

The Luddites: At War with the Future

Two hundred years ago Britain was gripped by a wave of violent machine breaking, as skilled textile workers, invoking the mythical Ned Ludd, attacked factories and factory owners in an attempt to defend their livelihoods. Richard Jones looks at how the phenomenon affected the industrial heartlands of Yorkshire.

The term Luddism has entered everyday usage as an expression for hostility to technology and progress, but the original phenomenon was far more nuanced and sophisticated than that. The Luddite disturbances of 1812 were part of a much older tradition of food rioting and political unrest and stemmed also from the precise status of certain forms of skilled labour in English law and society. The precedent for highly skilled craftsmen reacting vigorously, and occasionally violently, in defence of their status and interests dates back at least to the 1563 Statute of Artificers, a body of law that governed much of the market for skilled labour, and perhaps as far back as the Statute of Labourers of 1381. When we consider that the cloth industry had seen large-scale technological innovations going back to the introduction of the watermill in the 13th century it becomes much harder to argue that the Luddites of 1811 and 1812 were motivated by a knee-jerk resentment of technological innovation. Meanwhile the frequent use of cod-legal terminology by 19th-century Luddites reflects the belief that their activities were not only desirable, but somehow ‘right’, or even legal, in the face of the decline in their status and importance.

'The Leader of the Luddites', an English satirical print of 1812 shows an agitator in bonnet and dress encouraging workers wielding weapons beside a burning factory. George Mellor was the acknowledged leader of the Luddites in Yorkshire.



Task: Define Luddism.

Annotations:

invoke (v.)	<i>anrufen; hier: sich berufen auf</i>	nuanced (adj.)	<i>nuanciert, fein</i>
mythical (adj.)	<i>mythisch, legendenhaft</i>	sophisticated (adj.)	<i>genau, differenziert</i>
livelihood (n.)	<i>Erwerbsgrundlage, Einkommensquelle</i>	precedent (n.)	<i>Präzedenzfall; Vorläufer</i>
affect (v.)	<i>beeinflussen</i>	knee-jerk (adj.)	<i>reflexartig</i>
hostility (n.)	<i>Feindschaft</i>	resentment (n.)	<i>Unmut, Groll</i>

By Richard Jones | Published in History Today Volume: 62 Issue: 5 2012
 Source: <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-jones/luddites-war-future>