INTRODUCTION

We are experiencing, so we are frequently assured, a second Industrial Revolution. New technologies are radically restructuring both the character and organisation of work across a broad sector of the economy. The process of adjustment to this, often rapid, pattern of change frequently proves painful. Jobs, once seen as secure, are lost and with them not just their earnings but also the status and place in society with which they imbued their possessors. Other jobs survive but work patterns and modes have to be substantially altered, old customs and expectations abandoned.

In facing up to the challenge of change, we are often exhorted to learn the lessons of the past, lessons taught by the history of the first Industrial Revolution in this, the world's first, industrial nation. These lessons are, apparently, straightforward. First, since it was the dynamic of entrepreneurial ambition, seizing upon new technological innovations and scorning time-honoured but irrelevant traditions and methods in favour of new systems of production, which dragged the British economy from its pre-industrial roots into the modern age, it is obvious that such ambition must be encouraged and facilitated in every way possible. Second, it follows that attempts to obstruct the dynamic of entrepreneurial progress must be prevented, since, should they succeed in retarding change, this must prove economically disastrous as failure to adapt is deemed terminal. So obvious is this second lesson that we require only one pejorative adjective to describe the ill-considered and ignorant attempt to resist progress: that adjective is 'Luddite'.

The men of the East Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire who in 1811 and 1812 resorted to industrial violence in an attempt to oppose the detrimental impact of technological and organisational innovation upon their trades could little have imagined the linguistic legacy they were to bequeath to posterity. After all, their actions were not unique. Other groups before and since have resisted technological change. Yet

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'Luddite' and its noun, 'Luddism', have entered into the language as synonymous with blinkered reaction, mindless obstructionism and pointless physical resistance to 'progress'. Thus, to take some recent examples, opposition to new type-setting technology in the printing industry, hostility to P.W.R. nuclear power stations, resistance to new work structures in the motor and furniture industries, to new motor-ways and the Channel tunnel, even the Foreign Secretary's mild criticism of the utility of a space-borne missile 'shield', can all be castigated in the popular press as 'Luddite'. This is a remarkable survival. In English history only the Puritans can lay claim to a similar linguistic heritage. And they, unlike the Luddites, were emphatic victors and could impose their image upon society and upon history from a position of strength. Alone of those social protest groups who fell to ignominious defeat, the Luddites can still be invoked in everyday conversation without need for footnotes.

The remarkable endurance of the image of Luddism can be accounted for only in part by human sympathy for the universality of the plight of men confronted by an overwhelming technological imperative. The story of the Luddites from *Shirley* onwards has also been deliberately popularised as part of a mythology of the Industrial Revolution. Millocrats, safe in the calmer waters of mid-Victorian prosperity, wished to view the triumph of industrialism, *their* triumph, as an heroic one, not one based merely upon the power of economies of scale. The Luddites nicely fitted this propagandist scenario. As a dangerous amalgam of stupidity, inertia and criminal violence they could be deemed worthy metal on which, metaphorically, to have tested the sword of the nascent industrialist, cast in the role of conquistador. Luddites encapsulated all the attributes necessary to highlight the moral lessons of the Industrial Revolution. Resistance was dangerous, resistance was foolish, resistance was useless. Their defeat was not merely their just deserts: it was a lesson to posterity. The Luddites then are remembered, but they are remembered as caricatures. On few other groups does 'the enormous condescension of posterity', Edward Thompson's ringing phrase, sit more heavily.[1]

The history of the Luddites, however, should point up another 'lesson' of the Industrial Revolution, a lesson frequently ignored or forgotten. They remind us that the process of industrial transformation has rarely been smooth and has frequently engendered bitter conflict. This continues to be the case since changes which threaten to destroy

[1] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; Harmondsworth, 1968 edn), p. 13.

established patterns of work threaten more than just sources of income. They jeopardise status, security, customary social structures and concepts and feelings of community identity. Work, today as in the early Industrial Revolution, remains a vitally important element in conferring self-respect and in defining social, economic and political relations. Indeed, psychologists tell us that the loss of one's job or career is, after bereavement, the most shattering blow to the individual's equanimity. The march of progress, then as now, carries with it the promise of enhanced prosperity. But it also leaves in its wake many casualties. Not all lie down quietly to die.

The historiography of resistance to mechanical innovation in the early Industrial Revolution has been a curious one. Machine breaking plays little part in most economic history textbooks, labour's reaction to technological displacement, when noted at all, being seen as an irritating minor impediment to the inevitable with little or no account of its effect upon industrial development.[2] Political and social historians have found machine breaking to be rather more diverting but it is usually viewed as symptomatic of some other problem, economic depression or high food prices and hunger, rather than as direct hostility to technological or organisational change. Were it not for the 'unfortunate timing' of its introduction, the story often runs, machinery would not have occasioned such protest.[3] Luddism's place in labour history too is an awkward one. While labour historians have always shown sympathy for the problem faced, Luddism does not readily fit into the labour history pantheon, itself frequently too Whiggish a view of the past.[4] The violence of machine breaking does not point towards orderly trade unionism and indeed is often seen as indicative of an inability to organise effectively.[5] Even Eric Hobsbawm's pioneering essay on the Luddites did not avoid this trap entirely. While Hobsbawm's concept of 'collective bargaining by riot'

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[2] For example, P. Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain, 1700–1914* (Methuen, 1969), pp. 363–4, notes that 'it is clear that the future lay with those that sought to accept the fundamentals of the emergent industrial society' whereas Luddism, an 'attempt to destroy it', was 'the survival of a reaction characteristic of the pre-industrial world – the peasants' revolt – a negative response'.

[3] For example, A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867* (Longman, 1959), p. 182, sees the Luddites as 'helpless victims of distress'.

[4] See, for example, J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer* (1919; Longman, 1979 edn), introduction by John Rule, pp. xx–xxi; G. D. H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The Common People, 1746–1946* (Methuen, 1938; 1949 edn), pp. 184–5.

[5] M. I. Thomis, *The Luddites: Machine Breaking in Regency England* (David and Charles, 1970), p. 134; E. H. Hunt, *British Labour History, 1815–1914* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 195.

shifted attention towards the role of machine breaking as a weapon of
labour in eighteenth-century industrial struggles, he still saw indus-
trial violence of this sort as essentially a precursor to modern industrial
relations and already something of an anachronism by the early nine-
teenth century.[6]

It was not until Edward Thompson's monumental *The Making of the
English Working Class* appeared in 1963 that any really sustained at-
tempt to understand Luddism from within its own context and com-
munity was made. Thompson's insistence on the importance of the
agency of working people themselves in shaping their own social and
political development shifted the focus towards seeing protest as a
product of the specific culture and community values from which it
sprang. In consequence a generation of social historians has been
inspired to investigate 'the blind alleys, the lost causes and the losers',[7]
not with the smug complacency of visitors to a heritage museum but,
as far as is possible, from within an understanding of their subjects'
own history and context. It is certainly this approach which is the
inspiration of this book.

Since Thompson, debate on the Luddite disturbances of 1811–12, as
on much else about which he wrote, has grown apace. A great deal of
attention has been paid to the economic background of Luddism, to its
organisation, its relationship to trade unionism, to radical politics and
to class development. Only limited attention, however, has been paid
to the longer term context of Luddism or to its place within the history
of machine breaking. Even less interest has been shown in pursuing
the issues of why some regions, places and industries saw resistance
while others did not and why resistance was physical in some places,
constitutional in others. Nor have historians been much concerned to
examine the values, concepts and attitudes which informed machine
breaking or their origins.[8]

It is these issues which form the focus of this book. It is not con-
cerned with the events of 1811–12, at least not directly, but with the
period before the Luddites, in particular the years from the 1770s to
1809, years which witnessed the earliest infancy of the Industrial
Revolution. And whereas Luddism affected three industries, this book
is concerned with only one, the woollen cloth industry in England.

[6] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (Weidenfeld and
Nicolson, 1964; 1968 edn), pp. 5–22.

[7] Thompson, *The Making* , p. 13.

[8] M. Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700–1820* (Fontana, 1985), is an honourable
exception.

The woollen industry offers a fascinating model for such a study. It was the oldest, most deep-rooted and in many ways most 'traditional' of all the textile industries, its vital place in the national economy protected by statutory controls and regulations dating back to the Tudor period. It was the industry which saw the most sustained and determined resistance to machinery. It was also an industry concentrated in two regions, in the West Riding of Yorkshire and in the counties of Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, collectively always referred to as the West of England cloth making region. The West Riding and the West of England both produced woollen cloth using the same techniques and methods but production in each was organised in very different ways. This gave rise to two very different economic and social structures and in turn produced very different histories of mechanisation and economic development. The West Riding woollen industry, the minor party in the early eighteenth century, was already developing rapidly before mechanisation enabled it to expand even more prodigiously in the decades after 1780, establishing itself as the paramount national centre of the industry by the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The West of England, predominant in 1700, experienced much slower growth, found the Industrial Revolution a far less congenial experience and was in terminal if protracted decline by 1830. The woollen industry, therefore, offers an excellent opportunity to conduct a comparative study of the impact of and response to machinery in the same industry over the same period of time.

The regional history of the Industrial Revolution is currently undergoing a long-overdue resuscitation. Economic and social historians are beginning to re-examine the origins of industrialism and in the process are rediscovering a rich regional diversity of experience and development. Inevitably, perhaps, these studies have tended to concentrate upon regions of dynamic industrial growth such as the Midlands, Lancashire and Yorkshire rather than upon those which failed to respond to the challenge of change. Thus, for example, the histories of the wool textile industries of East Anglia and Devon, which followed the same pattern of decay as the West of England, remain under-researched for this period. Equally, relatively few recent regional studies have been concerned with the social as opposed to the economic histories of their subjects. In consequence, the social context within which change occurred, or failed to occur, remains for many regions only partially charted. The student of the English woollen industry is blessed with three outstanding monographs, one on the West of England by the late Julia Mann and two on Yorkshire by R. G. Wilson

and Pat Hudson, each in their own fields pioneering and definitive works.[9] None, however, are really concerned with 'history from below', concerning themselves, as was their remit, principally with the economic history of their region. Derek Gregory's ambitious attempt to fuse the disciplines of geography, economic history and sociology provides an interesting examination of the economic and social context of the West Riding during this period of transformation but his conclusions have been received with scepticism, perhaps because of this multi-disciplinary approach.[10] Nor, for the most part, have these regional historians attempted comparative accounts of the process of and the reaction to change. One has, in fact, to go back to the Hammonds to find a book which deals with the responses to industrialism within a broadly comparative perspective. Their Fabian preoccupations, however, meant that their approach to the problem of industrial violence was at best ambiguous. In recent years only John Bohstedt has essayed so wide a comparative canvas but he is less concerned with the industrial bases of protest at change than with consumer protests and radicalism.[11] The justification for this book, therefore, is as an attempt to fill these particular lacunae for the English woollen industry and perhaps in so doing to offer a new perspective on the reaction to industrial change generally.

This book is focussed upon the issues of custom, community and machinery. It is the last which justifies the starting point of the study since 1776 witnessed the introduction into both the West of England and the West Riding of the spinning jenny, the first mechanical innovation to begin the process of industrial transformation. While machines were tangible and their effects assessable, custom and community present greater difficulties of definition. While both are in essence conservative forces, as conceptual systems they may appear to lack precision or substance. It is the contention of this book that both did in fact have specific as well as general meaning within the context of the economy and the society of the two regions of which they were

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 9 J. de L. Mann, *The Cloth Industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880* (Oxford, 1971);
    R. G. Wilson, *Gentlemen Merchants: The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1700–1830* (Manchester, 1971); P. Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: A Study of the West Riding
    Wool Textile Industry c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1986).
10 D. Gregory, *Regional Transformation and Industrial Revolution: A Geography of the Yorkshire Woollen Industry* (Macmillan, 1982).
11 J. Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (Harvard,
    1983). For an outstanding and ambitious comparative study of the French textile
    industry, see W. M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French
    Society, 1750–1900* (Cambridge, 1984).

both products and shapers. It was the structure and customs of the woollen industry which shaped community as a dynamic force for social cohesion and resistance to change. And custom was elevated above mere habit and tradition by the existence of the corpus of old regulatory legislation which in theory controlled many aspects of the manufacture. The bitterly resisted repeal of this legislation in 1809 marks the terminal point of this study since it commenced the process of the destruction and deconstruction of old concepts of custom and ultimately of community.

Reaction to the advent of a machine economy varied from region to region and from place to place. To understand why, it is necessary to examine two critical determinants: first, the organisation of work and the character of the community within which work took place; and secondly, the impact of machinery upon work itself. Chapter 1 examines the effect of the organisation of production in shaping community attitudes and craft consciousness in the two regions. The different work structures in the West of England and the West Riding generated very different capital–labour relationships and these had major repercussions for the way innovation was viewed. Such differences in economic structure have recently been engaging economic historians within the debate on proto-industrialisation, developing models to explain the successes and failures of regions in transforming from pre-industrial to industrial economies. Comparison of the West of England and West Riding woollen industries, apparently archetypal examples of the two models advanced by the proto-industrialisation thesis, demonstrates that economic structure alone cannot account for the pattern of change. Crucially it was the value systems generated by these structures which determined the response to innovation.

Chapter 2 examines the impact of technology upon work itself. Workers did not view machinery in abstract but in the way it affected their jobs. Where machinery augmented or facilitated employment within the existing work structure, it was rarely resisted. It was when machinery threatened employment or relocated it into a new factory-based system that it generally encountered hostility. Historians have been inclined to disparage hostility to the factory system, arguing that factory work was no worse than and rather better paid than outwork. Nonetheless, fear of the factory was a powerful force in the woollen industry. Historians have also tended to side with those apologists for mechanical innovation who claimed that machinery had only minor consequences for employment. Chapter 2 investigates the fear of factory work and the impact of machinery upon employment.

While the first two chapters investigate the cultural and economic context into which mechanical innovation was introduced, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 look at the response to the rise of a machine economy. Some places witnessed no resistance to machinery. Hostility to machinery in others did not necessarily lead to acts of violence and resistance did not always lead to much beyond initial protests. Yet in other places resistance was both fierce and sustained. Why was this the case? Chapter 3 examines the community reaction to the early mechanisation of the preparatory processes in the industry and argues that resistance was located within a community consensus which felt threatened by machinery. In some places this community culture had a rich tradition of protest which pre-dated mechanisation and it was here that resistance proved most sustained and implacable.

Community resistance could prove an obdurate obstacle in the path of progress but it was rarely possible to maintain opposition over lengthy periods of time or when faced with determined innovators. Sustained resistance required not just numbers but the organisational capacity of a trade union. This was found in the woollen industry in the cloth dressers of the West of England and the West Riding who found themselves threatened by technological redundancy. In 1812 the Yorkshire cloth dressers or croppers were to prove the most determined and successful of the Luddites. Their battle, however, had its origins in the 1790s. The case of the cloth dressers raises issues concerning the relationship between trade unionism and industrial violence. Much labour history has been written with the premise that the two were clearly separate, that violence was indicative of a failure to organise effectively and was conducted quite independently from 'orthodox' trade union action. Chapters 4 and 5 challenge this compartmentalist approach. Chapter 4 examines the organisation of the cloth dressers' trade, their history of combination and their response to the early introduction of finishing machinery. These demonstrate that while the cloth dressers in fact made effective use of 'orthodox' trade union sanctions, they were also willing and able to resort to more physical resistance to supplement or take the place of the strike or boycott. This inter-relationship is shown clearly in Chapter 5, which examines industrial violence and machine breaking in some detail by a study of the Wiltshire Outrages of 1802, a forerunner of the Luddite disturbances in Yorkshire ten years later. Violence is shown not to have been a product of weakness nor of an inability to organise. It was in fact part of a calculated, deliberate and graduated response to the threat posed by machinery.

Historians examining pre-industrial communities through the matrix of the riot always run the risk of being accused of accentuating the atypical. Certainly disturbances were not the everyday activity of the majority who normally simply got on with their daily tasks of producing cloth and earning a living. However, if we are seeking to understand the values, attitudes and *mentalité* of that working community, riots often provide historians with our only point of access. Since that community did not, except in exceptional cases, leave us a direct record of their opinions, we must seek them in their actions. This can be done by recognising disturbances not as unrelated, random events but as carrying purposeful statements of values which may only be decoded through a careful contextual understanding of that community. Our sources of information on these events are, of course, rarely neutral reporters. Letters to the Home and War Offices reflected the views of the propertied and newspapers reported from the perspective of and for the respectable, not the rioting, classes. Again, it is to the actions of the crowd we must turn and seek to make sense of them from within the context and culture of their own community.

The woollen workers' response to the threat of machinery was not, however, confined to violence and industrial action. They also made use of the law to appeal to the authorities for protection against structural change. The woollen industry, the ancient staple, was hedged around with legislation regulating and controlling production methods, marketing and labour relations. There proved to be over seventy such statutes still extant in 1802. Archaic and often ignored or observed only in spirit though not in detail, this body of legislation provided the woollen workers with a powerful weapon with which to resist change. The collision between the forces of innovation and tradition in the woollen industry, therefore, was more than a physical one. It was also fought out before the courts and, more importantly, before two Select Committees of the House of Commons in 1803 and 1806. In this the cloth dressers were not alone. The weavers of the West of England and the master clothiers and journeymen of the West Riding were likewise overshadowed by the threat of structural change in the form of the factory system. Chapter 6 investigates their campaign to uphold and strengthen the old acts in order to resist the rise of the weaving factory and loomshop, a campaign which helped precipitate the final battles at Westminster.

Chapter 7 examines the workers' case before Parliament. The Report of the 1806 Select Committee is deservedly well known, as is the evidence they compiled, though that of the 1803 Committee is less well

used.[12] Both, however, have been used mainly to describe the economic structures and changes taking place in the industry. Yet the Parliamentary investigation of the woollen industry provided the woollen workers and master clothiers with a unique platform from which they could expound their wider values and attitudes to industrial relations and to the role of regulation in the industry. Chapter 7 argues that this evidence, together with the debate it generated in the press and in pamphlets, reveal that the woollen workers shared a coherent political economy which had no place for the *laissez-faire* values of the innovators. The debate over the old laws was not simply a question of removing obsolete impediments to economic growth. It revealed a powerful ideological struggle between an old political economy based on order, stability, regulation and control supplemented by custom and the new political economy based on a faith in free market forces and the power of capital. Taken together with the community and craft values and attitudes examined in earlier chapters, the campaign over legislative control reveals an holistic moral economy which informed woollen cloth producers' views in both the West of England and the West Riding and which repudiated the values of the new industrial society. Here we can see the real issues which the Industrial Revolution raised. It was not just a question of more and more machines. It involved a complete re-orientation of perceptions of economic and social relationships.

   Chapter 8 examines the implications of these findings in relation to the issue of class consciousness. Historians have long debated how far the rise of the Industrial Revolution generated new class attitudes. Luddism in particular has been placed in a central position in this transformation for here the battle with the new industrialism seems most bitter, here the state could clearly be seen siding with the forces of innovation against labour. Chapter 8 discusses the evidence for the economic and political alienation of workers and petty capitalists both from nascent industrial capitalism and from the state in the years before 1812 in the light of the themes which run through the book, namely custom and community. The conclusions indicate that the causal relationship is far less clear than some historians have suggested since the economic and political reactions to change did not necessarily point in the same direction. Those forces which informed and shaped resistance were products of a traditional culture which could not

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[12] *B.P.P., Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on the Woollen Clothiers' Petition* (H.C. 95), 1802/3, Vol. 7; *Report of and Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee to Consider the State of the Woollen Manufacture* (H.C. 268), 1806, Vol. 3.