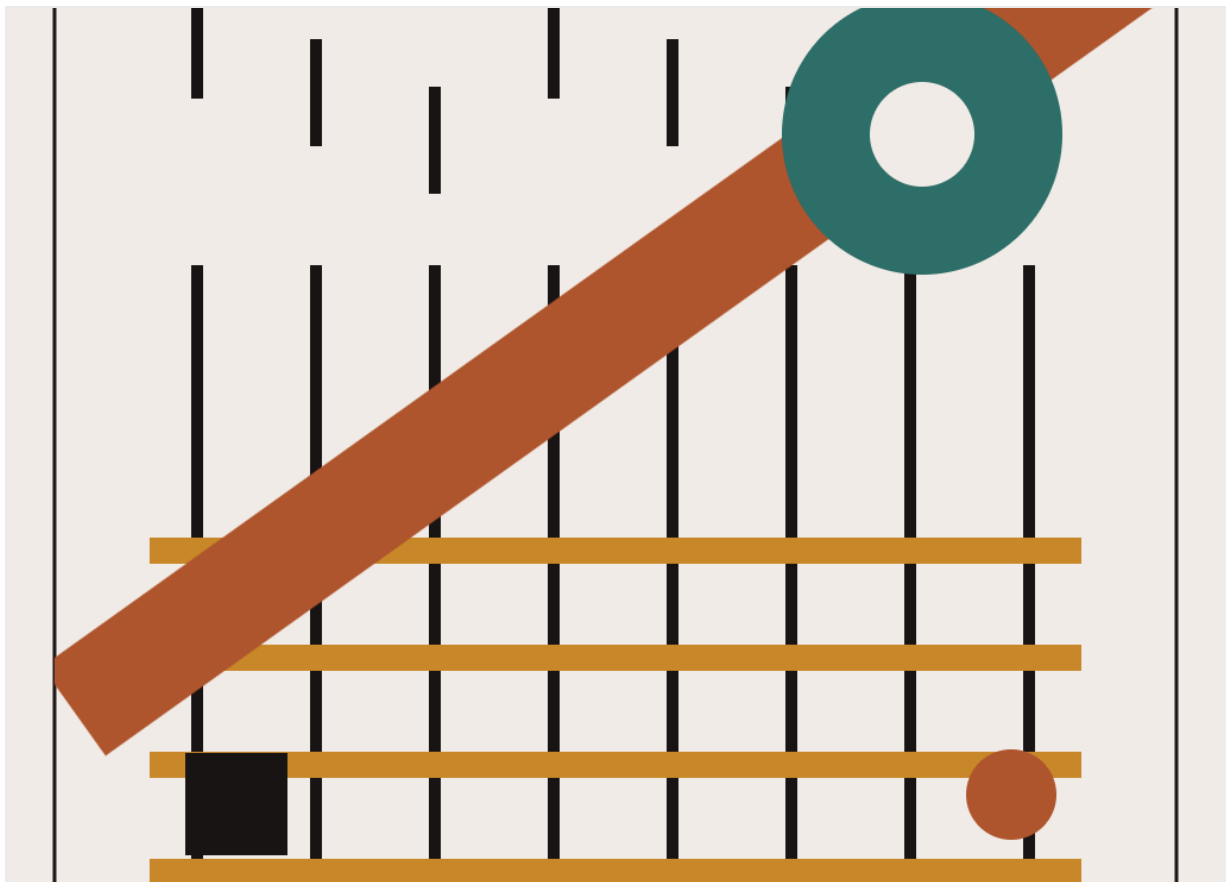


Society

Why Is Luddism Making a Comeback?

Smashing looms looks irrational until you ask who the machines were actually for. The new Luddites aren't scared of technology; they're asking the original question again.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ December 23, 2025 ■



To call someone a Luddite is to call them a fool, a person too frightened or stupid to accept progress. This is one of history's more successful smears, and it has almost nothing to do with the people

it names. The original Luddites were not afraid of machinery, did not misunderstand it, and were in many cases the skilled workers who knew the technology best. Their revolt was not against machines as such. It was against a particular use of machines to break their livelihoods and hand the gains to the mill owners.

The early nineteenth century textile workers who smashed looms were making a pointed argument, not a panicked one. New machinery was being introduced in a way that deliberately deskilled their trade, drove down wages, and concentrated the profits upward, all during a period of war, high food prices, and no legal channel for labor to bargain. They were not saying that mechanical weaving was impossible or evil. They were asking who the productivity gains were for, and answering, correctly, that they were not for the people doing the work.

Framed that way, the recent revival of Luddite language stops looking like technophobia and starts looking like a return to the original question. The people now invoking the word are rarely arguing that a given technology cannot or should not exist. They are asking the distributional question the smear was designed to bury: when a new system automates a category of work, who captures the surplus, and who absorbs the loss. That is not a superstitious question. It is an economic one, and it has a different answer in different arrangements of ownership and power.

The reason the question feels urgent again is that the current wave of automation is reaching into work that was long assumed to be safe. Writing, illustration, translation, analysis: the tasks of the credentialed middle, not just the factory floor. When automation threatened manual labor, the comfortable classes could describe resistance as

backwardness from a safe distance. Now that the same logic is arriving at their own desks, the Luddite question, who is this actually for, has stopped being a historical curiosity and become personal.

Recovering the real history does not settle what to do. A machine that displaces workers can, under the right institutions, free them for better work and raise everyone's standard of living, and that has genuinely happened. But it can also, under the wrong ones, immiserate a generation while enriching the owners, and that has genuinely happened too. The Luddites understood that the technology alone does not determine which outcome you get. The politics around it does, and pretending otherwise, by dismissing every objection as fear of the new, is how the losers get told their loss is their own ignorance.