

## REVIEWS

# **Gavin Mueller: Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right About Why You Hate Your Job Verso, 2021**

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The Luddites have a bad reputation. They were English weavers in the early 1800s who opposed the introduction of mechanised looms and went about destroying them, taking their name from the imaginary character Ned Ludd. Since then, the term Luddite has been turned into a derogatory label for anyone critical of new technologies and therefore deemed to be against progress. If you do not want to use a mobile phone or eat genetically modified food, you might be called a Luddite, and it is not complimentary. More specifically, workers who damage their equipment are portrayed as irrational.

Gavin Mueller challenges this picture of the Luddites and more generally wants to argue for the positive role of machine-smashing. But this is not the book you might expect from the part of the subtitle 'about why you hate your job.' This is less about hating jobs and more about workers' struggles.

There are two strands in the book. One, the more practical, is an account of workers' efforts to resist the detailed control of their activities by their employers, in particular by resisting the imposition of machines that determine their exact motions and the pace at which they must be made. Mueller tells about how, prior to the introduction of factories, craft workers worked at home, deciding when and how they did things. This putting-out system gave workers dignity and control, both of which were compromised in factory settings. Owners cemented their power over workers by introducing machines that reduced worker autonomy. This was true at the time of the Luddites and has been true ever since. Most famous is Taylorism, in which time and motion studies of workers were used to impose a rigid and narrow set of actions on workers. In essence, workers were treated as machines, furthermore as unthinking machines. Their skills were downgraded, so they

did not have to think as much but instead just follow orders, disembodied as the imperatives of machinery.

To get a break, workers can break or jam a bit of equipment. Mueller gives a great many examples, from numerous countries and occupations, of worker resistance. If ever you thought that sabotage on the job was a rare or backwards-looking activity, Mueller's account will have you reconsidering.

*Breaking Things at Work* has another side, equally important: a survey and analysis of views about technology, mostly from a Marxist perspective. In the introduction, he says he has two main aims. One is to alert Marxists to a different way of thinking about technology, in particular to turn them into Luddites: 'My argument boils down to this: to be a good Marxist is to also be a Luddite' (p. 5). Mueller's second aim is to turn people critical of technology into Marxists.

Much of the book serves as a sophisticated review of ideas about Marxist and related perspectives on technology and work, especially about Luddism. Mueller tells about Marx's views, as expressed in *The Communist Manifesto*, and those of a great number of others. This could serve as a primer of left responses to Luddism, and is presented with clarity and balance.

Mueller starts from a Marxist perspective but is open to a range of views, including those of anarchists. He is critical of the assumption, in much writing and practice, to assume that technology is neutral and that socialism can be built directly on capitalist industrial practices. Mueller says theorists need to learn from what workers actually do, in particular from their resistance at work. If workers break machines, then there is probably something wrong with the machines.

Mueller canvasses a wide range of movements and perspectives. Among them are struggles by dock workers, by black workers, by feminists, and by militants in the US Trotskyist movement called the Johnson-Forest Tendency. He devotes a chapter to high-tech Luddism, including smashing of computers.

In the academic field of technology studies, it is taken for granted that technology is not neutral. There is a distinction between artefacts, the material objects such as screwdrivers and earthmovers, and technology, which refers to the artefacts plus accompanying social relations, such as manufacturing routines. Technology in this sense cannot be neutral. It can be said to embody relationships between humans.

Artefacts are products of human imagination and effort, and it should not make sense to call them neutral. True, a car or a computer can be used for a variety of purposes, but it is easier to use it for some purposes than others.

When workers break things at work, they are resisting a non-neutral artefact, in other words a technology designed and used for control and exploitation. In this sense, all challenges to technology are political: they are about power, and technologies are like congealed systems of power.

Towards the end of *Breaking Things at Work*, Mueller broadens his perspective to look at the construction of technologies as a political process. He uses the example of free software, which empowers users and challenges proprietary software which is designed in service of capital. The construction of liberatory technology might be considered part of a Gandhian constructive programme.

As mentioned, one of Mueller's two main aims is to 'turn people critical of technology into Marxists.' What is missing is any mention of social movements targeted at technologies. A prime example is the movement against nuclear power. Although the issues that resonate the most with the public are reactor accidents and long-lived radioactive waste, some campaigners are driven by a political critique. The nuclear fuel cycle and the introduction of a 'plutonium economy' are ideally suited to authoritarian social relations. Because of the danger of nuclear technology, and its vulnerability to terrorist attack and use, policing and surveillance are necessary.

The movement against nuclear power, which has been very successful, has not relied on sabotage, nor has it involved more than a few workers in the industry. Indeed, the movement has been a model of nonviolent action, and the early years of the movement were a seeding ground for the spread of nonviolent action training and consensus decision-making. Many Western Marxists were initially supportive of nuclear power, while in the Soviet Union and other socialist states it was extremely difficult to protest.

The movement against nuclear power can be examined from Mueller's lens: the movement, through its actions, forged a certain sort of consciousness and unity. It was an environmental consciousness and the unity was largely outside the workplace. Does a Marxist analysis add very much to understanding this process?

There are quite a few other social movements that have technology as a focus for critique. The peace movement is critical of military technology,

especially nuclear weapons. This movement has largely operated outside the workplace; sabotage by workers in arms manufacturing has not played a visible role. The climate movement is critical of fossil fuels and the associated production processes. Again, worker sabotage has not yet played a significant role. Some parts of the movement against genetically modified organisms, and the animal liberation movement, have used sabotage, but this is seldom by workers in the industries. If Mueller wants to turn people critical of technology into Marxists, he needs to show what Marxism can bring to the great many movements that target technologies. If breaking things at work can play a significant role, that could be included in movement strategising.

*Breaking Things at Work* is valuable in showing the scale of resistance by workers to their own subjugation, in particular their resistance to technologies that facilitate this subjugation. No doubt there is even more to learn from the history of machine-breaking. Rather than being retrograde, Luddism may be a way to help construct the future.