

Maybe the Luddites had a point?

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When we think of Luddites we picture men with sledgehammers in about 1800, destroying power looms in mills because they thought their jobs were at risk. Daft and narrow minded men who couldn't grasp the benefits of modern technology. But perhaps they had a point after all? In an age when it seems just about anything can be automated, it may be possible to automate all jobs; but is it right to do so?

To me the self-service checkout at supermarkets is a sign of over automation madness. These areas always seem full of angry people, fighting the technology and being constantly told that there is an 'unexpected item in the bagging area.' Unless you really do want to see lots of checkout staff made redundant and supermarket owners made even richer, the traditional checkouts are far more pleasant.

I dislike the phrase working class jobs, because automation has had an effect right across the class spectrum and is likely to affect previously technology resistant professions like accountancy, solicitors, architects etc. If you don't think a computer can do your job, you are in for a nasty shock!

The microchip takeover has been going on for some time. Remember copy typists? Those rooms full of usually women but I do remember the odd male typist. Then there were the semi-automated accounting systems and comptometer operators. In most of the companies I worked for these jobs employed a lot of people and those people tended to be women. Lots of jobs taken over by copiers and other technology.

Then there is the great broadband revolution, with everything being sent, paid or looked at over the net. When was the last time you sent a cheque in the post? So postal services decline and courier companies go to the wall. All those gangs of cycle couriers lurking around corners in W1 are now largely a thing of the past. More jobs gone!

Then there are the banks and building societies with their ATM machines. We all loved those, after all it was far more convenient than queuing up to talk to a human cashier. At one time people left school at 16 with three decent O levels and got a job as a bank cashier. If they had drive and enthusiasm they could end up running a department. I know a lady who did just that. It was a great driver of social mobility, now all we have are streets full of ATM machines.

I could go on, there are lots more professions that have been automated out of existence. If unions moan they're called Luddites, after all you can't stand in the way of progress and anyway the people will move onto other new types of work. The problem is that new work is now very often soul destroying, minimum pay jobs in the service sector. To hide the problem people are shoved into college courses into their 20's and end up with a massive student debt and still only able to get a job stacking shelves or flipping burgers.

This has a massive effect on the economy. The first industrial revolution was fairly self-financing. Workers at one factory used their wages to buy the goods produced at another factory. The economy grew and the majority of the population moved off the land into paid employment in industry. I would debate that move as being progress, but that argument is for another day. The problem with the second industrial revolution, the one we're living through now is where are people going to earn the money to buy the goods and services produced by automation?

There is a famous quote from a meeting Henry Ford was supposed to have had with a trade union leader. There is now doubt about its authenticity, but it does illustrate the dilemma.

"Henry Ford II: Walter, how are you going to get those robots to pay your union dues?"

"Walter Reuther: Henry, how are you going to get them to buy your cars?"

So I restate my point that even if we can automate every job, is it right and economically sensible to do so?

.... And finally..... don't use self-service checkouts!

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