

## The Luddite uprisings – lessons for technology politics now

**It is 200 years since the Luddite uprisings in northern England. David King argues that the motivations of the Luddites have been misrepresented, and that we need to look again at their legacy.**

The 200th anniversary of the Luddite uprisings stretches from November 2011 until January 2013. These uprisings resulted from the imposition of new technologies, which put many out of work. Today, science and technology raise a wide range of social, environmental and ethical concerns but, from genetically modified crops to climate engineering, these concerns are rarely addressed properly, partly because anyone who raises criticism is denigrated as a 'Luddite'. History has been written by the victors and the Luddites are portrayed as opposed to all technology and progress. It is ironic, however, that while the ideology of progress through technology has hardened into a rigid dogma – which condemns all critics as 'irrational' or 'anti-science' – the Luddites were very selective about which machines they destroyed, and opposed only machines 'hurtful to Commonality', i.e. the common good.

### The Luddite uprisings

The Luddites were textile workers in Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Lancashire. They were skilled artisans whose livelihoods and communities were threatened by the new factory system, with its combination of machines, such as shearing frames and power looms, and other practices that had been unilaterally imposed by the aggressive new class of manufacturers who were driving the Industrial Revolution.

In 1799, the Combination Acts had banned trade unions, while wages were being cut and unapprenticed youths being employed. In 1809, laws that prohibited machines that displaced labour were repealed. Workers feared unemployment, which often meant destitution and starvation. The situation was made worse by major reductions in the cloth trade due to the wars with France.

The uprising began in Nottingham in November 1811, and spread to Yorkshire and Lancashire in early 1812. The Luddites first warned mill owners to remove the frames. If they refused, the machines were smashed in nocturnal raids. For nearly a year, despite flooding northern England with spies and more troops than were deployed to fight Napoleon in Spain, the authorities made few arrests.

Then, in February 1812, the Frame Breaking Act introduced the death penalty. In Yorkshire, attacks had been highly successful in the smaller workshops. But the most famous attack, by around a hundred men on William Cartwright's Rawfolds Mill in April 1812, was unsuccessful since Cartwright had hidden troops in the mill. Two of the Luddites were killed. After these deaths, for the first time the Luddites turned to assassination, killing William Horsfall, another large mill owner. After this, the Luddite attacks on machines declined, and some Luddites turned to night-time raids on armouries, in the hope that a general armed insurrection could be mounted. But in October 1812, the authorities finally arrested George Mellor, a key leader of the Yorkshire Luddites. He and 13 others were hanged together at York in January 1813. By the end of the uprisings thousands of frames, a significant proportion of the total number in England had been smashed.

The cause of the Luddite uprisings was the imposition of the new free-market/industrial regime. These uprisings can be seen as the last gasp of the old order against the coming Industrial Revolution or, as Kirkpatrick Sale puts it, "a rising not against machines but against The Machine."

### The politics of technology today

This anniversary comes at a timely moment because, at the beginning of the 21st century, the negative consequences of the industrial capitalist system are becoming so severe that they can no longer be ignored. From climate change, resource depletion and biodiversity loss to epidemics of mental illness, drug addiction and crime, the downsides of this system are leading to disillusionment with the conventional narrative of 'progress'.

While many of these problems are widely accepted as being due to the unregulated free-market, the crucial role of science and technology is often not well understood. As the great apologist for industrialism, Andrew Ure, wrote in 1835, "This invention confirms the great doctrine already propounded, that when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility." Because the Luddites exposed this best-kept secret of industrial capitalism, they have been portrayed not merely as another bunch of troublemakers, but as opponents of progress who 'want to go back to the stone-age'.

Since the Industrial Revolution, science and technology have become the crucial drivers of capitalism, which has in turn driven massive social change. The result has been an endless cycle of 'technological fixes' – normally in the form of a product that can be sold by corporations – rather than a process of democratic decision-making about the central processes by which our society develops. This democratic deficit has often led to a backlash against specific technologies, such as GM crops.

But while more democracy is essential, the crisis of industrial society forces us to address the question of which technologies and economic and social structures we need for a sustainable and just world. While the Luddites were not anti-technology, their example calls to us to look for paths away from industrial capitalism. Our task is to go forward, but in doing so we should not be afraid to (in part) seek inspiration from the technologies and social forms of pre-industrial society. However, in our times the challenges are different, and so will require new technologies, but those appropriate to a world in which a key value is the fostering of Commonality.

Scientists and engineers have a key role to play in this process, but in order to do so they must abandon the arrogance of assuming that they define what the problems are. Technology must be developed through dialogue with society at large.

### Get involved

The Luddites 200 Organising Forum – <http://www.luddites200.org.uk> – has been set up in order to help celebrate the anniversary and to encourage debate on the politics of technology now.

**Dr David King is  
Director of Human Genetics Alert.**

### Further reading

Thompson E (1991). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Penguin Books.  
Sale K (1996). *Rebels Against the Future*. Quartet Books.  
The Land (2011). Special issue on the Luddite anniversary. <http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/issue/land-issue-10-summer-2011>