



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on March 15, 2012

Bicentennial of Luddite Lawlessness

Some people prefer to live in log cabins among the trees of rural America, using well water, tending gardens, chopping wood, and living what many of us would call a primitive life. Most of us have known grandparents who lived in much simpler times and who knew how to use a “Mangler” to dry clothes and a hand-turned blender to make ice cream. Their shirts and dresses may have been homemade and their fruits and vegetables preserved in Mason jars from the orchards and gardens of their property. Many of us also have happy memories of camping in the woods, enjoying the wonderful but simple menu of the Boy Scouts.



One of the greatest blessings of liberty, which flows naturally from a constitutional system that limits the power of government in our lives, is choice. No one is forced to work in a particular job. The process of freedom within a society produces change. Yet few changes ever bring undiluted benefits. When Henry Ford perfected in his Model T a vehicle that ordinary workmen in his plant could buy, Ford helped spark an industrial explosion that made American society the most mobile in history. A whole group of subsidiary industries, such as the tire-making industry in the cities of Ohio, iron-mining in Minnesota, and steel production in Pittsburgh were dramatically expanded as Detroit became the center of motor vehicle production for the world. This meant, however, that buggy whip and surrey makers, as well as livery stables, faced a major economic decline.

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Those hurt by technological progress, such as businesses that lose market shares to more efficient competitors, may resent the natural changes caused by free enterprise. They have, however, only three real options. They may adapt to the changes by using their skills and experience in new ways. They may demand that government “protect” them, perhaps by mandating that employers negotiate with unions or by placing unneeded burdens on new industries. Or they may do what the Luddites did 200 years ago.

The Luddites, named after Ned Ludd, who in a fit of rage destroyed a loom of his employer in the early 19th century, were opposed in principle to technological change. Moreover, on [March 15, 1812](#), the Luddites attacked and destroyed a wool processing plant owned by Frank Vickerman in West Yorkshire. The Luddites also threatened violence against manufacturers who used labor-saving machines which, the Luddites felt, jeopardized their jobs or made their work routine and dull.

Many “progressives” of the time supported the Luddites. Lord Byron, for example, in his maiden speech in the House of Lords defended the Luddites, using thick sarcasm to attack the benefits of automated work. Speaking of the Luddite destruction of weaving machines, Byron said:

Considerable injury has been done to the proprietors of the improved frames. These machines



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were to them an advantage, inasmuch as they superseded the necessity of employing a number of workmen, who were left in consequence to starve. By the adoption of one species of frame in particular, one man performed the work of man, the superfluous labourers were thrown out of employment.... The rejected workmen, in the blindness of their ignorance, instead of rejoicing at these improvements in arts so beneficial to mankind, conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism. In the foolishness of their hearts, they imagined that the maintenance and well doing of the industrious poor were objects of greater consequence than the enrichment of a few individuals by any improvement in implements of trade which threw the workmen out of employment, and rendered the labourer unworthy of his hire.

Other Luddite supporters included, in America, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who professed that unchanged nature was the most virtuous condition of the world. The theme of Byron and the Luddites 200 years ago resonates today: Economic change hurts some people, so it should be stopped; technology is destroying the beauty and simplicity of our world; and the “rich” are oppressing us with their labor-saving machines and processes. Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, wrote a manifesto which includes these words:

The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They (sic) have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in ‘advanced’ countries, but they have destabilized society, made life unfulfilled, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world.

This Luddite mentality, of course, imputes evil motives to those who are innovators, producers, and successes in the free market. “They” do not care if the poor suffer, if the beauty of the natural world is defaced, and if humans are forced to work in dull, repetitive jobs. President Obama displayed this sort of simplistic thinking when he was asked why unemployment was high. [He told Ann Curry](#) last June:

There are some structural issues with our economy where a lot of businesses have learned to become much more efficient with a lot fewer workers. You see it when you go to a bank and you use an ATM, you don’t go to a bank teller, or you go to the airport and you’re using a kiosk instead of checking in at the gate.

It is this Luddite mentality that pushes Obama to view the potential oil and gas production, using relatively new techniques and technologies, as bad and embrace instead windmills, which were cutting edge and transformative technologies 1,000 years ago, but which are profoundly inefficient today.

Luddites, essentially, are limited minds. Abundant and cheap energy allows families to take summer trips to Yellowstone National Park and the surplus productivity allowed breadwinners to have vacation time. The automation of jobs like bank tellers allows people to move into more interesting and remunerative work. Modern techniques of producing fossil fuel economically are vastly cleaner and cheaper than the old and laborious methods of chopping wood.

There is nothing in America that prevents communities that believe that we already have enough technology from living, as the Amish do, simple and comfortable lives. But the Amish never storm factories, threaten to murder industrialists, or sue to prevent drilling for oil and gas. Our nation provides the answer to Luddite violence and unrest: Live the life you choose and let others do the same.



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