Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto

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Most students of European history dismiss the Luddites of 19th century England as "reckless machine-smashers" and "vandals" worthy of mention only for their daring tactics. Probing beyond this interpretation, though, we find a complex, thoughtful, and little-understood social movement whose roots lay in a clash between two worldviews.

The worldview that 19th century Luddites challenged was that of *laissez-faire* capitalism with its increasing amalgamation of power, resources, and wealth, rationalized by its emphasis on "progress."

The worldview they supported was an older, more decentralized one espousing the interconnectedness of work, community, and family through craft guilds, village networks, and townships. They saw the new machines that owners introduced into their workplaces — the gig mills and shearing frames — as threats not only to their jobs, but to the quality of their lives and the structure of the communities they loved. In the end, destroying these machines was a last-ditch effort by a desperate people whose world lay on the verge of destruction.

Barraged by Technologies

The current controversy over technology is reminiscent of that of the Luddite period. We too are being barraged by a new generation of technologies — two-way television, fiber optics, bio-technology, superconductivity, fusion energy, space weapons, supercomputers. We too are witnessing protest against the onslaught. A group of Berkeley students gathered in Sproul Plaza to kick and smash television sets as an act of "therapy for the victims of technology." A Los Angeles businesswoman hiked onto Vandenberg Air Force Base and beat a weapons-related computer with a crowbar, bolt cutters, hammer, and cordless drill. Villagers in India resist the bulldozers cutting down their forests by wrapping their bodies around tree trunks. People living near the Narita airport in Japan sit on the tarmac to prevent airplanes from taking off and landing. West Germans climb up the smokestacks of factories to protest emissions that are causing acid rain, which is killing the Black Forest.

Desperate Neo-Luddites

Such acts echo the concerns and commitment of the 19th century Luddites. Neo-Luddites are 20th century citizens — activists, workers, neighbors, social critics, and scholars — who question the predominant modern worldview, which preaches that unbridled technology represents progress. Neo-Luddites have the courage to gaze at the full catastrophe of our century: The technologies created and disseminated by modern Western societies are out of control and desecrating the fragile fabric of life on Earth. Like the early Luddites, we too are a desperate people seeking to protect the livelihoods, communities, and families we love, which lie on the verge of destruction.

What is Technology?

Just as recent social movements have challenged the idea that current models of gender roles, economic organizations, and family structures are necessarily "normal" or "natural," so the Neo-Luddite movement has come to acknowledge that technological progress and the kinds of technologies produced in our society are not simply "the way things are."

As philosopher Lewis Mumford pointed out, technology consists of more than machines. It includes the techniques of operation and the social organizations that make a particular machine workable. In essence, a technology reflects a worldview. Which particular forms of technology — machines, techniques, and social organizatoins — are spawned by a particular worldview depend on its perception of life, death, human potential, and the relationship of humans to one another and to nature.

In contrast to the worldviews of a majority of cultures around the world (especially those of indigenous people), the view that lies at the foundation of modern technological society encourages a mechanistic approach to life: to rational thinking, efficiency, utilitarianism, scientific detachment, and the belief that the human place in nature is one of ownership and supremacy. The kinds of technologies that result include nuclear power plants, laser beams, and satellites. This worldview has created and promoted the military-industrial-scientific-media complex, multinational corporations, and urban sprawl.

Stopping the destruction brought by such technologies requires not just regulating or eliminating individual items like pesticides or nuclear weapons. It requires new ways of thinking about humanity and new ways of relating to life. It requires the creation of a new worldview.

Principles of Neo-Luddism

1. *Neo-Luddites are not anti-technology.* Technology is intrinsic to human creativity and culture. What we oppose are the *kinds* of technologies that are, at root, destructive of human lives and communities. We also reject technologies that emanate from a worldview that sees rationality as the key to human potential, material acquisition as the key to human fulfillment, and technological development as the key to social progress.

2. *All technologies are political.* As social critic Jerry Mander writes in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, technologies are not neutral tools that can be used for good or evil depending on who uses them. They are entities that have been consciously structured to reflect and serve specific powerful interests in specific historical situations. The technologies created by mass technological society are those that serve the perpetuation of mass technological society. They tend to be structured for short-term efficiency, ease of production, distribution, marketing, and profit potential — or for war-making. As a result, they tend to create rigid social systems and institutions that people do not understand and cannot change or control.

As Mander points out, television does not just bring entertainment and information to households across the globe. It offers corporations a surefire method of expanding their markets and controlling social and political thought. (It also breaks down family communications and narrows people's experience of life by mediating reality and lowering their span of attention.)

Similarly, the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device did not just make birth control easier for women. It created tremendous profits for corporate entrepreneurs at a time when the largest generation ever born in the United States was coming of age and oral contraceptives were in disfavor. (It also damaged hundreds of thousands of women by causing septic abortions, pelvic inflammatory disease, torn uteruses, sterility, and death.)

Critiquing Technology

3. *The personal view of technology is dangerously limited.* The often-heard message "but I couldn't live without my word processor" denies the wider consequences of widespread use of computers (toxic contamination of workers in electronic plants and the solidifying of corporate power through exclusive access to new information in data bases).

As Mander points out, producers and disseminators of technologies tend to introduce their creations in upbeat, utopian terms. Pesticides will increase yields to feed a hungry planet! Nuclear energy will be "too cheap to meter." The pill will liberate women! Learning to critique technology demands fully examining its sociological context, economic ramifications, and political meanings. It involves asking not just what is gained — but what is lost, and by whom. It involves looking at the introduction of technologies from the perspective not only of human use, but of their impact on other living beings, natural systems, and the environment.

Program for the Future

1. As a move toward dealing with the consequences of modern technologies and preventing further destruction of life, *we favor the dismantling of the following destructive technologies:*

- nuclear technologies — which cause disease and death at every stage of the fuel cycle;
- chemical technologies — which re-pattern natural processes through the creation of synthetic, often poisonous chemicals and leave behind toxic and undisposable wastes;
- genetic engineering technologies — which create dangerous mutagens that when released into the biosphere threaten us with unprecedented risks;
- television — which functions as a centralized mind-controlling force, disrupts community life, and poisons the environment;
- electromagnetic technologies — whose radiation alters the natural electrical dynamic of living beings, causing stress and disease; and
- computer technologies — which cause disease and death in their manufacture and use, enhance centralized political power, and remove people from direct experience of life.

Technology by and for the People

2. *We favor a search for new technological forms.* As political scientist Langdon Winner advocates in *Autonomous Technology*, we favor the creation of technologies by the people directly involved in their use — not by scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs who gain financially from mass production and distribution of their inventions and who know little about the context in which their technologies are used.

We favor the creation of technologies that are of a scale and structure that make them understandable to the people who use them and are affected by them. We favor the creation of technologies built with a high degree of flexibility so that they do not impose a rigid and irreversible

imprint on their users, and we favor the creation of technologies that foster independence from technological addiction and promise political freedom, economic justice, and ecological balance.

3. *We favor the creation of technologies in which politics, morality, ecology, and technics are merged for the benefit of life on Earth:*

- community-based energy sources utilizing solar, wind, and water technologies — which are renewable and enhance both community relations and respect for nature;
- organic, biological technologies in agriculture, engineering, architecture, art, medicine, transportation, and defense — which derive directly from natural models and systems;
- conflict resolution technologies — which emphasize cooperation, understanding, and continuity of relationship; and
- decentralized social technologies — which encourage participation, responsibility, and empowerment.

4. *We favor the development of a life-enhancing worldview in Western technological societies.* We hope to instill a perception of life, death, and human potential into technological societies that will integrate the human need for creative expression, spiritual experience, and community with the capacity for rational thought and functionality. We perceive the human role not as the dominator of other species and planetary biology, but as integrated into the natural world with appreciation for the sacredness of all life.

We foresee a sustainable future for humanity if and when Western technological societies restructure their mechanistic projections and foster the creation of machines, techniques, and social organizations that respect both human dignity and nature's wholeness. In progressing towards such a transition, we are aware: We have nothing to lose except a way of living that leads to the destruction of all life. We have a world to gain.

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