

Call for papers

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A Plebeian Event

Ned Ludd or Equality

A specter is haunting communism: Ned Ludd. Who was this man?

Western high culture is said to have emerged from oral, collective storytelling. Other forms of grassroots storytelling do not lead to written works; they remain part of folk tradition, lingering in memories, in sounds or songs, or in casual conversations at the counter of some tavern. It sometimes happens that the protagonists of those old tales, as days, months, and years pass, become immensely powerful.

It is said that a certain Ned Ludd, in a remote village in Leicestershire, “seized by a fit of mad rage,” broke down the door of a small apartment-studio one day in 1779 to destroy two sewing machines. These were the times when the so-called Industrial Revolution began to disrupt the means and methods of production and, above all, the living conditions of the world’s most disadvantaged. From that day in 1779, time and again, as soon as a machine is sabotaged, the *specter* of Ned Ludd reappears.

Ludd remains a mysterious figure, faceless and without a history. Did he ever truly exist? Certainly: nothing is more vital than a specter. This mysterious figure gives birth, anonymously and without scruples, to a collective intolerance toward machines. He unleashes what Alain Badiou considers the condition of any political passion, of any “passion for the real”: rage. Like a trickster, Ludd reappears in history with a sardonic laugh and an unparalleled determination to avenge the offenses and sufferings of the vanquished. Thomas Pynchon, speaking of Ludd, describes a maniacal clown who, every time he repairs a machine, goes mad and then destroys it. A monster: the other side of a Frankenstein, himself the product of the Promethean hubris that Ludd fights with hammer blows. His gesture evokes the

community of those who have no ties – a bit, come to think of it, like the Joker in Todd Phillips’s film (2019).

Ludd returned in 1811 when, in the forests near Sherwood – where centuries earlier another great warrior figure had raged in defense of the weak –, groups of male and female workers organized to destroy the steam engines that were engaging in unfair competition against them. The protest movement lasted a long time; the workers attempted to destroy an entire factory in Rawfolds, an episode Charlotte Brontë would later describe in her novel *Shirley*. The revolt grew increasingly radical, to the point that the British government decreed the death penalty for the insurgents (only one poet, Byron, fought with immense courage against this infamous law). They must be killed because they are frightening, they are *monstrous*: the rioters claim to follow the orders of a mysterious general – or king, depending on the case – named Ludd: “Cops, go ahead and look for our leader...”.

Despite the brutal repression of this first uprising, Ludd – a clownish, ragged king – reappears time and again at the head of those who have little or nothing, and who feel and see every form of life alien to the logic of the machine, threatened by the advance of technological forces; in short, when the oppressed find in that name and in that late-18th-century narrative a myth that, in the manner of Benjamin and Jesi’s Spartacus, breaks the continuity of history, the so-called Progress inevitably driven by machines.

K Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts intends to explore this rupture – the turning point that Luddism represents in the revolutionary tradition, within the nascent labor movement – through a special issue dedicated to Ned Ludd. First and foremost, we must understand whether Luddite-style struggles merely represent a leap back into the past. The studies of E. P. Thompson (notably his pioneering work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963), while also correcting certain Marxist oversimplifications, demonstrate that Luddism represents, above all, the defense of those who refuse to be torn apart by capitalist *laissez-faire*. The workers who sabotage the machines are not merely defending their jobs; rather, they are taking up the cause of the right to existence of ways of life, ways of thinking, and shared experiences that have been patiently built up around their work. They destroy in order to resist (their own) destruction, without compromise. From this perspective, it also becomes clear that the struggles waged by the Luddites are not simply intended to protect old working conditions; on the contrary, they foreshadow a rejection of work. The Luddites (we were about to write, the Spartacists) pose, yesterday as today, a huge question, a Pasolini-style query: what is a people, how does it live, how does it not disappear, when it is not a sovereign People, in an era dominated by the extreme phase of Capital?

Could we argue that Luddism today would take the form of a strike against existence? Would those forms of Luddite desertion, in other words, be capable of disarming the machines that swallow our desires and our dreams to turn them into just another commodity? Don DeLillo thought so in *The Silence*: time stands still, the screen goes black, capital spins its wheels. Of course, like historical Luddism, this strike remains

a matter for those who have nothing, that is, a form of struggle waged by those who possess nothing against those who have everything, whose lives can be shattered by the introduction of yet another machine, a steam-powered tool, or new software.

Thompson demonstrates that the emergence of King Ludd in history has a specific philosophical significance: the Luddite riots express the irrepressible demand for equality. The destruction of machines is the act through which history's defeated reaffirm their desire to be equal. Ludd embodies the specter that organizes and catalyses this desire.

The issue of *K Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts* dedicated to the figure of Ned Ludd invites submissions that should focus primarily on certain specific aspects.

1) Ned Ludd is a name invented for the nameless, for what Arendt calls the “scum of the earth”, those whom history excludes, crushes, and extinguishes. To utter the name of Ned Ludd when Ned Ludd is no longer here – if he ever was – means, for the vanquished, to tear away the veil of their history made of domination and humiliation, to burst into the theatre of the victors' History. It is, in other words, an attempt to construct a memory of the nameless. It is precisely a matter of shaping, starting from the example of the Luddites, a tradition of the oppressed.

2) Luddism certainly represents a highly problematic movement in the history of Marxism: it embodies the specter of the *Lumpenproletariat*. Violence against machines would reveal not only a misunderstanding of the *use* of the machine, which remains a tool that can be employed by capitalism but also by those who fight against it, but also the inability of the nascent working class to establish discipline, order, and strategy for itself. In this sense, Luddite-style struggles must be overcome – in the words of Hegel – in favor of more conscious forms of class organization. It is therefore a matter of examining, from the perspective of destituent power, the friction between Marxism and Luddism.

3) In the wake of Thompson's studies, but also of certain insights from Italian Marxist critical thought of the 1960s, this issue of *K Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts* aims to assess the potential political significance of spontaneous and immediate Luddite-style struggles.

4) Luddism and philosophy: can Luddism still offer a possible politics today? The hypothesis is that Luddism poses a contemporary problem precisely because it is out of step with the times, when machines are everywhere, when there is no longer any free time, time liberated from the machine; that is, when the machine, in reality, keeps us working constantly, even when we are not working. Does Luddism perhaps truly indicate that we must begin to philosophize as Nietzsche intended: with a hammer! It is a matter of verifying Luddist logic as an experience of radical desertion (Hammer & desertion: destroying destruction).

5) Anger is normally dismissed, pushed to the margins of philosophical discourse and even of the public agora. Luddism, on the other hand, demonstrates that anger can be a vehicle of hope when it challenges the violence of injustice. Paradoxically, that anger which power seeks to relegate to the realm of animality constitutes an unexpected *prise de parole*, the emergence of a potentially political subjectivity. Luddism is, in this perspective, the demonstration of how a collective movement can arise from an existential dimension. Luddite anger, in fact, does not simply exhaust itself in a form of hatred because it can transform social resentment into a public demand for equality.

Submit proposal by May 31, 2026 (2.500 characters max.)

Send to: krevuecontact@gmail.com

If the proposal is accepted, the manuscript must be submitted by October 10, 2025.

After this date, the selected contribution will be automatically excluded from the journal issue.