

Where have all the Luddites gone? Exploring what makes us human—and whether modern technology threatens to destroy it

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The great—if sometimes overlooked—20th-century philosopher and cultural critic Günther Anders once proposed that our modern age is characterized by a dangerous and pervasive "Apocalypse-Blindheit": a blindness to the apocalypse.

Writing in the midst of the 20th-century nuclear arms race, he suggested an unquestioning faith in science and progress prevents us from seeing the technological catastrophe spreading out all around us.

The reality of human-created climate change has, in recent years, perhaps begun to cure this condition. And there are at least some indications a significant number of people are becoming aware of the mess we're in.

But as Richard King notes in his sweeping and ambitious [Here Be Monsters](#), our philosophical or intellectual responses to technology have not really kept pace with events.

Instead, what King calls "the techno-critical tradition," or a tradition of thinkers who view technological modernity as fundamentally damaging and foreboding, has more or less disappeared.

Thus, once-towering philosophers of technology—figures like [Lewis Mumford](#), who was already warning in the 1950s that unrestricted technological expansion threatened the durability of both the human and the natural worlds, and [Neil Postman](#), who in the 1980s described modern society as a "technopoly" in which [human behavior](#) is thoroughly governed and regulated by machines—hardly receive any attention at all.

And the more "techno-critical" elements of those who *are* studied widely (notably the ubiquitous [Hannah Arendt](#)) are quickly glossed over or pushed to the margins.

Why, then, have full-throated critiques of technology become so scarce at the exact moment when they might seem most pertinent? Where have all the Luddites gone?

Recovering human nature

King argues one crucial reason for the decline of the techno-critical tradition is its tendency to rely on the concept of human nature.

We can only maintain our technologies corrupt us if we have some relatively fixed sense of who we would be without them.

But, particularly in the rarefied atmosphere of universities, the concept of human nature has been decidedly unfashionable (indeed all but forbidden) for nearly half a century. It has become commonplace to suggest every definition of the human, no matter how loose or how broad, exists primarily to exclude its opposite. We define the "human," the argument goes, to mark off forms of life that can be labeled *inhuman*, and thus justify their elimination.

As King sees it, the widespread abandonment of the concept of human nature might be well-intentioned. But it has inadvertently left us vulnerable to an unthinking veneration of technology—one particularly amendable to the interests of capitalism.

For to strip the human of all natural limits is to present it as nothing more than what King calls a "blank slate"—a programmable machine capable of being engineered for optimal production and consumption, void of any essential needs or desires.

"The danger," King writes, "is not that we create a monster that runs amok, or a plague of zombies, or a rogue AI—or a planet of the apes, for that matter—but that we begin to see ourselves and others as something less than fully human, as machines to be rewired or recalibrated in line with the dominant ideological worldview. "

In that case, we would already have arrived at a perilous situation—a situation where our perception of ourselves as bounded by and connected through nature had given way to the "post-humanist" view that humans

are fleshy automata, subject to endless modification.

For King, this danger is at a historical tipping point. And we must face it immediately. Doing so, however, will require more than an examination of technology itself.

It will require what King dubs a "radical humanism," and a fundamental reassessment of what we are—including our relations with ourselves, with one another, and with our common world.

Homo faber, or the tool-making animal

Here *Be Monsters* proposes to develop nothing less than a new definition of human nature.

King, of course, is fully aware of the immensity of the task, and he is careful to qualify his approach in important ways. He acknowledges, for example, the basic difficulty of distinguishing between nature and culture. Any consistent understanding of the former would eventually have to envelop the latter.

It's part of human nature to produce culture, King allows. The human is "[Homo faber](#)", he proposes, "man the maker." And "no less than the instinct for [self-preservation](#) or sexual desire, technological creativity is fundamental to our being."

But from King's perspective, there is a qualitative difference between building tools that harness the power of nature (for example, a windmill) and using technology to alter its very fabric (for example, splitting the atom).

The line might be hard to pinpoint. But as King sees it, in the age of nuclear energy, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, machine learning,

and much more, it was crossed long ago.

King similarly acknowledges his tendency to frame the problem in ways that primarily concern the wealthy inhabitants of the [Global North](#)—and that the same issues will look entirely different from the perspective of the [Global South](#). It must be infuriating to hear those who have already reaped most of the benefits of technological development now insist that limits be placed on those who have paid most of the costs.

"Nevertheless," King insists, "the Global North and Global South [...] are at very different stages of development." And precisely because it has advanced further into the belly of the beast, "the North has problems the South doesn't have, or has to a lesser degree." The North, in other words, should not be seen as a model, but as a warning.

Social, embodied, creative

Following these introductory remarks, King divides his book into three parts. Each addresses a crucial aspect of the human experience, and the way modern technology threatens to destroy it.

The first part describes humans as essentially social creatures, who require both the physical presence of other humans and a robust political community in order to become themselves.

It argues that [social media](#), algorithmic manipulation, and what King calls "technologies of absence" corrupt this aspect of our existence.

The second part takes up the related question of our embodiment. King proposes neither the mind nor the body can be reduced to mechanistic calculations, and warns against the pernicious effects of attempting to do so.

For King, when we view our mind as nothing more than a large calculator and our body as an object to be constructed and reconstructed at will, we risk losing sight of the very limits that make it possible for us to flourish.

Finally, the third part explores the human capacity for free creation and "the pleasures of practical activity." Here King seeks to revitalize the familiar Marxist theme of alienation, or the sense in which technological modes of production distance us from the products of our labor. And he begins to sketch out the parameters of what he calls "a new relationship with technology."

As King sees it, we stand on the verge of a precipice. The technologies we have constructed to make our way in the world are very close to depriving us of any world whatsoever.

"In order to avoid this trap," King concludes, "we will need to develop a radical humanism that puts the social and creative needs of human beings front and center"—one that, once again, "is not afraid [...] to invoke the concept of human nature."

Historicizing the human

Here *Be Monsters* deals extensively with specific technologies, offering a kind of pessimistic catalog of their worst potential. But some of its most intriguing arguments concern philosophical and ideological positions that were established long before the advent of either the atomic or the digital age.

King spends a considerable amount of time dismantling the platitudes of utilitarianism, liberalism, and capitalism.

And he shows how these phenomena, which have their roots in the 17th

and 18th centuries, provided the intellectual and material foundations of what we now call "neoliberalism." This is a way of thinking that King takes to be fundamentally at odds with human well-being, and with the project of humanity as such.

The problem is, we cannot really historicize one concept of the human—namely the neoliberal concept, which treats humans as self-interested, profit-maximizing machines—without historicizing the concept of "humanity" as a whole.

That is to say, while the biological species "human being" has obviously existed for a very long time, the notion that all members of that species share a common world, that we all have some common interests, and even that we all possess common rights, is not that old at all.

In this sense, it might be best to think of our humanity, not as an object we might investigate and describe, like a part of the natural world, but more like a response to a crisis or an event.

As we arguably witnessed for fleeting moments during the COVID pandemic, humanity is called into existence—and we belong to it—when something larger than life grips us all, and we are compelled to act in concert.

The question is whether we will ever be able to do this in the sustained manner required to address the overwhelming existential catastrophes outlined by King.

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