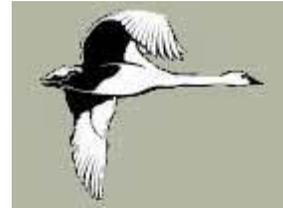


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Kirkpatrick Sale's Rebels Against The Future

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Time magazine recently called it “The Twentieth Century Blues.” Canadian philosopher George Grant has written of the “darkness which envelops the Western world.” Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, referred to a “quiet desperation” among suburban American housewives “the problem with no name.” Most Americans since then, and certainly most Earthlings, have experienced “the problem” in their own lives. If nothing else, it is the grist of daily journalism: runaway murder and suicide rates, brutal mass layoffs of formerly secure employees, rising poverty and family violence, unceasing civil wars, poisoned air and water and soil, pandemic extinctions of plant and animal species, glaciers melting and food crops failing as the climate heats up in a thickening cloud of carbon gases around the world.

Social historian Kirkpatrick Sale, in his eighth luminous book in three decades, has given a name to “the problem with no name.” He calls it “technology.” He calls it “innovation.” He calls it “machinery” in the service of industrialism, and therefore “hurtful,” he writes, to human “commonality” and global well-being.

Sale’s new book is *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution*, Addison Wesley, 1995. Like other of his books, it is part social history and scholarship, part novel in the spirit of Zola, and part advocacy on behalf of planet Earth “the only living planet in the universe” which he stubbornly calls the “biosphere.” Sale declares in his opening sentence that he shares an “affinity for the ideas and passions that motivated the subjects of this book, particularly their abiding sense that a world dominated by the technologies of industrial society is fundamentally more detrimental than beneficial to human happiness and survival.”

Sale argues that “human happiness” in central England, prior to the Luddite rebellion there in 1811 and 1812, was rooted like an oak in three and four centuries of stable family and community life. Most of the families worked together in the wool and cotton trades that accounted for the bulk of England’s lucrative export market. This was cottage industry in the purest sense of the phrase. “Work usually involved some bodily skill,” writes Sale,—like combing, spinning and weaving wool—“and some mental agility, often a craft in which a person would take some pride, usually with the family pitching in and with occasions for songs and stories and gossip the while, and when times were good it was possible to lay by a shilling or two and when work was slack there was always a garden and a few animals to fall back on.”

Not that life in these cottage communities was wholly idyllic, without travail and discord, even before “the problem” emerged. Sale notes that the “cottage weaver” often toiled in “damp and crowded quarters,” was generally beholden to merchant suppliers and buyers of his “finished goods,” and so was “part of an ‘outworker proletariat’ long before the power loom was perfected.” Sale notes further that patriarchy “was the norm in the countryside villages” though women could “earn an equal social status” with men that children entered the work force at an early age, and that “life was usually as bare and simple and functional as the furniture in the parlor.”

Nonetheless, Sale contends, “it had its virtues,” not only in terms of family cohesion and self-reliance but also and perhaps especially in terms of municipal fraternity and collective well-being. The “close-knit villages” of Nottinghamshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, where these tens of thousands of families lived, “functioned as true communities,” writes Sale, with a “common culture” and “traditional relationships among masters and journeymen, workers and merchants, cottagers and squires, parishioners and parsons. And *central to it all* (emphasis added) was a moral custom that was the framework upon which all social and economic relations hung, in large measure based on mutual aid and reciprocity over the back fence . . . and on honesty and fairness in the workplace and market . . . and on an abomination of anything that would upset or alter that custom, including innovations and technologies imposed from without.”

Starting roughly in 1785, which marked the introduction of the “steam-powered factory” in England, the traditional cottagers of the textile districts were increasingly threatened and set upon by “innovations and technologies imposed from without.” The principal source of this imposition was a new breed of capitalist evolving in England under the banner of Adam Smith, an ambitious coterie of inventors, manufacturers and marketeers who were able quickly to enlist the apparatus of the British state in behalf of their lunge for wealth and power. By 1800, writes Sale, “some 2,191 steam engines were thought to be at work in Britain those—‘Stygian forges with their fire-throats and never-resting sledge-hammers’ that Carlyle wrote of.” By 1813, “there were an estimated 2,400 textile looms operating by steam, but that burgeoned to 14,150 by 1820 and exploded to more than 100,000 just a decade later.” At which point, writes Sale, “according to a contemporary expert, one man could do the work that two or three hundred men had done at the start of the Industrial Revolution, ‘the most striking example of the dominion of human science over the powers of nature of which modern times can boast.’”

Hence, in cruelly short order, the artisans and their families in the textile districts were absorbing the brunt of what Sale calls the “First Industrial Revolution.” (Sale argues that a “Second Industrial Revolution” was triggered in 1971 with the “master technology” of the digital computer about which more below.) Many of the artisans of course lost their jobs in the industrial onslaught, and those who found work at “Stygian forges” found themselves essentially enslaved. “While the engine works,” wrote a doctor of the period, quoted by Sale, “the people must work. Men, women, and children are thus yoke-fellows with iron and steam: the animal machine—fragile at best, subject to a thousand sources of suffering, and doomed, by nature in its best state, to a short-lived existence, changing every moment, and hastening to decay—is matched with an iron machine insensible to suffering and fatigue.”

And yet, writes Sale, “at bottom the workers’ grievance was not just about the machinery—it never was just the machinery throughout all these years—but what the machinery stood for, the palpable, daily evidence of their having to succumb to forces beyond their control . . . that were taking away their livelihoods and transforming their lives.” The diabolical “logic of the machine,” to paraphrase Sale, quickly infected whole communities, driving a wedge of profit-hunger between traditional artisans and local owners of the new technology. “This was the morality of industrial capital, and it apparently had no place in it for the morality of a society were the well-being of the workers and their work, the salubrity of family and community, mattered most.”

In any case, the preliminary tactic of petitions and letters and pleas to capitalists and government officials having failed, a small band of textile workers in Nottinghamshire decisively launched the Luddite rebellion on November 4, 1811. Their target wasn’t a steam-powered textile mill, although not a few of them bulked in the region, but rather the house of a “master weaver” named Hollingsworth who had recently installed some “hated machines” of the job-killing kind. In the darkness, writes Sale, the raiders “blackened their faces or pulled up scarves, hoisted their various weapons, hammers, axes, pistols, ’swords, firelocks, and other offensive weapons’ (as one report had it) and

marched in more or less soldierly fashion to their destination.” Posting a guard, they broke into the house and smashed a half- dozen of Hollingsworth’s “frames,” or “cut-up” machines, and then disbanded only to return some six nights later to finish the job. This time, however, they were met by gunfire, and one of the raiders, a weaver named John Westley, was mortally wounded. “Proceed, my brave fellows,” he reportedly exclaimed, “I die with a willing heart.” His comrades, writes Sale, “bore the body to the edge of a nearby woods and then returned with a fury irresistible by the force opposed to them” and broke down the door while the family and the guards escaped by the back door. They then smashed the frames and apparently some of the furniture, and set fire to the house, which was gutted within an hour; the men dispersed into the night, never identified, never caught.”

Thus erupts the boisterous tragedy of Luddism, a brief but seminal and instructive episode in the annals of Western industrialism, which Sale narrates with the flair of a novelist. (He points out early, by the way, that the famous namesake of the Luddite rebellion—often referred to by the rebels themselves in public declarations as “Captain” or “General Edward Ludd”—didn’t exist at the time of the revolt and may never have existed, save in the person of a boy in Leicester some 20 years before who may have smashed a knitting machine.) It is a story, writes Sale, of “pseudonymous letters, night-time raids, quasi-military operations, secrecy and solidarity, and a campaign to instigate fear, or alarm, or dread in the hearts of those at whom it is aimed.” It is also a story of ruthless suppression by a British state whose armed dragoons and magistrates mistaking a leaderless, inchoate uprising for a disciplined revolution would stop at nothing to protect the interests of England’s new industrial elite.

In its later months, when the rebellion spread from Nottinghamshire to Lancashire and Yorkshire, “it adds on public demonstrations, attacks on factories (including one which claims the lives of ten Luddites), arson and burglary as its character hardens and the raids become more frequent, sometimes frenzied, even in the face of growing numbers of troops.” Particularly in Yorkshire, Sale observes, “Luddism rises to its most imposing form, rooted as it is in communities with long heritages and strong allegiances, and here there are clearer signs of an authentic insurrection—armed raids and the hoarding of weapons, the voice of a true rebel raised now and again, and eventually even assassination—and here the wave crashes against unyielding breaker rocks and is largely spent, only little more than a year after it begins.”

By January 1813 at the latest, when 14 rebels are strung from the gallows on a single day, the Luddites have lost, “their howl drowned out by the deafening noise of the factory engine.” But Sale hasn’t finished by a long shot. He marches on for 75 pages, mainly skewering and demythologizing the “*post-industrial*” computer age, which Sale insists is not remotely post-industrial. He argues that the modern computer and attendant technologies now in the hands of the international corporate state are the driving force of the “Second Industrial Revolution” mentioned above with grave implications for human “commonality” and global well-being.

Sale is aware that the “computer age” has far more champions and defenders at this point than it has detractors. He acknowledges, too, that some industrial processes have been cleaned up and made more efficient by the application of computer-based technologies, just as he acknowledges that a certain small quantum of the world’s population has benefited more than it has been damaged by those technologies—at least so far. But in sum, he concludes, the basic and ultimately corrosive “currents” of the First Industrial Revolution are fully present and working their evil in the Second. He lists those “currents” as the following: (1) “The Imposition of Technology,” (2) “The Destruction of the Past,” (3) “The Manufacture of Needs,” (4) “The Service of the State,” (5) “The Ordeal of Labor,” (6) “The Destruction of Nature.”

Sale is persuasive in his treatment of these “currents,” showing how each interacts with

the others to produce “the problem” afflicting the denizens of the late 20th century.

He is especially persuasive—in fact compelling—in his treatment of number six: “The Destruction of Nature.” He writes:

[It is] “characteristic of industrialism, to make swift and thorough use of nature’s stored-up treasures and living organisms, called ‘resources,’ without regard to the stability or sustainability of the world that provides them—a process ratified by such industrial ideologies as humanism, which gives us the right, materialism, which gives us the reason, and rationalism, which gives us the method. But it was not until industrialism grew into its high-tech phase, with the immense power-multiplier of the computer, that this exploitation of resources escalated onto a new plane different not only in *degree*, with exhaustion, extermination, despoliation, and pollution at unprecedented and accelerating rates, but in *kind*, creating that technosphere so immanent in our lives, artificial, powerful, and global, and fundamentally at odds with the biosphere. What Carlyle saw as the economy’s ‘war with Nature’ in the 19th century has, like all warfare, become a vastly more thorough force in the 20th.

Not surprisingly, Sale makes clear toward the end of his book that he is sympathetic to the efforts of activists in America and abroad to conceive and execute a “Neo-Luddite” revolt against modern technology run amok. Indeed, he cites the provisions of a “Neo-Luddite Manifesto” authored by a woman named Chellis Glendinning. But Sale is too watchful and intellectually honest to be optimistic in the near term. Despite his references to hopeful signs of effective opposition to industrialism—among them such thinkers as Wendell Berry and Jeremy Rifkin and such organizations as Greenpeace—seems to be persuaded that “the problem” he has named will not be contained in time for salvation. On the contrary, he seems to be persuaded that the Second Industrial Revolution—a global Frankenstein ravaging the planet in quest of more profit for its corporate masters, reducing all life to market commodities—will continue laying waste to the biosphere until “civilization” simply collapses in one or another variant of apocalypse.

Assuming there are survivors, he writes, it will be necessary for those “survivors to have some body of lore, and some vision of human regeneration, that instructs them in how thereafter to live in harmony with nature and how and why to fashion their technologies with the restraints and obligations of nature intertwined, seeking not to conquer and dominate and control the species and systems of the natural world—for the failure of industrialism will have taught the folly of that—but rather to understand and obey and love and incorporate nature into their souls as well as their tools.”

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