

Slacker Luddites

Critical Art Ensemble

Throughout the first world, nothing is more emblematic of zero work nihilism than the image of Luddite resistance. Joyful destruction of machines in the workplace: Is there anyone who hasn't entertained such fantasies? Who hasn't thought about crashing a workstation hard drive, spilling coffee into a mainframe, or throwing a company vehicle into reverse while speeding down the highway? For many, such fantasies become reality, and neoluddites are born. But are such deeds really the acts of Luddites, or do they merely replay a historical narrative that never existed — an indulgence in nostalgic creations? Because of the profound differences that separate the political economies of early and late capital, the nihilistic impulses of early 19th-century Luddites cannot be qualitatively compared to those arising now in the late 20th century. The Luddite designation can only be used rather loosely in the society of late capital. On its surface, the image of early 19th century workers smashing the machines of textile mills has a potency that seems utterly relevant to the crushing alienation of the contemporary workplace, but the motivations and ideology that lie behind Luddite activity today have little in common with the Luddites of the past.

The Luddism of early capital represented the dying thoughts of the feudal body, while the attacks on the textile factories were the final muscle spasms of the feudal corpse. Those who were motivated to participate did so out of the fear that they were becoming anachronisms. It seemed clear to the Luddites that machines were going to replace them and steal away their livelihoods, as poor as they may have been. Any political intent behind Luddite activities was counterrevolutionary in nature — an attempt to stop the revolution in production, and to halt the shift of power from land to capital (from nobility to bourgeoisie). The final goal of the Luddite was to maintain the status quo, since the Luddites of early capital were desperation personified in their deathly fear of machines, economic instability, and the future. From a cool intellectualized perspective, Luddites are not a group to be canonized in the history of resistance to authoritarian structures. If anything, they were demons in this history. But let us not forget the passions. Smashing up factories — that must be one supreme libidinal discharge. Such actions signify moments of free-form desire. To substitute for these moments, which are too few in the lives of individuals in late capital, the myth of the Luddite continues to dwell in the hearts of all people who hate work in general, their jobs in particular, and the repressive atmosphere omnipresent in the work environment.

From the contemporary viewpoint nearly two centuries later, it should be very apparent that Luddism in its historical form has no place in late capital (only its mythic form carries meaning). The conditions have changed too drastically, and yet there are still some threads of continuity. Fueled by images of anti-tech nihilism, traces of the Luddite mythology live on, but as nothing more than isolated fragments offering only intermittent patterns of significance. Most importantly, the specific fear that motivated the originary Luddites is gone. Although technological development causes many people fear and anxiety, fewer and fewer believe that technology will replace them. In fact, the fear is really quite the opposite. As technology attaches itself to the body, the relationship between the body and technology becomes increasingly symbiotic. The bureaucratic and technocratic classes and portions of the service class are being turned into cyborgs. This is the new Luddite fear; the fear of losing organic purity, and of becoming overdependent on/addicted to technology.

Examples of people being turned into cyborgs are quite numerous; the most obvious place where this occurs is of course the military. In that institution, ruled by a desire for technology to run wild, people want to be machines — killing machines. The better a soldier can

transform h/erself into pure technology, the better h/er chances of surviving combat. Headsets, night vision goggles, automatic weapons, lasers, gas masks, etc., are all attached to the body, extending its possibilities. This is a second-order cyborg: Organic infrastructure with an impermanent technological superstructure. The question is, at what point will the techno-superstructure become permanent, creating a first-order cyborg?

The first-order cyborg can be a frightening thought, especially considering how well the middle class is being groomed for this development. Rather than being framed in terms of death, the cyborg question is framed in terms of life, desire, and entertainment. From pacemakers to contact lenses, bio-tech makes the body stronger. Who will say no to technology that extends life, or to that which returns the body to normative functions? Let us not forget the possibilities for balancing the body's appearance with its desired image. Everything from artificial cheek implants to sex change operations offer liberating experiences of a nomadic, ever-transforming body. And finally, what of all the video and virtual reality games? It is fun to go into those artificial electronic worlds. Just suit up, and the conquest of death is at your command. Apocalypse and utopia have imploded with such force under the sign of technology that it is nearly impossible to separate the two possibilities. The media machine of the corporate complex maintains an utopian spectacle to keep the population moving toward existence as cyborgs. This is part of the reason why it is difficult to find a contemporary Luddite with the same zeal for destruction that h/er predecessors had. Contemporary Luddites do not hate technology. On the contrary, they are comfortable with it. At the same time, technology is not accepted without question to the extent desired by corporate futurologists and public relations people. The relationship between the Luddite and technology is a little more ambiguous than it once was, and consequently the anti-tech nihilism has also dissipated. What more can be said? Compared to the original Luddites, the contemporary anti-tech malcontents are slackers.

Rather than continuing to examine the more sensationalized aspects of technology. Let's return to the everyday life of the bureaucratic class. The environment of the bureaucracy keeps the traces of Luddism alive. No matter how big a smiley face the corporate futurologists put on technology and the cyborg alternative, spend only a few moments sitting at a workstation, staring into a computer screen, and one realizes that something about this situation is truly debilitating. Or look around the office at all the other workstations, and witness the organic debris of hit-and-run victims on the digital highway. It's an unpleasant vision to say the least, but perhaps worse is the feeling that technology is starting to cleave to the skin. This feeling inspires the realization that the greater the efficiency of the human/tech interface, the better for bureaucratic production. The most basic slacker Luddite tactics have developed to counter this withering repression. Some are time-honored, such as repeated trips to the rest room. Some are newer, such as meeting at the xerox machine for a bitch session with other workmates. This tactic is of a higher order than the former, because not only are the workers doing nothing, but they are also getting paid for having nonproductive conversation (distinguishing between the orders of slacker Luddism will be discussed later in the essay). These tactics not only slow the rate of production, they also temporarily hinder the bio-tech synthesis. Unfortunately, high level management also realizes this, inspiring it to greater efforts to accelerate the synthesis necessary for maximum exploitation.

At present, employees can be monitored by devices connected to their computers, so the overseers know precisely how long a worker has been at h/er workstation and can even take keystroke counts, but surveillance alone is not enough. Slacker Luddites know how to get around these surveillance techniques. However, once the organic and the technological are joined. workers will never be able to leave their workstations. They will be able to move from

place to place, but they will never be able to check out. The wearable computers from NEC Corporation exemplify this corporate elite science fiction fantasy. There is little doubt that the task of compressing machine space and organic space (the workstation and the body) into a single compact unit is well under way.

Yet despite all this workplace terror, as long as technology offers services to the individual, it receives the utopian benefit of the doubt. It is both useful and enjoyable. Quite commonly, a slacker Luddite who hates to slave on h/er computer at work returns home only to sit at the computer again, to desktop publish h/er own magazine. This situation is the opposite of originary Luddism. The slacker Luddite shuns or destroys technology not because of a hatred or fear of it, but because of a hatred for work, while originary Luddites were accustomed to work, but hated and feared the technology. Slacker Luddism is a late capital hybrid, a perfect example of recombinant culture. It synthesizes the tactics of originary Luddism with the zero work ethic of contemporary slackers.

Even an idea like zero work begins the process of depoliticization. Zero work is generally associated with radical left action, but this is not the intention of the slacker Luddite. While zero work was formerly a strategy made specific in the notion of a universal strike, an effort to force the collapse of the capitalist system, the slacker Luddite sees zero work as a desirable condition personally. No grandiose goals of social and political restructuring are involved. Under the slacker rubric, zero work is transformed into a therapeutic strategy, a way to feel good about yourself. The slacker Luddite oscillates between individual heroism and political naivete.

The situation of the slacker Luddite is also directly influenced by h/er class position. Unlike in the past, the slacker Luddite is more likely to be a bureaucrat, technocrat, or service worker, and less likely to be a worker proper. The current conditions of the working class are such that slack is extremely hard to achieve. Since such conditions emerged out of early capital, the strategies of resistance developed during that time are more common and practical. For those working on the assembly lines, resistance is a matter of all or nothing. For instance, the assembly line moves at a fixed rate, so slacker attempts to slow down production will generally lead to hasty dismissal. The only real options are general strike (a dead strategy), or (following the tactics of early Luddites) machine destruction for the purpose of completely shutting down the factory. Neither of these tactics is very common now, and they are both very risky in terms of potential punishment from the state. Slack is not an accurate description of these approaches. In terms of the latter tactic of "throwing a wrench in the machine," the technocrat is better equipped. By introducing viruses into corporate or bureaucratic communication systems, the individual resister can do much more damage than by stopping a point of production — s/he can attack the command and control of a complex manufacturing multi-site.

In the case of skilled laborers, such as construction workers, the use of independent contracting severely curtails Luddite or slacker Luddite activity. Profits increase with the rate of production for skilled laborers and independent contractors, and technology is a great aid in keeping production rates high. Further, since most of the equipment these workers use belongs to them, it would be quite foolish for them to destroy their own property. Consequently, this is not a likely location for Luddite ideology or action.

For bureaucrats, however, the conditions are perfect for Luddism to grow and flourish. The work is just esoteric enough to make it very difficult to determine reasonable production rates. Add this factor to the low pay, the most alienating of working conditions, and a general

ideology of "minimum pay, minimum work," and all varieties of slacker Luddite behavior become more likely, The work itself is relatively secure, so the situation is less desperate than it is for workers. This difference is key in separating the slacker Luddite from h/er predecessors. Unlike in the days of early capital, Luddite action is no longer a matter of survival, To some extent, slacker Luddism actually requires a certain degree of luxury, At the same time, this is ironically where one of the strongest threads of continuity appears between Luddites and slacker Luddites. In both cases, desire to regain control of the work situation is a primary motivating force. It is resistance to instability that ties the generations of Luddites together.

The problem of instability cannot be disconnected from the ever-increasing velocity of communication, production, and consumption in the age of capital. The perils of nomadic and recombinant culture are most menacing to those who attempt to construct a sense of place. No real sense of continuity exists, leaving memory without stable linkage points to the world of phenomena. Objects in the world are forever coming at the individual, leaving no time for reflection on interactions with them, much less time to turn around to see where one has just been. (This is another reason why there is a corporate-military demand for the cyborg life form. Working machines need no time for reflection.) Perhaps the problem is even greater and more fundamental than the establishment of place, since it is questionable whether any stable concept of space itself remains. What space are we in while speaking on the phone? What world are we looking into while staring at a computer screen or a video monitor? It is very difficult to say. Can space be folded in on itself so that it is possible to be everywhere at once through the use of communication technology? William Gibson described cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination." If that is so, how do we decide which hallucinations to subscribe to, and how trustworthy they are? More to the point, is the hallucination based on consensus at all? The intense confusion and skepticism that arises from the dematerialization of physical space often awakens nostalgia for a return to the hegemony of physical space; at the very least, it inspires a yearning for a means to temporarily stabilize the immediate environment.

The original Luddites represented a vague intuition that political economy was about to enter its dromologic era. The ability of the machine to work more efficiently than people, as individuals and as groups, appeared as a material fetishization of speed. As the old routes of labor began to dematerialize, the Luddites reacted by destroying the fetish object (i.e., the machine). It was an attempt, however misguided, to reestablish the old regime of everyday life. Although technology was perceived as an evil to be feared, the truly frightening thing was the inability to maintain self and place. It was all disappearing.

Slacker Luddites also desire a sense of stability in terms of both self and place; however. This desire is not precisely the same as that of their forerunners. In fact many are speed freaks, but they are speed freaks who like to control their own dosage. As mentioned above, the proper dosage is measured against personal comfort. Slackers do not recognize the adrenal experience of hyperanxiety as useful or desirable. Understanding their need to control the velocity at which they travel, so as never to completely dematerialize self or environment, is key to comprehension of slacker Luddite tactics.

Another idea that is central to understanding Luddite tactics is the aforementioned association of neoluddism with zero work. They know that some production must be accomplished, and that although they may resist, they cannot choose not to work. However, they believe that no one should do any more work than is absolutely necessary. Once the word "work" is used the slacker Luddite knows problems are ahead. In fact, this word should be discarded, and replaced with what the word actually means: alienated action. "Leisure" is no better. The two

are sides of the same coin. The former is coerced production, while the latter is coerced consumption. In the utopian world of the slacker Luddite, no distinction exists between work and leisure; there are only desired responses to the world.

Part of the slacker Luddite's mission is to reappropriate the workplace — that is, to strip it of its alienating qualities. This is often done by personalizing it, thereby creating a place where s/he can accomplish whatever s/he desires. Slacker Luddites attempt to make the workplace enjoyable, i.e., not a workplace. For example, the lower orders of slackness consist primarily of varieties of "goofing off." These are attempts to separate from the machine, and to thereby deny or temporarily destroy the cyborg identity. The easiest machine to eliminate is your own. Once separated from the machine, a relative quietude ensues that allows for reflection, and even face-to-face interaction.

Retreatism and passivity, however, are novice slacker techniques. The reward is too short in duration, and it is too easy to be caught and given a patronizing reprimand. The high-end slacker personalizes the cyborg itself, which is its ultimate destruction. S/he transcends goofing off. This slacker spends time at the workstation playing video games, chatting with friends on the internet, making travel plans, and so on. The computer registers the time served at the station, so surveillance is deflected. (Fortunately, the computer cannot as yet record whether labor power has been expended in a manner useful to a given employer.) But best of all is the slacker who does freelance assignments while at work. This slacker is paid both for a project that s/he wants to do, and for using a hostile institution's time, equipment, and supplies.

The slacker Luddite delights most in misappropriating the technology, and in turning the authoritarian codes of the workplace inside out. H/s mission is not to destroy the material aspects of work — this would be as misguided as the actions of the originary Luddites — but rather to destroy the symbolic order that confines and alienates the individual. This is not to say that an occasional intentional freezing or crashing of the technology never occurs, or that such actions are not of interest; however, these tactics, when done under the sign of slack, are only a means to a very limited end. All high-end slackers know that it is the hallucination of the workplace that must be destroyed, not that which conveys the hallucination.

Alienation and misery are integral parts of the economy of desire. Work must be as unfulfilling an experience as possible, for only by torturing people day in and day out will they emerge from the prison of production with the zeal to consume that which they artificially desire. The desperate act of consumption — purchasing as a means to fill some fundamental lack — could be perceived only by the truly exploited as a viable strategy to resolve the crisis of life in late capital. Strategies which break this obscene cycle are few. If the Luddites showed us anything, it was that the workplace is a prime location for resistance, and that resistance is very effective when it is an attack from within the institution itself. Their methods may have lacked any reasonable subtlety, but their nihilism still acts as a rallying point. If the slacker Luddites have shown us anything, it is the value of blasting the codes of the ideational place, not the space itself. As long as the workplace continues to be an environment that steals our autonomy with the intention of making labor as unfulfilling as possible, there will always be traces of Luddism, and there will certainly always be slackers.