

AGAINST the **MACHINE**



**The
Hidden
Luddite
Tradition
in
Literature,
Art,
and
Individual
Lives**

NICOLS FOX

*A*AGAINST
the MACHINE

*The Hidden Luddite Tradition
in Literature, Art, and Individual Lives*

NICOLS FOX

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For Kathryn and Sam

A Shearwater Book

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“Panoramic yet intimate, informative but passionate, Nicols Fox’s *Against the Machine* sets out the many layers of context underlying the Luddite defiance of the standardized machine. The book exceeds its already widely drawn boundary to mount a spirited defense of all that is unique, idiosyncratic, and impulsively human.”

—Sven Birkerts, author of *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*

“From William Blake to the Arts and Crafts movement to Rachel Carson, this lively book celebrates those who question whether new and complicated machinery always represents a step forward.”

—*Utne Magazine*

“This is an extraordinary book, with an extraordinary theme. It takes one simple idea—resistance to technology over the last 200 years—and explores it in wonderful fashion, with thorough and detailed history, a great range of learning, indefatigable journalism, and much plain good sense. It should find a huge audience.”

—Kirkpatrick Sale, author of *Rebels against the Future*

“*Against the Machine* is an invaluable resource that empowers us to carry on.”

—*Resurgence Magazine*

“This is a fascinating, twelve-gauge look at some of our central riddles. I was riveted (if I may pun). It’s enlisting, convincing, and quite comprehensive.”

—Edward Hoagland, author of *Compass Points*

“*Against the Machine* is a remarkably interesting, impressively researched book populated by a large cast of fascinating characters. . . .”

—*OnEarth*

“This is a lively and useful history of an important tradition—the counter-cultural current that has run side by side with the mainstream for hundreds of years, a current that swells with each day that passes.”

—Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and *Enough*

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Prologue

One-third of computer users admit to physically attacking a computer. More than 70 percent confess they swear at them. Frustration, anger, and exasperation—minus the swearing and the hitting—affect 67 percent. Or so revealed a study commissioned by the software company Symantec in 1999. Observation and personal experience indicate no improvement. The sticky mouse, a freeze, or a crash provokes the most anger.

The problem goes by several names: tech rage, desk rage, web rage, or simply CRAP—for Computer Rage, Anxiety, and Phobia—and the phenomenon follows closely on the heels of growing incidences of road rage and air rage. Today, as the threat of terrorism hangs in the air, the consequences of air rage can be more serious—even as tensions connected with flying increase. Now “airport rage” is barely contained as a new layer of anxiety is imposed over the everyday stress of modern mass transportation.

Our relationship to technology has become complex, a mixture of adulation, dependency, frustration, and rage. Clearly, in technology’s ability to do what could only be fantasized in years past, it is a marvel. Its appeal and usefulness need no reinforcement from me. It is its own witness in that regard.

Yet, in all its various associated frustrations—traffic, crowds, herding, waiting; one's sense of being merely a small cog in a huge machine, of having to rely absolutely upon systems that are not absolutely reliable, of powerlessness so cunningly disguised as power that one labors under a persistent sense of unreality—it is plainly driving people crazy.

The solution to computer rage, a technical magazine suggests, is for people to change their habits. There are sensible suggestions to clean out surplus files so that crashes occur less frequently, to have realistic expectations about what machines can do, to develop patience. People must, in other words, adapt to the machine. The idea that it should be the other way around—that machines should adapt to humans—seems not to have occurred to anyone. And yet it would seem obvious. Who, after all, is in control here?

Do we really want the answer to that question? Of late the balance has shifted, and the answer is no longer as clear as it might once have been.

Technology delights us as much as it frustrates and complicates the lives into which we have willingly invited it. Our childlike needs for pleasure and excitement have been cheerfully accommodated by our high-tech industries. Our desire for comfort and ease has been catered to. Glittering material goods are available and cheap. The longed-for magic of the sorcerer now leaps from the laptop. The fantasies of comic books and science fiction are now everyday realities.

For the past two hundred years, technology has been creeping up on us slowly, seductively, incrementally, until it now dominates our thinking, our expectations, and our actions in ways that could not have been anticipated and of which we are scarcely aware. It has, in a manner not consciously or carefully considered, reshaped and reordered the world around us to its own measure. Over those two centuries, the relationship between human and tool has shifted dramatically. The extent to which we now attempt to adapt our lives to the requirements of the machine is unacknowledged. We adjust automatically, willingly, bravely: remembering our identification numbers, fitting our hands to the keyboards, fixing our eyes not on the horizon or the movement in the bush but on the screen; our ears tuned not to the sound of the wind and the rustle in the grass but to the whirs and chirps and hums and pings of the machines. But the struggle to adjust is not without consequences. It manifests itself in our stress, our discomfort, our rage.

And we should not be surprised. It should only be expected: machines

and humans are basically incompatible. Humans are not machines. We don't naturally think or act like machines. Our bodies are not shaped and suited to the machine. Thus our attempts to reshape ourselves are doomed to frustration. It is an awkward, clumsy match. We are everything the machine is not: creatures of emotion and sensation with minds that are creative and imaginative. We act in unpredictable ways, we are naturally suited to nature—not to a world of electronic impulses. And this is nothing to apologize for. These are the traits of our successful endurance and adaptability, and if these qualities are now demeaned, it is the machine and its unnatural demands that have demeaned them. The struggle to adapt to the requirements and uncomfortable standards of the mechanical—to act in orderly, regimented, predictable ways—is creating more societal stress than anyone might have expected. Frustration is common as we struggle to fit our concept of ourselves into the blanks on forms; as we reluctantly press 3 for the selection that doesn't really answer our need or our question; as we sit for hours in front of digitized electronic impulses while outside the birds and the sunshine are calling; as we eat foods that suit the marketplace more than they suit our bodies—bodies that are essentially unchanged from the ones that survived nicely a thousand years ago or two thousand years ago. In this awkward process of adaptation, we fight our preferences, control our impulses, manage our emotions, and hide our intuitions in a world in which these qualities are unwelcome and discouraged, in a world shaped by a force that has none of these qualities and, in fact, denigrates them. Technology has reduced a thousand ordinary actions to numbers, to flashes of light or sound, to an overly simplified yes or no that has nothing to do with the complexity and subtlety that is humanness—or that is the world around us, for that matter. It is an artificial construct into which the natural world is being shoved, the round peg into the square hole. It will go, but it's not a good fit.

And yet, despite the accumulated frustration and rage, genuine resistance to the machine is relatively rare. Our preconditioning to favor novelty keeps us fascinated by the machines. Generally people try bravely, even enthusiastically, to accommodate themselves. They are not sure why they are consequently unhappy. They do not blame the machines, for we have convinced ourselves—or been convinced by advertising and promotion—of their marvelous natures and of our great need for them. We have created dependency where none existed, forgetting that we survived and thrived as a species for hundreds of thousands of years without the internal combus-

tion engine or the cell phone. Now too many of us feel lost and inadequate and frightened if the lights go out. We love our machines, after all—as we would a spouse in an enduring bad marriage, whose flaws are so familiar, whose irritating voice is so much a part of the background that it is impossible to conceive its not being there. Alternatives are not even imagined.

But resistance to technology does exist, and it is not new. It emerged simultaneously with the machine itself, increased as the industrial revolution gained strength, and has remained a persistent, if underrecognized, presence even as the world has become a highly technical place. It endures for one reason: we are not the people we pretend to be. There has been no time to adapt in the evolutionary sense. We struggle in the twenty-first century with first-century bodies and minds and wonder why it is a challenge, and we assume that the problem is individual, personal, and fixable. We blame ourselves for our failure to keep up, for our failure to adapt.

Some people have always known what the problem is. In 1811 they were the followers of Ned Ludd and were called Luddites, and their anger welled and overflowed into a rebellion against the mechanical weaving machines that were taking their jobs and disrupting and destroying their communities and their lives. But resistance to the machine did not end there. It persisted, and it can be found as a strain of thinking that, if it has not dominated, if it has not even been entirely visible, has nevertheless endured, expressed through literature, art, philosophy, and ways of living that deliberately challenge the mechanical with an alternative that emphasizes what the machine is not.

The followers of Ned Ludd took up weapons against the machines that were destroying their lives, but the essence of Luddism is not violence. Far from it. It is a respect for and a confidence in those things that make us human, with a concomitant rejection of the mechanistic approach to being that devalues our humanity. It is a philosophy that respects tradition, intuition, spirituality, the senses, human relationships, the work of the hand, and the disorderly and unpredictable nature of reality, as opposed to a mechanistic or reductionist construct of the world. It questions the domination of science and the elevation of efficiency to a superior value. It rejects materiality.

Luddism, then and now, favors a thoughtful use of appropriate technologies that does not damage the relationships we hold dear. It cherishes the natural world from which we attempt to separate ourselves only at our peril.

I first heard about the Luddite Rebellion in an English history class in college. The idea of rebelling against technology appealed to me at once. My preferences for the old, the natural, the handmade, the traditional were already set—or inborn, a stray gene from some similarly fusty ancestor, perhaps, for my parents were more than half-infatuated with the new. I loved signs of wear in natural materials, the mark of the hand, evidence of a good age. For me it confirmed a past and promised a future; it represented time unfolding, a heritage. I loved the old ways, the old songs, things that had endured. If a carving knife worked well, why would we want something as silly as an electric one? I had never even seen a computer, but I knew I wouldn't like it. At nineteen I was a curmudgeon, an old fogy, a technology resister, a neo-Luddite. Since then, every mention of the word Luddite has made me sit up and listen.

I can recall the precise moment I decided to take up the research that led to this book. It was in 1995 and I was reading Kirkpatrick Sale's *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution*. What caught my attention was his reference to a tradition of resistance to technology that had persisted just beneath the surface of general awareness since the rebellion. Sale dropped hints but didn't elaborate: Byron, Brontë, Thoreau. At that moment I began a search. If there was a literature of Ludism, if there was possibly a living tradition of resistance to technology, I aimed to dig it out.

History is a telescope that the present turns on the vastness of the past. The Present—let's personify it as a tall, darkly clad figure standing on a hill—turns slowly with the telescope, finds an agreeable view, then tightens the focus. History is necessarily a selective process, and what is selected is what seems pleasant, agreeable, suitable, and convenient to the Present. It is what the Present demands, a past that supports the prevailing, dominant view.

The rest of the past remains where it is, unchanged but unnoticed, until the figure with the telescope is replaced—or, awakened to the possibility of another view, turns the telescope elsewhere. This book is an invitation to the figure with the telescope to shift the gaze and tighten the focus on a neglected aspect of the past, to be aware that what is convenient to the Present is only half the story or less—a fraction, the easiest part—and that there is more: less convenient, but important nevertheless.

There is a discernible history in which the machine was questioned, challenged, and occasionally rejected entirely. We don't—in our love affair

with the new, enthralled by novelty, seduced by the tantalizing but dubious promise of Progress—hear much about it. The democratic tradition has a flaw, I think. It conditions us to think in terms of winners and losers. The candidate who loses an election, even if by only a single vote, becomes not the individual who has the support of nearly half the population, but the loser, dishonored and ignored. We replay this way of thinking again and again in our culture: games, contests, awards. And yet the fact is that the principles and ideas of the loser remain, as a recognizable—if not a dominant—force or presence in society.

And so it was that the Luddites lost their fight against the machines. And so it was that everyone who has challenged the machine has lost. And yet they have not lost, for they represent a solid body of thinking that deserves to be reconsidered and appreciated as an alternative to the present domination of technology: an option, a value system that continues to throb beneath the shroud prematurely placed over it. It is possible to challenge the mechanistic approach to living and working; it is permissible to question whether it prevails with humans in mind or dominates for other reasons; and it is appropriate to envision, to consider, even to create and nourish alternatives.

Sale's book seemed, at the time, to fit neatly into a faint yet growing public frustration and concern with the impact of technology, coupled with an increase in actual resistance. A year or so earlier, Jerry Mander's *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* had openly advocated both a questioning *and* a rejection of technologies that were having an adverse impact on the environment and on human society. Problems with technology were obvious: the persistent threat of nuclear annihilation; the new realities of biochemical weapons; the industrial wastes that contaminate soil, rivers, and groundwater; the disasters of Chernobyl and Bhopal that poisoned so many and so much; the high probability that the climate is being changed by our addiction to fossil fuels—to cars, airplanes, and overheated houses—the problems of waste disposal, the diseases of modernity: the increasing cancers, diabetes, asthma and other lung disorders. A friend tells me she loves technology: she is wearing a complicated implanted device, she explains, that monitors and supplies insulin as she needs it to treat her diabetes. As I say nothing and slightly widen my eyes, she blushes and acknowledges, without my suggestion, that it is probably the modern diet that gave her diabetes in the first place. We seldom think how much of what we consider technological inno-

vation is actually a response to a problem technology has created. Coping keeps the economy thriving.

Then there are the more subtle but immediate and personal challenges technology presents: the frustrations of adaptation; the repetitive-motion injuries; the stresses of urban or even suburban living; the noise; the trash; the traffic, the traffic, the traffic—and the parking. In our good dreams the telephone is not ringing.

It was in 1993 that Bill Henderson, editor of the Pushcart Press, organized the Lead Pencil Club after what was intended as a joke had to be taken seriously. After he published an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* describing his dislike of the computer, the mere mention of such an organization in print prompted hundreds of responses from individuals around the globe who also hated their computers and wanted to become members. This led to his editing a book, *Minutes of the Lead Pencil Club: Pulling the Plug on the Electronic Revolution*, which brought together letters, commentary, cartoons, and essays that collectively represent a range of reactions from outrage to dismay at our subservience to the mechanical. Sven Birkerts, in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, wrote in 1994 of his concern that the computer was changing writing and thinking in ways that had not been carefully considered and which would damage important aspects of our ways of viewing reality. Langdon Winner's *The Whale and the Reactor* had already, in 1986, tapped into the powerful emotions generated by the battle between the natural world and the technological leviathan. Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*, published in 1988, considered the deteriorating connection between human-generated technologies and the damaged environment from a spiritual perspective. Gradually, a body of contemporary work was emerging that could be grouped under a heading that some people were already calling neo-Luddite. A passing reference in yet another magazine led me to a back issue of the *Utne Reader* containing Chellis Glendinning's *Luddite Manifesto*. Her program for the future includes dismantling nuclear, chemical, computer, electromagnetic, and genetic-engineering technologies, and it is important to consider this as a possibility. I identify with Mary McCarthy, who in her essay *My Confession* remembered, "It irritated me to be told that 'you could not turn the clock back.'" Obviously one cannot go back, but one can go forward, applying the understanding and accumulated wisdom of our technological experience. It is important to accept that we are still in control and that our unquestioning

worship of science and our imprisonment in a technological paradigm is a choice that we have made, if not entirely conscious of the ramifications, then willingly. That which we have created can be transformed, if we have the desire and the will to do so. It is important that we not abrogate control over our present situation, leaving the future to . . . what? To some indefinable, unnamed force that we confess in our supplicant's posture is not ours to manage?

In all these sources were references to Wendell Berry, a farmer, essayist, and poet whose common-sense approach to resisting technology has earned him devoted fans around the globe. In fact, I was beginning to sense that questioning technology seemed to strike a chord with individuals everywhere who had, at some point, felt the urge to take a blunt instrument to some balky marvel of ingenuity that failed to keep its promise. The faster the pace of life, the more insistent the hum of background motors; as more and more things that individuals truly value are allowed less and less space in modern life, the questioning becomes louder.

The characteristics that define Luddism can be discovered in the Romantic poets, in the writings of Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. The Arts and Crafts movement was an outright rejection of industrialized production. The same principles can be found in the lives and work of potters such as Bernard Leach and his followers. Resistance to technology is a thread that winds through the writings of the Southern Agrarians and the novels of such diverse authors as Wallace Stegner, E. M. Forster, and John Fowles. It appears in the work of such recent cult figures as Robert Persig and Edward Abbey. Modern poets from Gary Snyder to W. S. Merwin express their anger at the technological juggernaut that rampages across the landscape. Environmentalism has its roots in resistance to this same ruthless domination and those who use it to conquer and subdue nature—a sentiment that has its beginning in the writings of John Muir and Aldo Leopold and evolves into the deep ecology of Arne Naess. Behind the modern Luddite movement is a solid body of philosophical writing. Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford construct a base upon which present-day ecophilosophers such as Edward Goldsmith build. And it is possible to reread old favorites with a new awareness: to see Dickens's *Dombey and Son* or *Hard Times*, for instance, not simply as entertaining Victorian novels but as forceful protests against the machine, understood as such (all too well, in some political circles) by their contemporary readers.

Luddites today are self-selecting. There is no litmus test. You may live in a mud hut, carry water, and chop wood by choice, or simply hate your computer, yearn to outdistance your cell phone, and wish you could buy a car without automatic windows. But at bottom you feel some identification with all those who are apprehensive about and resistant to the domination of the machine in our society, in our work, and in our individual lives. Luddism is neither conservative nor liberal: both capitalism and Marxism are committed to the concept of industrial progress, the wisdom of which Luddites question. It is, however, a conscious approach to living. Luddites—or neo-Luddites, if you prefer—carefully evaluate what contributes to the considered life and what does not. They do so to the degree they find personally appropriate. We must think about the “encompassing technocratic, manipulative world that we have established,” writes Thomas Berry in *The Dream of the Earth*. “We must not over-romanticize primitivism . . . yet when we witness the devastation we have wrought on this lovely continent, and even throughout the planet, and consider what we are now doing, we must reflect.”¹ Such reflection is, in fact, part of a tradition that is strong and enduring and today more important than ever.

The Machine, by which I mean all the agencies of order, regularity, and efficiency, whether social or technical. . . .

Lewis Mumford, *In the Name of Sanity*

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