

## Emergency Breaks

*Gavin Mueller's Breaking Things at Work explores the failures and mistakes of the technophilic left*

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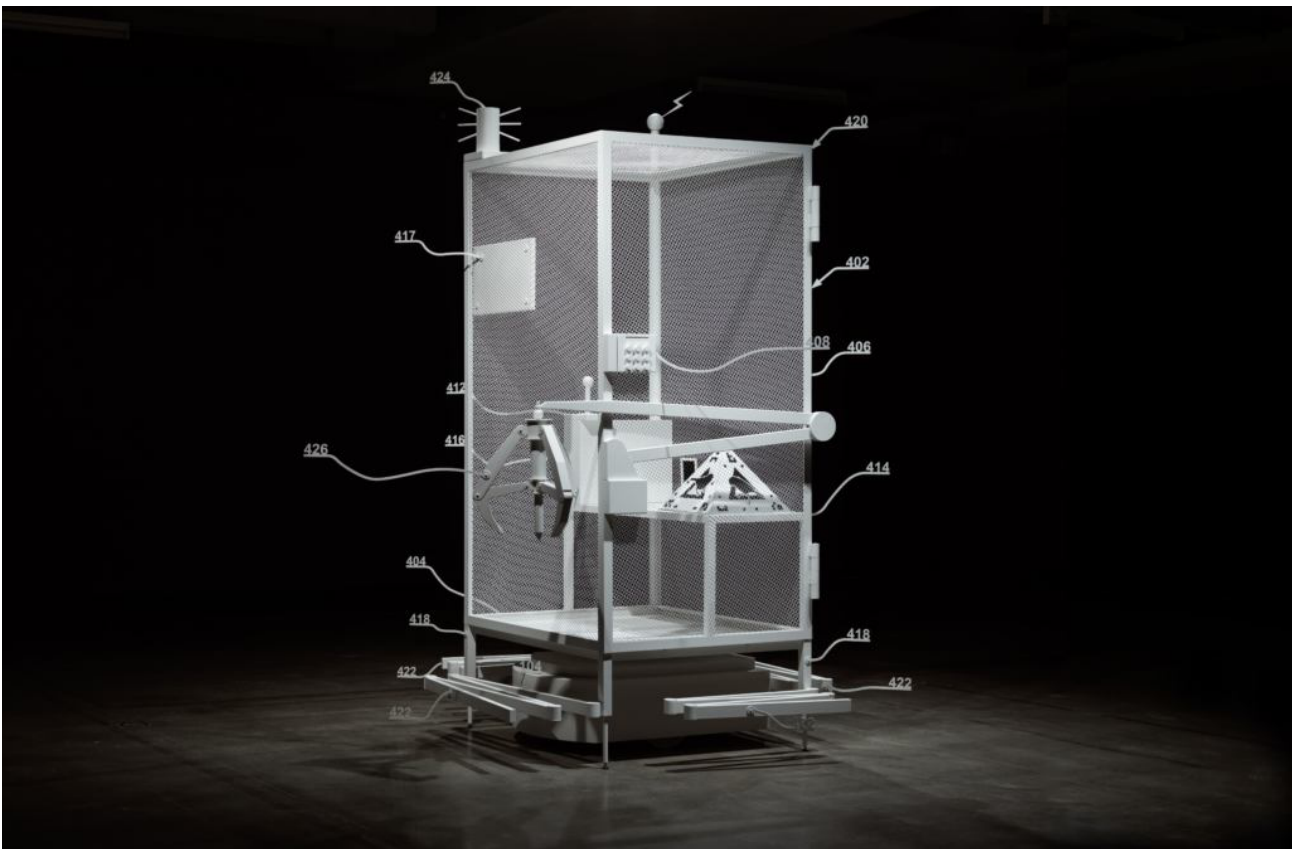


Image: Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown

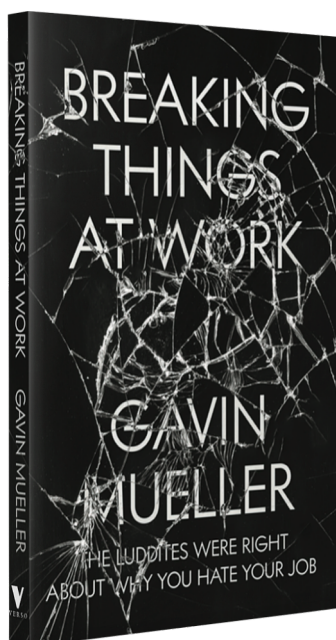
*Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: "System for transporting personnel within an active workspace," 2016) (2019) by Simon Denny. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy the artist and the Rachofsky Collection.*

Remember the Ship? In late March 2021 — ages ago in pandemic-time — the gargantuan container ship named *Ever Given* somehow got stuck in the Suez Canal, blocking traffic through the world's most important commercial waterway for six full days. That week, it seemed like it was all anyone could talk about online. There was a website you could refresh for up-to-the-minute updates on whether the Ship was still stuck (it always was, until it wasn't). The cost to shipping companies climbed ever higher, eventually totaling close to \$10 billion. And we were all deliriously happy.

The plight of the Ship sparked so much joy in large part because of the sheer physical comedy of the situation. It is simply very funny to picture a large ship getting stuck. The much-memed image of a crew attempting to dislodge the monstrosity with a humble excavator only added to the hilarity. But it was clear that the incident also struck a deeper nerve. There was a strange outpouring of something almost like relief: a sense that the misfortune of this star-crossed vessel somehow represented an interruption, however brief, in the grinding, irresistible dynamics of the large-scale, technologically mediated systems that govern our lives under contemporary capitalism. If the Ship could get stuck, what else was possible?

Ecstasy in the face of the spectacle of breakdown is the flip side of a mounting exhaustion with the promethean ambitions of today's tech overlords. Even as their net worth continues to balloon, they do not quite inspire like they used to. Bill Gates is getting divorced. Elon Musk wants to go to Mars and to dig tunnels for cars under our cities for some reason. Jeff Bezos is building an enormous clock in the desert that won't do anything, apparently, except remind us that 10,000 years is a long time.

Who cares?



This sense of disillusionment is bad news for a group of writers on the left who have banked hard on the enduring appeal of techno-utopianism, as Gavin Mueller observes in his insightful new book, *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Were Right About Why You Hate Your Job*. Sometimes called “accelerationism,” this school of thought argues that socialism — or “postcapitalism,” or “fully automated luxury communism” — can come about by seizing the sublime technological infrastructure created by today’s leading capitalists and redeploying it towards proletarian or at least egalitarian ends. The technology itself is terrific, they claim. The problem is just that it’s controlled by a small group of people who only use it to enrich themselves.

Mueller disagrees. The idea of a socialist Amazon — or Walmart, or Uber — is a contradiction in terms, he argues, because the technical “innovations” of these firms are inseparable from their exploitation of workers. What they have perfected are technologies of domination, surveillance, and atomization, keeping workers isolated, monitored, and tethered to the inhumane rhythms of a machinic edifice. Always low prices

depend on always low wages. High-tech capitalism hasn't given us a fully automated utopia with a residual crust of exploitation lingering on the outside. It has selectively deployed automation and other technologies precisely in order to intensify exploitation. Hence Mueller's alternative: Break things, preferably at work.

As his provocative subtitle suggests, he traces this strategy back to the original Luddites, the working-class machine-smashers of early-19th-century England, then in the throes of its first industrial revolution. The first Luddites were far from the pathetic technophobes depicted by what historian E.P. Thompson called the "enormous condescension of posterity." Rather, they took up arms against machinery as a deliberate political tactic. Sabotage was an expression of workers' rage against the depredations of industrial capitalism, one that was irresistibly theatrical even as it delivered a very material blow to bosses. The question that Mueller wrestles with throughout the book is whether a revitalized Luddism can act as a similarly effective catalyst of working-class politics in the 21st century. Is breaking machines the first step to building a better world?



Much of *Breaking Things at Work* is devoted to a compelling examination of the ancestors of today's accelerationists — the techno-utopians haunting the corridors of the history of the socialist movement. Far from a 21st-century curiosity, Mueller argues, the fantasy that socialists could simply grab hold of the productive apparatus of capitalism and transfer it into the hands of the working class lurked behind the strategic failures of the left throughout the 20th century.

As Mueller acknowledges, this attitude has antecedents in the work of Karl

Marx himself. Marx felt that it was a good thing that the labor movement in Britain eventually seemed to outgrow the “crude” tactics of the Luddites, learning to “distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which uses those instruments.” In a famous passage from the *Grundrisse*, the preparatory manuscripts for *Capital*, Marx speculated that the development of capitalism was pushing towards “an automatic system of machinery.” Since this mode of production would not rest on the exploitation of living laborers, it could be made the foundation of a socialized economy where workers acted only as “supervisors” of machinery — no longer grist for the satanic mills of capitalism.

## **A “socialist Amazon” — or Walmart, or Uber — is a contradiction in terms, Mueller argues, because their technical “innovations” are inseparable from their exploitation of workers**

Marx’s view of technology was highly ambivalent, however, and it evolved significantly over time. In the first volume of *Capital*, for instance, he remarked that “it would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt.” Innovation under capitalism did not just aim to improve efficiency but to enhance employers’ control over unruly workers.

These complexities were smoothed over during the consolidation of so-

called “Orthodox Marxism” in the late 19th century, the version of Marxist thought that dominated the Second International after Marx’s death in 1883. The German writer and activist Karl Kautsky, often referred to half-jokingly as the “Pope of Marxism” for his role in consolidating the new orthodoxy, saw the steady, politically neutral development of the “forces of production” as the throughline of history. For a long time, capitalism had served to enhance the power and technological sophistication of these forces; but a period of crisis loomed on the horizon, a moment at which a workers’ revolution could take over the machinery of production and restart its progressive development under socialized control.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks strongly disagreed with Kautsky that workers needed to wait for capitalism to fully develop the forces of production before attempting their revolution. Nonetheless, they believed that, once in power, they could import the cutting-edge techniques of capitalist production without incurring the immense human cost to workers that accompanied industrialization in Western Europe and the United States. Most notoriously, Lenin was enthusiastic about the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “scientific management” system, which urged managers to break up the production process into atomized operations that could be studied, standardized, and timed (and mechanized, where possible). Managers would then require workers to adhere to the “one best way” to perform their operations. Under socialism, Lenin argued, Taylorism could help reduce working hours by maximizing industrial efficiency.

But Taylorism was not just designed to expand output. It was also a means to crush the power of workers on the shop floor by diminishing the importance of craft knowledge, allowing disruptive workers to be replaced at will with easily trained substitutes. In fact, Taylorism did help managers suppress working-class resistance in the early days of Soviet industrialization, eventually eliminating any vestige of economic

democracy remaining from the revolutionary era.

## **The fantasy that socialists could transfer the productive apparatus of capitalism into the hands of the working class lurked behind the strategic failures of the left throughout the 20th century**

Mueller documents a quite similar belief in the essential political neutrality of production technology at work in the midcentury labor movement in the United States. Here, this belief had nothing to do with Marxism, but rather served to distance the movement from the appearance of radicalism. Anxious, under red scare conditions, to project an image of cooperation with capitalist progress, labor leaders in decades after World War II proved willing to cede authority over the actual production process to managers. They focused instead on establishing frameworks to redistribute the fruits of enhanced productivity to workers in the form of steady wage increases and pension and healthcare benefits.

This stance ultimately proved self-defeating. Rank-and-file workers often revolted spontaneously against assembly line speedups and mechanization, reaching a fever pitch by the early 1970s. Labor leaders were suddenly caught fighting their members, as well as employers. Those employers, in turn, used new logistics technology, including shipping containers and factory automation, to suppress worker revolts, scatter production geographically, and threaten workers contemplating unionization with the prospect of plant shutdown. The American labor movement has never recovered.



Mueller's synthesis of the history of the technophilic left is so damning that it becomes difficult to understand why these ideas have proved so consistently attractive to leftist thinkers with diverse political and theoretical backgrounds. Is there anything to be said on the anti-Luddites' behalf?

Part of the enduring appeal of techno-optimism is, well, its optimism. The idea that the development of capitalism unwittingly performs socialists' work for them can provide comfort to the left in moments of apparent defeat. Lean years for the workers' movement are not necessarily time wasted; the intensification of exploitation today could be balanced out by the expansion of tomorrow's abundance.

Perhaps this is why technophilia has often proved particularly attractive to the frequently beleaguered left in the United States. Edward Bellamy's 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward*, in which a socialist state deploys miraculous technological systems to dramatically reduce working hours and deliver consumer goods nearly instantaneously, sparked the development of "Nationalist Clubs" amidst the collapse of the Knights of Labor and the violent repression of the labor movement in the aftermath of the 1886 Haymarket riot. The original "Technocracy" movement, led by the engineer Howard Scott and inspired in part by Bellamy, gained steam in the 1920s and early 1930s, a period when the labor movement had once more been crushed by the American state during the first red scare after World War I. In each case, these techno-utopian enthusiasms largely flickered out when new forms of working-class mass politics reemerged — the People's Party and industrial unionism in the 1890s; the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the Popular Front in the 1930s.

But enthusiasm about technology on the left isn't just a means of keeping



the faith alive in dark times; it has also helped leftists formulate a political vision less vulnerable to the most familiar conservative critiques of socialism. Socialism is a pie-in-the-sky fantasy that could never work in practice? Well, a kind of socialism already exists within our largest corporations, just captured by private interests. Socialists hate luxury and are willing to make shared squalor the price of equality? Exactly the opposite — socialists want everyone to have access to the lifestyle of today's ultra-rich. Socialists think we should improve society somewhat, and yet they participate in society? No contradiction here; the accomplishments of our present society will form the foundation of the socialist future.

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While the rush to defuse criticism has often led technophilic leftists to downplay the extent to which the purpose of class domination is built into the structure of capitalist production technologies, there is surely something to these replies that even Luddites ought to appreciate. Our large corporations might not provide a template for cooperative production under socialism, but their logistical achievements do debunk the canard that markets are the only way to coordinate production and distribution efficiently. Perhaps there are good environmental, aesthetic, or spiritual reasons not to seek to universalize the lifestyle of our plutocratic elite, but it is also true that any socialism worth fighting for

ought to reduce toil and expand access to leisure. Universal Basic Subsistence Farming will never be the objective of an effective working-class mass movement, but people have taken to the streets to fight for more time “for what we will,” as the eight-hour-day movement of the late 19th century put it. And it’s hard to imagine winning more time for what we will without making peace with much of the technology that capitalism has produced.

All of this helps to explain why the figures who populate the Luddite counter-genealogy that Mueller interweaves throughout *Breaking Things at Work* were not as uniformly hostile to technology as the label would lead you to expect. William Morris, the champion of the Arts and Crafts movement in Victorian Britain, “favored the use of machinery to reduce working hours” even as he insisted that work itself should be made more pleasurable, creative, and useful. The great German Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin, while excoriating the linear view of “progress” that many contemporary leftists shared with their capitalist enemies, celebrated the ability of new technologies like the motion picture to level aesthetic hierarchies and democratize access to art.

The mass movements Mueller profiles follow the same pattern. The Industrial Workers of the World, the most radical labor organization of the early 20th century United States, published instructional pamphlets on how to use sabotage to combat the depredations of Taylorism. Nonetheless, they also scorned the status distinctions endemic to the preindustrial world of craft work and enthusiastically embraced the value of leisure: “the less work the better,” as IWW leader “Big Bill” Haywood famously put it. The Black Panther Party and other Black radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s argued that factory automation was producing a racialized surplus population or “lumpenproletariat,” severing Black communities from access to work in the formal sector and creating the conditions for ghettoization. But their response was to call for

“people’s community control of modern technology,” not simply for the restoration of some pre-technological past.

Later in the book, Mueller introduces the concept of “Luddite technology” to characterize the open-source software invented by anarchistic programmers to undermine the intellectual property regime that capitalists like Bill Gates imposed in the late 20th century. The idea of a Luddite technology — machinery that enables resistance to the machinery of capitalists — underscores the extent to which Mueller’s Luddism remains grounded in Marxism and Marx’s ambivalence about, rather than hostility to, technology. The goal of attacking any given piece of technology should always be to attack the “form of society” that lies behind it. If techno-utopian strands of Marxism have emphasized the forces of production over the relations of production, a sophisticated Marxist critique of technology must avoid making the same mistake. The goal is a world free from social relations of domination and exploitation. Some, though certainly not all, of our present-day technologies may still have a home in such a world — alongside other technologies we have yet to imagine.



In order to keep the relations of production squarely in our line of sight, Mueller recommends that we assess the value of Luddite tactics in any given conjuncture in terms of their ability to help “compose” a militant working class, or a “struggling class,” as he puts it at one point. The concept of class composition has roots in the work of E.P. Thompson, himself a great historian of Luddism. Thompson argued that the initial formation of the working class in England was not simply an automatic outcome of the industrialization process but a result of its dynamic interplay with the resistance of workers like the Luddites. The Luddites

helped make the English working class by demonstrating to workers that capitalist social relations could be the object of sustained collective contestation.

## **Attacking any given piece of technology should always be rooted in attacking the “form of society” that lies behind it. The goal is a world free from social relations of domination and exploitation**

As Mueller observes, neo-Luddite actions have the potential to serve a similar function today. Small acts of sabotage and gamesmanship against the machines that have made Amazon’s warehouses so hellacious have grown into eruptions of more organized militancy inside America’s second-largest employer — on display in this spring’s inspiring if ultimately unsuccessful union drive in Bessemer, Alabama. Similarly, at Tesla, Elon Musk has been extremely successful at squashing unionization, but he still has had to contend with at least two high-profile cases of plant sabotage in the last few years. As long as there are still workers who come face to face with industrial technology, it will always be difficult for employers to extinguish the flame of machine-breaking entirely.

But what about everyone who doesn’t come face to face with industrial technology? Mueller is right to critique the widespread notion that we’re hurtling down the highway to full automation. But as Aaron Benanav has recently argued, recent decades have in fact witnessed the expulsion of labor from industry and the proliferation of surplus populations of the sort

that the Black Panthers warned about half a century ago. This has happened even in the absence of full automation, due to pervasive overcapacity in the global manufacturing sector. Some of our surplus population has been reabsorbed into service work, and the expansion of delivery app business during the pandemic is a reminder that exploitation in the service sector is often technologically mediated. But for countless people stringing together three or four fast-food jobs, or selling contraband on the street, or trying to survive on disability insurance, the relationship between resistance and breaking things at work is less than obvious.

As a result, the most visible fights through which a “struggling class” seems to be recomposing itself today have actually taken place outside the workplace. Much of the energy behind the resurgence of self-described socialism in recent years has stemmed from the demand for national single-payer health insurance, the most important effect of which would be to take some of the sting out of informal employment and unemployment. Similarly, the issue of housing has moved to the center of municipal politics, with tenant unions and other organizations working to ensure access to housing even for people without a steady income. And the nationwide anti-racist movement against policing that culminated in last summer’s uprising has taken aim at the criminalization, incarceration, and execution of the United States’ growing, disproportionately Black surplus population. When police murdered Eric Garner in 2014, they initially accused him of the crime of selling single cigarettes.

There doesn’t have to be a tradeoff between these struggles and the Luddite forms of resistance to work that Mueller seeks to cultivate. On the contrary, to free people from dependence on formal employment is to embolden them to make demands at work that might otherwise seem risky or unrealistic. We have seen a glimpse of this possibility this spring, when the extension of expanded unemployment benefits has led to an

unprecedented wave of fast-food workers refusing to work for poverty wages. Walkouts, mass resignations, sick-ins, and wildcat strikes are also forms of sabotage, even if no equipment gets broken in the process. Like other Luddite tactics, they attempt to “pull the emergency break” on the train of industrial progress, as Walter Benjamin put it. From your local Burger King franchise to the Suez Canal, the infrastructure of power and profit is more fragile than it appears.

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