The Age-Old Urge to Destroy Technology

The book “Techno-Negative” reminds us that resistance to new inventions has existed in some form across millennia.

By Kyle Chayka April 8, 2026

Illustration by Ariel Davis

Our go-to tale of resistance to technology is the story of the Luddites: In England in the early nineteenth century, skilled weavers and craftsmen found their livelihoods threatened by automated machinery, so they began to attack textile factories, destroying the machinery with hammers. Less familiar are the revolutionaries who used large clubs to smash thousands of hanging lanterns on the streets of Paris in 1830, in rebellion against gas lights as a form of state surveillance; or the Committee for the Liquidation or Subversion of Computers, a.k.a. *CLODO*, a gang that set fire to magnetic data cards and computer programs in the Toulouse offices of Philips Informatique in 1980. Members of the latter group identified themselves as information-technology workers and described their attack as “an intelligent act of sabotage,” opposing the “dangers of IT and

telematics." (The French, with their strong culture of protest, seem particularly adept at fighting the encroachments of technology.) *CLODO* continued to express their dissent by bombing the regional computer archives of Haute-Garonne, decrying a "society where we connect like trains in a rail yard, desperately hoping to reduce chance." They saw digital recordkeeping as a kind of existential imprisonment, locking humanity in a cage of data. As invention rolls on, so do ingenious acts of destruction, attempts to halt so-called technological progress in the name of the organic and the soulful.

These rebels, among others, are the stars of "Techno-Negative" (University of Minnesota Press), a provocative and enjoyable new book by Thomas Dekeyser, a professor of human geography at the University of Southampton. In it, Dekeyser assembles a history and taxonomy of the refusal of technologies, even ones that humans had come to depend on in their daily lives. The techno-negative attitude involves "longing for the dismantling of what sustains you," he writes. Yearning to light some tech on fire is a relatable feeling these days, as generative artificial intelligence promises to supplant nearly every form of non-physical labor, social media wreaks havoc on the mental health of young people, and massive data centers loom as environmental blights. Dekeyser's assembled stories may not offer a how-to manual, but they do provide inspiration for thinking against

today's dominant technologies. The book proceeds through three themed sections charting, respectively, state policies that regulate technology ("Sovereignty"); individual efforts to sabotage new technologies ("Revolt"); and attempts to escape from society's technologized condition ("Withdrawal"). Dekeyser ultimately calls for "techno-abolitionism," a process of deconstructing the aura of inevitability around new technologies. This is a somewhat abstruse goal, aiming not to stop technological change but to remake its character. At the book's conclusion Dekeyser offers a tidy manifesto that may urge us on: "There is insufficient hatred for this technological world." I could get a tattoo of that line, or at least use it as my iPhone background.

In antiquity, technology was literally demonized, so there was no stigma in positioning oneself against it. For all the ancient Greeks' knowledge, they created curiously little in the way of lasting machines. This may be explained by the negative connotation of *technē*, their word for the practice of skilled crafts and engineering. *Technē* "had brought something dark, possibly sinister, into the world, something that must, for as long as possible, be kept at bay," Dekeyser writes of the prevailing attitude. Out of a kind of "pathological narcissism," he adds, the Greeks may have feared that machines would displace humanity, which they considered the height of beauty; anyway, they had enough human slaves

who needed to be kept occupied and oppressed that they didn't really need robots. The medieval Catholic Church associated technology with the devilish temptation of pride; one twelfth-century historian accused Pope Sylvester II of using magic that he'd learned in Islamic Spain to call forth a demon and have it build an omniscient talking statue head that helped him to become Pope. (Sylvester had evil statuary; we have ChatGPT.) "Sinfulness is the hidden condition of technology," Dekeyser writes, summarizing the Church's posture. Amen!

With the birth of early modernity, which is to say, the advent of industrial capitalism, ideological skepticism toward technology gave way to technology becoming a tool of the state. As soon as tech proved that it could reproduce capital more efficiently than a human worker, it was given more protections than the worker, attaining an exalted status. (According to a seventeenth-century law in Vienna, you could get a hand cut off for messing with street lanterns.) The history of struggle against technology is also the history of struggle over what makes the human different from the machine. The labor movement undertook two fights, resisting workers being displaced by machines but also resisting workers being treated *as* machines, subhuman fodder fuelling technological progress. Techno-negativity represents the desire to opt out of technology and its (perhaps illusory) narrative of improvement, as Osei Bonsu,

the early-nineteenth-century African king of Ashanti, did when he declined a gift of mechanical devices such as a lathe, a watch, and a music box from the British. Colonial technology came for his kingdom, regardless, and the forces of modernity ended up demonizing those who *didn't* embrace technology as backward and uncivilized. The protagonists of "Techno-Negative" may find contemporary adherents among those who seek out older, slower, less efficient forms of technology—after all, bricking our smartphones is its own kind of rebellion.

Dekeyser is a crisp and forceful writer, though nonacademic readers may find themselves sometimes lost in the verbiage of theory. (The lantern smashers, he writes, "open up the strategic-affective possibilities of a politics of the unknown.") Still, there's more solace to be found in the history traced by "Techno-Negative" than in many more mainstream literary critiques of technology. Our hatred of social media or of artificial intelligence is not some novel phenomenon, Dekeyser reminds us; it's a feeling that has existed in some form across millennia. Resistance seems less futile when it is part of a shared tradition, though "Techno-Negative" is more focussed on tracing a lineage than on judging the efficacy of anti-technology movements past. Many of the stories in the book are tragic Icarus narratives, featuring acts of rebellion that succeed in one brief ecstatic burst, and then resoundingly fail. We know from history that the Luddites

were not successful; indeed, over time their name became (undeservedly!) a shorthand for technological dummies. *CLODO*'s fires did not stop digital recordkeeping; its members could scarcely have imagined a modern world in which, say, user-generated location data from Pokémon Go is being used to train automated delivery robots. But the ancient Greeks may have had a point with their suppression of *technē* after all. ♦