

Excerpt from *A Letter to the Luddites*

by William Cobbett, in his *Political Register* (November, 1816)

It is undeniable, that you have committed acts of violence on the property of your neighbours, and have, in some instances, put themselves and their families in bodily fear. This is not to be denied, and it is deeply to be lamented....

How does Cobbett indicate that machines make humans better off?

By machines mankind are able to do that which their own bodily powers would never effect to the same extent....To show that machines are not naturally and necessarily an evil, we have only to suppose the existence of a patriarchal race of a hundred men and their families, all living in common, four men of which are employed in making cloth by hand. Now, suppose some one to discover a machine, by which all the cloth wanted can be made by one man. The consequence would be, that the great family would (having enough of every thing else) use more cloth or, if any part of the labour of the three cloth-makers were much wanted in any other department, they would be employed in that other department. Thus, would the whole [society] be benefitted by the means of this invention; the whole would have more clothes amongst them, or more food would be raised, or the same quantity as before would be raised, leaving the community more leisure for study or for recreation....

With regard to their effects in a great community like ours, that question is necessarily more complicated; but, at any rate, enough has been said to show, that men cannot live in a civilized state without machines; for, every implement used by man is a machine, machine merely meaning thing as contradistinguished from the hand of man. Besides, if we indulge ourselves in a cry against machines, where are we to stop? Some misguided, poor, suffering men in the county of Suffolk, have destroyed thrashing machines (machines that could separate the grain from the stalks of wheat). Why not ploughs, which are only digging machines? Why not spades, and thus come to our bare hands at once?

How does Cobbett say that machines can increase the number of jobs in a country?

Precisely the same must it be with regard to the stocking and all other manufactures. But, while the destruction of machinery would produce no good to you with regard to the home trade, it would produce a great deal of harm to you with regard to the foreign trade; because it would make your goods so high in price, that other nations, who would very soon have the machinery, would be able to make the same goods at a much lower price.

I think, then, that it is quite clear, that the existence of machinery, to its present extent, cannot possibly do the journeyman manufacturer any harm; but, on the contrary, that he must be injured by the destruction of machinery. And, it appears to me equally clear, that if machines could be invented so as to make lace, stockings, &c. for half or a quarter

the present price, such an improvement could not possibly be injurious to you. Because, as the same sum of money would still, if the country continued in the same state, be laid out in lace, stockings, &c., there would be a greater quantity of those goods sold and used, and the sum total of your wages would be exactly the same as it is now....

What does Cobbett then say is the real cause of the working peoples' misfortune

Your distress, that is to say, that which you now more immediately feel, arises from want of employment with wages sufficient for your support. The want of such employment has arisen from the want of a sufficient demand for the goods you make. The want of a sufficient demand for the goods you make has arisen from the want of means in the nation at large to purchase your goods. This want of means to purchase your goods has arisen from the weight of the taxes co-operating with the bubble of paper-money. The enormous burden of taxes and the bubble of paper-money have arisen from the war [against the French], the sinecures [support given to Anglican clergy], the standing army, the loans, and the stoppage of cash payments at the Bank; and it appears very clearly to me, that these never would have existed, if the Members of the House of Commons had been chosen annually by the people at large....

The salt is sold in London at 20 shillings a bushel, wholesale; but, if there was no tax, it would not exceed perhaps 3 shillings a bushel. Every labourer with a family must consume more than a bushel [a year], which does not amount to more than the third part of half-a-pint a day; and, you will bear in mind, there is salt in the bacon, the butter, and the bread, besides what is used in the shape of salt.

Then, there is another very injurious effect produced by this load of taxes. The goods made by you cannot be so cheap as if you and your employers had not so heavy taxes to pay. Thus foreign nations, which are not so much loaded with taxes, can afford to make the goods themselves as cheap, or cheaper, than you can make them. Formerly, when our taxes were light, the Americans, for instance, could not afford to make stockings, broadcloth, cutlery, cotton goods, glass wares, linens. They now make them all, and to a vast extent! They have machinery of all sorts, manufactories upon a large scale, and, what is quite astonishing, they, who, before our wars against the French people [the Napoleonic wars], did not grow wool sufficient in quantity for their hats and saddle-pads, grow now fine wool sufficient for their own manufactories of cloth, and to export to Europe!

And, with these wishes, I hope I shall always remain,

Your friend,

WM. COBBETT.