

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Industrialism and its discontents

the Luddites and their inheritors

John Zerzan

2013

John Zerzan
Industrialism and its discontents
the Luddites and their inheritors
2013

Retrieved on June 17, 2013 from www.fifthestate.org
Fifth Estate # 389, Summer, 2013

theanarchistlibrary.org

Nearly two hundred years ago, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley gave us a classic warning about the hubris of technology's combat against nature. Her late Gothic novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), depicts the revenge nature takes upon the presumption of engineering life from the dead. Victor Frankenstein and his creation perish, of course; his "Adam" is as doomed as he is. If this monster cannot be saved by his father/creator, however, today's cyborg/robot/Artificial Intelligence products do expect to be saved. For those at the forefront of technological innovation today, there will be no return to a previous, monster-free state.

From our hyper-tech world we can look back to Mary Shelley's time and see the prototype, the arrival of modern techno-industrial reality. Between 1800 and 1820, England underwent the strains, storms and challenges of the ascendant Industrial Revolution. We are living with the outcome of that decisive battle-ground time.

Ugo Perone put it this way: “One day the big O with which the Ottocento [the eighteenth century] begins exploded, and philosophy as the great tale of totality started to be abandoned. The age of specializations began...”¹

Of course, few changes happen overnight. Industrial output had been tending sharply upward since the early 1780s.² And one could easily look much further back, to deforestation in Neolithic and Bronze Age times, to find out why many moors and heathlands are now barren.³ But it is in the early 19th century that power was passing from the hands of the titled landowners to those who owned the factories and foundries. Much more fundamentally, the time and space of social existence were fundamentally altered. As the equality of all citizens before the law began to emerge, so did the reality of an unprecedented subjugation or domestication.

Nothing in the canon of the (fairly recent) Enlightenment, with its claims and promises, had prepared anyone for this. The road to complete mastery of the physical and social environments was indeed opening, as the industrial system became, in Toynbee’s words, “the sole dominant institution in contemporary Western life.”⁴ The picture thus presented was laden with far more pain and absence than promise.

With the nineteenth century begins the winter of the West.⁵ Spengler’s conclusion is more apt than he knew. It was not a beginning, but the beginning of the end. Dickens’ depiction of Coketown in *Hard Times* did much to capture the reper-

¹ Ugo Perone, *The Possible Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 60.

² T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: the 18th Century*, vol. 3 (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 125.

³ G.W. Dimbleby, *The Development of British Heathlands and their Soils* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), e.g. pp. 29, 44.

⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1934–1958), p. 8.

⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), e.g. p. 78.

cussions of industrialism: the new mass society, ruled by the regime of the factory and its pace, its polluted and despoiled landscape, its inhabitants anonymous and dehumanized. Spengler saw how “the machine works and forces the man to cooperate,” rending nature beneath him as this “Faustian” machine passion alters the face of the earth.⁶

There was a long lead-in to the pivotal developments, a long process of mechanization and privatization. In England, more than six million acres of open field and common pasture were enclosed between 1760 and 1844.⁷ The pressures of the new industrial society were increasing enormously, pushing the dispossessed relentlessly toward the despotic mills and mines. New power-driven shearing frames and fully mechanized spinning machines encroached on the relative autonomy of family-based handloom weavers, for example. By the 1820s the pace of change was dizzying.

Especially in the late 18th century, Enlightenment theories of rights were advanced as arguments against severe challenges to popular prerogatives. Although the dawn of 1789 had been a moment of great promise, the early idealism of the French Revolution was betrayed by authoritarian terror. In the first years of the 19th century, however, “the solidarity of the community [and] the extreme isolation of the authorities” were still political realities.⁸

At issue, in an unprecedented way, is a new state of being, untouched by political claims and reform efforts: a world becoming decisively independent of the individual. The quantum leap in division of labor which is industrialism means the generic interchangeability of parts — and people. From identity and particularity to the stage, in Joseph Gabel’s term,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

⁷ Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 125.

⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 583.

of “morbid rationalism.”⁹ Michel Foucault noted that up to the end of the 18th century, “life does not exist: only living beings.”¹⁰ The stakes were as high as they could be, the ensuing struggle a world-historical one in this first industrializing nation. It’s clear that Emile Durkheim had it entirely wrong when he proclaimed that “in the industrial societies ... social harmony comes essentially from the division of labor.”¹¹

The march of the factories was a sustained attack on irregular work routines, in favor of the time-disciplined work environment.¹² Centralized production aimed at control over recalcitrant and decentralized workers. By its nature it demanded discipline and regimentation.

Heretofore the customary and numerous holidays from work were supplemented by the celebration of Saint Monday, a day of recovery and play following a typical weekend’s drinking. Enshrined in custom and long-standing local tradition, the popular culture — especially among artisans — was independent and contemptuous of authority. Hence factory servitude did not exactly beckon. F.M.L. Thompson noted that it was “extremely difficult to find satisfactory workers,” and that “even higher wages were not enough in themselves.”¹³ For example, the reluctance of weavers (many of them women) to leave their homes has been widely documented.¹⁴

⁹ Joseph Gabel, *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975).

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 161.

¹¹ Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 86.

¹² Somewhat recent scholarship has challenged Ashton, Landes and others as having overgeneralized the irregularity of pre-industrial work habits; e.g. Mark Harrison, *Crowds and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. 5, esp. p. 111. But the overall description seems valid.

¹³ F.M.L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 129, 130.

¹⁴ Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

The door that was forced open decisively between 1800 and 1820, roughly speaking (and I do mean roughly), inaugurated both global warming and an ever-mounting rise in global population. Globalizing industrialization is the motive force behind both developments. A deepening technological dimension becomes more and more immersive and defining, driving the loss of meaning, passion, and connection. This trajectory continually reaches new levels, at an ever-accelerating rate. As early as the 1950s, new technology was hailed by many as a “Second Industrial Revolution.”⁷⁵ In 1960 Clark Kerr and others announced that “the world is entering a new age — the age of total industrialization.”⁷⁶

As the 19th century waned, William Morris, who disliked all machinery, concluded that “Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.”⁷⁷ His *News from Nowhere* expresses a wonderful reversal of perspective, in which Ellen speaks from a time that has set aside the techno-desolation: “And even now, when all is won and has been for a long time, my heart is sickened with thinking of all the waste of life that has gone on for so many years.” “So many centuries, she said, so many ages.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ For example, Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1954).

⁷⁶ Clark Kerr et al, *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Quoted in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 125.

⁷⁸ William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Routledge, 1970), p. 176.

now more often bought than brewed and baked at home, for example. Standardized goods — and a standardized national language — were in full flow.⁷¹

A stronger emphasis on the need for regular, predictable labor is shown by the prevalence of factory clocks, schedules, and timetables; also domestic clocks and personal watches, once luxury items and now consumer necessities. By the 1820s, nostalgic images were being reproduced using the kinds of technology that erased the lost, commemorated world.⁷² As a relatively self-sustaining arrangement of life, rural society was ending, fast becoming a commercial item to be wistfully contemplated.

Bulwer-Lytton wrote in 1833 of the ascendant standards of decorum and conformity: “The English of the present day are not the English of twenty years ago.”⁷³ Diversions that many had enjoyed throughout their lives — public drinking, many holidays from work, boisterous street fairs, etc. — were seen as disgraceful and disgusting under the new order.

As the average person was being subdued and tamed, a few were lionized. Industrial modernity ushered in what is so prominent today, celebrity culture. The flamboyant actor Thomas Kean was an early star, but none surpassed the fame of Byron. He was one of the first ever to receive what we would call fan mail, that is, unsolicited letters on a mass scale.⁷⁴ Massified life also initiated widespread psychic immiseration. The best-seller of 1806 was *The Miseries of Human Life*, testifying to the large-scale anxiety and depression that had already set in, inevitable fruit of modern subjugation.

⁷¹ Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: the Province of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 84–85.

⁷² David Bindman, “Prints,” in I. McCalman, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

⁷³ Quoted in B. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

⁷⁴ Tom Mole, *Romanticism and Celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 228.

But at least as early as the beginning of the period under review, the beginnings of the destruction of the handicraft artisan and the yeoman farmer could be seen. “The small agricultural cloth-making household units... each so easily identifiable by its tenter of white cloth — would be gone in a few years,” observed Robert Reid.¹⁵ Manchester, the world’s first industrial city, was one contested ground, among many other English locales, as everything was at stake and the earth was made to shift. By the late 1820s, Thomas Carlyle wrote this summary: “Were we required to characterise this age of ours by a single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age.”¹⁶

The widespread “hatred of authority and control”¹⁷ and “general levelling sentiment”¹⁸ meant that resistance was powerful and certainly predated the early 19th century. The Northumberland miners destroyed pit-head gear with regularity during clashes with owners, leading to the passage of no less than eight statutes directed against such destruction between 1747 and 1816: quite ineffectual statutes, evidently.¹⁹ The briefest sampling reveals the range of late 18th century contestation: the anti-toll Bristol bridge riots of 1793, the great food riot year of 1795 (when groups of women waylaid shipments of corn, and attacked government press gangs seeking to kidnap men

¹⁵ Robert Reid, *Land of Lost Content: the Luddite Revolt, 1812* (London: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 294–295.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ben Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: the Age of Cant 1789–1837* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 356.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁸ E.P. Thompson, “The Crime of Anonymity,” in Douglas Hay et al., eds., *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Verso, 2011), p. 277.

¹⁹ Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 150–151.

for military service), and naval mutinies at Portsmouth and the Nore in 1797, to cite only a few prominent examples.²⁰

Machine-breaking and industrial arson soon became focused tactics against the ravages of industrialism, and to some often hard-to-pinpoint degree, against industrialism itself. Such forms of combat are seen among the west England “shearmen and clothing workers, in the Luddite resistance” to the introduction of mechanized devices between 1799 and 1803.²¹ This was also the time (1801–1802) of the underground workers’ movement known as the Black Lamp, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Not coincidentally, the 1790s was the golden age of the Lancashire handloom weavers, whose autonomy was the backbone of radical opposition to the factory system.

Marx’s idea of revolution was severely limited, confined to the question of which class would rule the world of mass production. But even on those terms he completely failed to predict which groups were most likely to constitute a revolutionary force. Instead of becoming radicalized, factory workers were domesticated to a far greater degree than those who held out against “proletarianization.” The quiescence of factory workers is well known. It wasn’t until the 1820s that they were first drawn into protest against the progress of the industrial revolution.²²

“Class” as a social term became part of the language in the 1820s, a by-product of the rise of modern industry, according to Asa Briggs.²³ “It was between 1815 and 1820 that the work-

²⁰ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 229.

²¹ Thompson in Hay et al., *op. cit.*, p. 275.

²² Neil J. Smelser, “Sociological History,” in M.W. Flinn and T.C. Smout, eds., *Essays in Social History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, **1874), pp. 31–32.

²³ Asa Briggs, “The Language of ‘Class’ in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” in Flinn and Smout, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

1822. This was part of the transition from “a largely communal to a primarily state-oriented, bureaucratically organized and professionally supported civic culture,” in the words of M.J.D. Roberts.⁶⁸ Idleness was a mark against the overall industrial future, so the treadmill was introduced. (Idleness among the rich was quite different, needless to say.) Unauthorized fairs were subject to suppression, though they showed considerable staying power; the Vagrant Act of 1824 was aimed at a variety of popular entertainments. The outlawing of “blood sports” like cock-fighting and bull-baiting may be seen as a positive move; but there was no talk of banning hunting of fox, rabbit, and deer by the upper crust.

Driven by the enclosure movement at base, privatization struck on all levels. Domesticity tended to crowd out the social, and happiness became “a fireside thing.”⁶⁹ Enclosure meant an absolutization of private property; enjoyment was increasingly private and confined. The home itself becomes more specifically divided, isolating family members within the household.⁷⁰ Movement is toward segregation of the sexes and identification of women with domesticity. The family and its division of labor become integrated with the trajectory of industry.

Consumer demand for cheap manufactured goods was an underlying, emergent key to the Industrial Revolution. This “demand” was not exactly spontaneous; new wants were now very widely advertised and promoted, filling the vacuum of what had been taken away. The decline in traditional self-sufficiency was everywhere apparent; beer and bread were

⁶⁸ M.J.D. Roberts, “Public and Private in Early Nineteenth Century London: the Vagrant Act of 1822 and its Enforcement,” *Social History* 13:3 (October 1988), p. 294.

⁶⁹ Robert W. Malcomson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 156.

⁷⁰ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 45.

The Guides, the Wardens of our faculties,
And Stewards of our labor, watchful men
And skillful in the usury of time,
Sages, who in their prescience would controul
All accidents and to the very road
Which they have fashion'd would confine us
down,
Like engines⁶⁶

Private, usually Christian schools received some government funding, but a national system of education was rather slow in arriving.

Food rioters, anti-enclosure fence-breakers, not to mention Luddites, could end up on the gallows, but a modern uniformed police force was not implemented much earlier than was a standardized school system. While those in authority had great need of law enforcement, they faced the deep-rooted hostility of the majority. Prevailing sentiment held that personal morality should not be subject to scrutiny by the armed force of society and law. Police were opposed as “paid agents of the state who informed on their neighbors and interfered in private life.”⁶⁷

Uniformed police were on the streets of London with passage of the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829, but strong antipathy to the new institution persisted. At a political reform rally in Coldbath Fields, London in 1833 a struggle broke out and three officers were stabbed, one fatally. The subsequent coroner’s jury brought in a verdict of justifiable homicide.

The change toward formal policing was just one aspect of an enforced social shift already underway. Increased control of mores introduced laws against “public indecency,” and other punitive measures were enshrined in the Vagrant Act of

⁶⁶ E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38:1 (1967), p. 97.

⁶⁷ B. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

ing class was born,” as Harold Perkin had it,²⁴ but the distinctive consciousness did not, as noted, mean a militant, much less a radical orientation during the pivotal two decades under review. A workerist identity was “scarcely involved” in the Luddite risings between 1800 and 1820.²⁵

The most sustained Luddite destruction of newly introduced textile machinery occurred between 1811 and 1816 and took its name from Ned Ludd, a young frame-work knitter in Leicestershire who had an aversion to confinement and drudge work. More than just identification with Ned’s famous frame-smashing episode, Luddism may be properly understood as a widely-held narrative or vision.²⁶ At the heart of this shared outlook was a grounded understanding of the corrosive nature of technological progress. The focus is underlined in Robert Reid’s wonderfully-titled *Land of Lost Content*, wherein he describes a Luddite attack on the hosiery workshop of Edward Hollingsworth on the night of March 11, 1811. Having successfully breached Hollingsworth’s fortified works, frame-breaking, à la Ned, ensued. The armed workers proceeded “selectively. Only the wide machines which knitted the broader, cheaper cloth came under the destructive hammer.”²⁷ Such targeting exhibits a combative hostility to standardization and standardized, mass-produced life, hallmarks of industrial progress writ large.²⁸

²⁴ Perkin, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁵ Smelser, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁶ Katrina Navickas, “The Search for ‘General Ludd’: the Mythology of Luddism,” *Social History* 30:3 (August 2005).

²⁷ Reid, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

²⁸ The radical impulse in Ireland was diverted into Ribbonism, somewhat like Luddism, but lost in a nationalist emphasis. Simon Edwards “Nation and State,” in Zachary Leader and Ian Haywood, eds., *Romantic Period Writings 1798–1832: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 125.

Byron, the most famous poet of the age, was moved to write, “Down with all kings but King Ludd!”²⁹ More important was the very widespread support for Luddite actions. Across the area, according to E. P. Thompson, “active moral sanction [was] given by the community to all Luddite activities short of actual assassination.”³⁰ Women did not play a key role in the machine-breaking attacks, but were very much a part of the movement. In the April 1812 assault on the Burton power-loom mill in Middleton, women were conspicuously present; five were charged with riot and breaking windows.³¹

Parallel examples of militancy were the East Anglian bread riots of 1815, and the victorious five-month seamen’s strike in the same year that paralyzed coal-shipping ports and the east coast coal trade. Frame-breaking had been made a hanging offense in 1812, and repression hit its high point in 1817 with suspension of habeas corpus rights.

But upon the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, a long era began that was decisively centered on political reform (e.g. reform of parliamentary representation) and trade unionism. Unions, then as now, exist to broker the relationship between owners and workers. A more or less scattered, independent and often recalcitrant population becomes combined, represented, and disciplined via unionism.³² This is much less some kind of conspiracy than an accommodation to the great pressures pushing industrial wage-slavery.

As early as Lord Holland’s 1812 efforts to channel Luddite energy in a reform direction, there had been interest in somehow moving it away from its real focus. Luddism had to do with

²⁹ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Rebels Against the Future: the Luddites and their War on the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1996), p. 17.

³⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 585.

³¹ Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

³² For the conservative role of unions see John Zerzan, “Who Killed Ned Ludd?” in John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* (Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press, 1999), pp. 205–211.

of order and unity, in order to recover a suppressed primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom.”⁶³

A common feature of many Gothic novels is a look backward to a simpler and more harmonious world — a connection to Rousseauian primitivism. Gothic’s revolt against the new mechanistic model for society often idealizes the medieval world (hence the Gothic) as one of organic wholeness. But this rather golden past could hardly be recognized through the distorting terror of the intervening years. Gothic ruins and haunted houses in print reflected the production of real ruins, real nightmares. The trauma of fully Enlightened modernity finds its echo in inhuman literary settings where the self is hopelessly lost and ultimately destroyed. The depravity of Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*, hailed by the Marquis de Sade, comes to mind, as does Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which demonizes its own creation. Soon, however, the Gothic became as mechanistic a genre as the social order it rejected. Its formulaic products are still being churned out.

The formation of malleable character, adaptable to the regimen of industrial life, was of obvious importance to the various managers in the early 19th century. Hence a key argument for support of schools was that they were “a form of social insurance.”⁶⁴ In Eric Evans’ summary, “By 1815 the argument was not whether education for the lower orders was proper but how much should be provided.”⁶⁵

The dinnerware manufacturer Thomas Wedgwood wanted a rigorous, disciplinary system of education and tried to enlist Wordsworth as its superintendent. His response, in *The Prelude*, includes these stinging lines:

⁶³ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.

⁶⁴ A.P. Wadsworth, “The First Manchester Sunday Schools,” in Flinn and Smout, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁶⁵ E. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

desserts” and instead were glamorized. Byron saw nature as a value in itself; his nature poetry is correspondingly instinctive and immediate (as is that of his contemporary, John Keats).

He was the most famous of living Englishmen but said goodbye to England in 1816, first to join forces with Carbonari partisans in Italy, and later on the side of Greek rebels, among whom he died in 1824. “I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments,” he had declared.⁶¹

Dino Falluga recognized that some celebrated the death of Byron and what he represented. Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote a few decades after the fact that thanks to Byron’s death the culture was finally able to grow up. It “becomes accustomed to the Mill,” rather than quixotically defending the Luddites as Byron did.⁶² Expectations of change did indeed die with Byron, if not before. Frustration with individual disappointments, also with a generalized, now chronic condition. Now the solitary poet becomes a true fixture, true to the reality that the poet — and not only the poet — is losing the last resource, one’s own authority over oneself. Another deep loss of this era, perhaps the deepest. The age of no more autonomy, of no more hope of making things basically different.

The Gothic novel represents the dark side of Romanticism. It had been launched decades earlier, with Horace Walpole’s anti-Enlightenment *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and outlived Romanticism considerably. Its rise suggests resistance to the ideas of progress and development. The more psychoanalytically inclined see the Gothic as a return of what had been repressed: “a rebellion against a constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideal

⁶¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁶² Dino Franco Falluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 133.

something incomparably more basic than politics and unions, but it failed in its frontal assault. A major late-inning target was John Heathcote’s lace factory at Longborough in June 1816, and the Folly Hill and Pentrick risings a year later “can be regarded as the last flicker of Luddism in its desperate, violent and political phase.”³³ This last adjective refers to a key aspect of the defeat of machine destruction: its diversion into reform channels.

Oppositional energies could still be found, but from this point on they were more often in evidence in more approved contexts. In Bristol, for example, “gangs of disorderly fellows there assembled, throwing stinking fish, dead cats, dogs, rats, and other offensive missiles” during an election campaign.³⁴ The “Swing” riots throughout southeast England in 1830–1831 harkened back to anti-industrial militancy. Agricultural laborers resented threshing machines that were turning farms into factories; they resorted to destroying them and burning owners’ property.³⁵ Their direct action and communal organization marked them as agricultural Luddites. Another, and pretty much final outbreak was the Plug riots in the summer of 1842, when a thousand armed workers held Manchester for several days in a general strike. But the second and third generation came to accept as natural the confinement and deskilling of industrial labor. Only starvation could conquer a few holdouts, notably handloom weavers, terribly outflanked by the factories. What happened, or failed to happen, in the

³³ Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?: Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789–1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 51.

³⁴ M. Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

³⁵ Roland Quinault, “The Industrial Revolution and Parliamentary Reform,” in Patrick K. O’Brien and Roland Quinault, eds., *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 197.

turning point years of 1800 to 1820 sealed people's fate. The ultimate victor was a new, much deeper level of domestication.

The Luddite challenge to the new order stood out, and continues to inspire. Another, somewhat neglected aspect or current was that of religious utopianism, known as millenarianism. This movement (or movements) shed virtually all association with traditional religious belief. It was distant from that agent of social control, the Church of England, and turned its back(s) on the C of E's main rival, Methodism (aka Dissenting or Non-Conformist). The millennialists were anti-clerical and even at times anti-Christian.³⁶ They promised a vast transformation; their prophets threatened to "turn the world upside down," similar to the aims of secular revolutionaries.³⁷ Millenarianism was "directed to the destruction of existing society," and the reigning authorities believed in the possibility that it "might be sufficient to spark off the explosive mixture of social discontent and radical sentiment" then prevailing.³⁸

The Methodist leadership recoiled in horror from the Luddite momentum and likewise from the many faces of millenarian extremism, some number of which were break-aways from Methodism. The Primitive Methodist Connexion was steadily growing, along with the "magic Methodists" of Delamere Forest, and the "Kirkgate screamers" of Leeds, among the many disaffected offshoots.³⁹ Some of these (and other similar groups) were explicitly referred to as Ranters, recognizing a link to the Ranters (and Diggers) of the 17th century millenarianist rebellion. Already in the 1790s "cheap

³⁶ J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), p. 10.

³⁷ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 61.

³⁸ J.F.C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 50, 77.

³⁹ Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783–1870* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 53.

decline as a poet after 1807 seems linked to the pessimism, even despair, that began to get the upper hand. He saw that the Enlightenment enshrining of Reason had failed, and he abandoned Nature as a source of value or hope.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's anguish at the erosion of community brought surrender and drug addiction. His *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* testifies to the erosion of values in the absence of community. His "Michael" poems completed a series on abandonment and meaningless loss. A major poet who collapsed back into Anglican orthodoxy – as did Wordsworth – and nationalist conservatism.

One who kept the liberatory Romantic flame burning longer was Percy Bysshe Shelley. Influenced by the anarchist William Godwin, Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813) contains these lines:

Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame,
A mechanized automaton. ** (III, 176)⁵⁹

Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* (1819) is an angry call to arms following the government assault on protestors, known as the Peterloo Massacre (e.g. "Rise like Lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number").⁶⁰ But he too flamed out, lost his way. The Hyperion project was dropped, and a major work, *Prometheus Unbound*, presents a confusing picture. By 1820 his passion had been quelled.

Of aristocratic lineage, George Gordon, Lord Byron was a lifelong radical. He spoke out against making frame-breaking a capital offense, and defended the impoverished. His brazen, bisexual behavior shocked a society he despised. With *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*, transgressors escaped their "just

⁵⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁶⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 299

thusiasm for the new dawn.”⁵⁴ Writing in 1804, Wordsworth recalled the exhilaration of ten years or so earlier, when the French revolution announced a new world and the factory system had not yet metastasized: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very Heaven!”⁵⁵ In its first bloom especially, Romanticism sought to reconcile humans and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness. As Northrup Frye put it, “the contrast between the mechanical and the organic is deeply rooted in Romantic thinking.”⁵⁶ René Wellek noted that such thinking could be seen as “an upsurge of the unconscious and the primitive.”⁵⁷

Events, soon to be defined by Marx and other industrializers as Progress, undid optimism and a sense of possibilities, as we have seen. Sunny Enlightenment predictions about the perfectibility of society were already turning to ashes, as people became increasingly separated from nature and entered the state of modern, industrial slavery. A great sense of disappointment overtook the earlier aspirations, which were rapidly being destroyed by each new advance of industrial capitalism. From this point onward, disillusionment, ennui, and boredom became central to life in the West.

William Wordsworth acknowledged the existence and importance of a spirit of wild nature, which Blake resisted in him. Wordsworth was particularly moved by the decline of the domestic or pre-industrial mode of production and its negative impact on the poor and on families.⁵⁸ Privation, a sense of what has been lost, is a key theme in Wordsworth. His well-known

⁵⁴ Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 47.

⁵⁵ Quoted in R.W. Harris, *Romanticism and the Social Order* (London: Blandford Press, 1969), p. 178.

⁵⁶ Northrup Frye, “The Drunken Boat,” in Northrup Frye, ed., *Romanticism Reconsidered* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 7.

⁵⁷ René Wellek, “Romanticism Reconsidered,” in Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵⁸ R.W. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

reprints of long-buried works of Ranter and Antinomian [literally, anti-law] complexion” were circulating.⁴⁰

The Scottish Buchanites, followers of Elspeth Simpson Buchan, wished to hold all things in common and rejected the bonds of official marriage. The Wroeites were largely wool-combers and handloom weavers, fighting against the extinction of their crafts. The more numerous Muggletonians, led by the tailor Ludovic Muggle, offered a refuge to the oppressed and excluded. Among the myriad groups and sects a range of millennial faiths can be found. Joanna Southcott, with her thousands of Southcottians, was a feminist—but not a radical one. Some of her flock, like Peter Morison and John Ward, were on the fiery side; in 1806 Morison preached the confiscation of “all the property and land belonging to the rich.”⁴¹ Richard Brothers of the New Jerusalem proclaimed that “now is the whore of Babylon falling” and the future will see “no more war, no more want.”⁴² Robert Wedderburn, a black sailor, attracted the “most extreme and impoverished radicals” to his London chapel.⁴³

The millenarian impulse was by no means an isolated, cranky, or unrepresentative passion. In the 1790s it emerged “on a scale unknown since the 17th century,” judged E.P. Thompson.⁴⁴ “From the 1790s to at least the 1830s radical millenarianism could pose a real threat” to the dominant system, precisely because it did not accept the ruling paradigm

⁴⁰ Iain McCalman, “New Jerusalem: Prophecy, Dissent and Radical Culture in England, 1786- 1830,” in Knud Haakonsen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 324.

⁴¹ J.F.C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁴² Quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁴³ I. McCalman, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁴⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Making*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

or participate within it.⁴⁵ It was an active critique of the deep assumptions of the ruling order.

Domestic servants and small shopkeepers were among the adherents, as well as artisans and other dispossessed craftspeople who were the spearhead of the Luddite ranks. And in 1813 a New Connexion minister, George Beaumont, was charged with inspiring the Luddite attacks in the Huddersfield area.

Thomas Spence was an influential, apocalyptic figure who found inspiration in the 17th century visionaries. He reprinted a Digger tract from that era by Gerald Winstanley, and likewise attacked private property as standing against God's common storehouse. Spence was convinced that "God was a very notorious Leveller" and that it was possible and necessary for humble men to turn the world upside down.⁴⁶

Alas, the world wasn't turned upside down. The civilizing machine persevered through the storms. Religion, in its usual role, taught respect for authority and had a new weapon in its arsenal: the evangelical revival's campaign for industrial discipline.

William Blake, of "dark Satanic mills" fame, was an enigmatic, idiosyncratic figure who certainly played a part in this period. Not fully a millenarian or a Romantic either, Blake took as his central theme "the need to release the human spirit from bondage."⁴⁷ Starting from an orientation toward class struggle, Blake ultimately opposed kingship, and rulership itself.⁴⁸

His *Songs of Experience* (1790s) point in a radical and millenarian direction, and he provided a radical critique of the limits of Swedenborgianism. But Blake can be characterized more

⁴⁵ E. Royle, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ I. McCalman, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Shiv Kumar, "The New Jerusalem of William Blake," in Shiv Kumar, ed., *British Romantic Poets* (New York: New York University Press, 1966), p. 169.

⁴⁸ Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 191–192.

as a Jacobin reformer than a revolutionary millennial. Consistency may be hard to find overall, though some observations, rendered in his own inimitable style, hit the mark. He found the factory and the workhouse terribly wrong and, as with the Luddites, saw the destruction of traditional workmanship as the end of working people's integrity. Mechanized time was a particularly important target: "the hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom: no clock can measure," for example.⁴⁹

Blake's outlook on both nature and women has to be seen as quite flawed. His anti-feminism is hard to miss, and there is a contempt for nature, as female and therefore secondary to the male. Social harmony is a major goal, but harmony or balance with nature, as championed by the Romantics or William Morris, for instance, was of no interest to Blake.⁵⁰ He desired the "Immediate by Perception or Sense at once,"⁵¹ but it did not occur to him to ground this desire in the non-symbolic natural world.

E.P. Thompson clearly went too far in asserting, "Never, on any page of Blake, is there the least complicity with the kingdom of the Beast."⁵² More accurate was his appraisal that few "delivered such shrewd and accurate blows against the ideological defenses of their society."⁵³

The first two decades of the 19th century were the heart of the Romantic period, and the course of this literary movement reflects what took place socially and politically in those years. At the beginning, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and others gave voice to "an explosion of millenarian and apocalyptic en-

⁴⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 86, 99, 105.

⁵¹ Quoted in Heather Glen, *Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 206.

⁵² E.P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.