, humans have become immensely powerful, but we don't seem to have much appreciation (or respect) for harmony, especially in our actual interdependence with all other life on this planet. Shoot, we barely empathize with each other, and hardly at all with the rest of life. Stated another way, we have more than enough passion, but insufficient compassion.

The confrontation looming between humanity and nature is the inevitable result of this imbalance between love and power.

Perhaps the suffering that accompanies such an unwanted confrontation is the only way we will change. Maybe this is how evolution propels us forward.