

The Tragedy of the Unabomber

Ted Kaczynski's criticisms of environmental destruction and out-of-control technology were incisive. But, disdaining leftists and being unwilling to join with others in a social movement, he resorted to abhorrent terroristic methods that had no chance of solving any of the problems he perceived.

Alex Skopic

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Dr. Theodore “Ted” Kaczynski died this month in a Federal Bureau of Prisons medical center, apparently by suicide. For most Americans, the name will need no introduction. For 17 years, Kaczynski terrorized the nation as the elusive “Unabomber,” mailing a series of homemade explosives to scientists, academics, and business executives, among other victims. From his cabin in the Montana woods, he killed three people and injured 23, all in service of a one-man crusade against what he called “the techno-industrial system.” By any measure, he was one of the most prolific and notorious domestic terrorists in U.S. history.

He was also, to put it provocatively, not entirely *wrong* about the techno-industrial system. In 1995, Kaczynski successfully blackmailed both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* into printing his 35,000-word manifesto, *Industrial Society and its Future*, which opens with the now-infamous lines:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in “advanced” countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. The continued development of technology will worsen the situation.

For someone reading this passage in 2023, it’s difficult not to see Kaczynski’s words as prescient. He wrote them before the internet was widely used, and before smartphones and social media were even dreamt of. Today, as Thomas Moller-Nielsen has written for *Current Affairs*, the charge of “widespread psychological suffering” resulting from technology seems inarguable: we live in a world where 41 percent of adults report that they’d rather give up sex for a year than forgo using their smartphones, and where loneliness, depression, and anxiety are on the rise, in part because “vast swaths of the U.S. population would prefer to spend time with their personalized high-tech gadgets rather than attempt to foster meaningful human relationships.” According to one Pew survey, 59 percent of teenagers have been bullied or harassed online, and the rate of suicide in 13 and 14-year-olds has more than doubled between 2008 and 2018, concurrent with the rise of the major social-media platforms. In the news, there have been multiple stories of infants whose first words are not “mama” or “dada,” but “Hey Google” or “Alexa.” Meanwhile, Amazon has patented a wristband that can track the hand movements of its warehouse workers, and “use vibrations to nudge them in a different direction,” effectively turning them into remote-controlled drones. Across the board, “indignities,” a “destabilized society,” and a sense that technological developments “have made life unfulfilling” are very much with us, with no end in sight.

Then, too, the charge of “physical suffering” located particularly in “the Third World” lands home. It’s a simple historical fact that the Industrial Revolution (and its consequences) went hand-in-hand with European imperialism, and that its raw materials

were furnished by the ravaging of entire continents. To pick just one example, much of the rubber in Europe was once supplied by the so-called Congo Free State, where Belgian overseers systematically whipped and mutilated their African subjects for failing to meet production quotas. Today, only the materials involved have changed. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as it's now known, thousands of workers are still forced into functional slavery in cobalt mines, where they scrape at the earth with pickaxes, breathe toxic dust, and often die in tunnel collapses—all to feed the demand for rechargeable batteries for the latest high-tech devices. In all likelihood, the laptop I'm typing this on contains metals mined by enslaved people, and so does whatever device you're using to read it. Elsewhere, in countries like Cameroon, climate change driven by the fossil fuel industry has made lethal fights over dwindling water supplies more and more commonplace. Across the Global South, the “continued development of technology,” to use Kaczynski's words, has indeed “been a disaster for the human race.”

Even some of Kaczynski's victims show a surprising appreciation for his analysis of modern society. After learning of the Unabomber's death, Gary Wright—who suffered wounds from more than 200 shrapnel pieces when his computer shop was attacked in 1987—went so far as to call him “prophetic”:

[T]hrow away the murders, right? Throw away the meaning and everything else. It was the wrong method, but if you apply where we are today, it's kind of prophetic in a way, that here we are today, we're debating A.I., we're debating all kinds of things. You got [sic] mental health issues due to social media. He did see some elements early on that maybe others weren't recognizing.

Wright isn't alone in feeling this way. Paradoxically, Kaczynski has spawned his own fandom among the chronically online, with entire subcultures of TikTok users posting edgy jokes about being “Tedpilled.” (“The Industrial Revolution lowkey be cringe,” opines one teen on the app.) Like with many internet trends, it's impossible to tell how much of this is sincere, and how much is a post-post-ironic joke at the expense of social media itself. Probably the answer is that it's a bit of both.

Others, though, take the Unabomber as a serious inspiration. In 2018, *New York Magazine* ran a profile of anti-technology radical John Jacobi, who encountered *Industrial Society and its Future* when he was living on an anarchist commune in North Carolina:

Staggered by the shock of his Kaczynski Moment but intent on rising to the challenge, he began corresponding with the great man himself, hitchhiked the 644 miles from Chapel Hill to Ann Arbor to read the Kaczynski archives, tracked down his followers all around the world, and collected an impressive (and potentially incriminating) cache of material on ITS along the way.

Clearly Kaczynski's ideas still have power, if they can spark a reaction like that. "ITS," in this case, refers to Individualidades Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (or, in English, Individualists Tending to the Wild,) a "a loose association of terrorist groups started by Mexican Kaczynski devotees" after the manifesto was translated into Spanish—by a "radical theorist" known only as "Último Reducto," who, like Jacobi, has written extensively about Kaczynski's life and work. The Unabomber's appeal, it seems, is not only cross-generational, but global.

Of course, there's a glaring flaw here. As admirable as Gary Wright's capacity for forgiveness might be, we can't just, as he recently put it in the *New York Times*, "throw away the murders," or glibly say that "it was the wrong method" before moving on. The fact remains that Ted Kaczynski was a serial killer, and it's primarily as such that he'll be remembered. He forfeited the chance to be known as a modern Thoreau—or even Jacques Ellul, the Christian anarchist whose book *The Technological Society* appears to have influenced him heavily—the moment he started blowing people's limbs off. Really, Wright got lucky. Three other men—Hugh Scrutton, Thomas Mosser, and Gilbert Murray—are dead at Kaczynski's hands, never having known who was targeting them or why. For their loved ones, the fact that the Unabomber occasionally made some good points about psychology or the environment must come as hollow consolation.

The really tragic part, though, is that it was all for nothing. To this day, it's unclear how Kaczynski thought mailing bombs to random people, who happened to be loosely connected with technology, would in any way alleviate the problems he'd identified within advanced industrial societies. His manifesto is full of bombastic talk about "revolution against the industrial-technological system," speculating that "under suitable conditions large numbers of people may devote themselves passionately" to such a cause, but there's no indication that he ever attempted to rally anyone to his side. Instead, he simply retreated from the world, hiding away in his cabin and lashing out with haphazard violence. There's a distinct element of sociopathy to his crimes, as seen when he writes in his diary about Hugh Scrutton's death:

Experiment 97. Dec. 11, 1985. I planted a bomb disguised to look like a scrap of lumber behind Rentech Computer Store in Sacramento. According to the San Francisco Examiner, Dec. 20, the "operator" (owner? manager?) of the store was killed, "blown to bits," on Dec. 12. Excellent. Humane way to eliminate somebody. He probably never felt a thing. 25,000 reward offered. Rather flattering.

Notice, there's no mention of what Scrutton's supposed offenses against humanity had been, or how his death was supposed to liberate anyone. Kaczynski didn't even know who he was targeting; his bomb would have killed whoever picked it up. He simply took satisfaction in the act of killing itself, and the notoriety it brought. In the 2020

Netflix documentary *Unabomber: In His Own Words*, he goes further, admitting that “I hate the system not because of some abstract humanitarian principle but because I hated living in the system,” and that “It was simply anger and revenge, and I was going to strike back.” Hardly the stuff revolutionary movements are made of.

Kaczynski’s mental health—or rather, his mental unwellness—appears to have played a role, both in shaping his beliefs and his way of acting on them. In the course of his criminal trial in 1998, he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and although he vehemently objected to his lawyers’ attempts to pursue an insanity plea, “paranoid” does seem like an apt word for some of his rhetoric about an all-powerful scientific “system.” In his journals, Kaczynski acknowledged that many people would regard him as insane—although he frames this, too, as a conspiracy against him:

As I said, if I succeed in killing enough people, the news media may have something to say about me when I am killed or caught. And they are bound to try to analyse my psychology and depict me as ‘sick.’ [. . .] I would point out that many tame, conformist types seem to have a powerful need to depict the enemy of society as sordid, repulsive or ‘sick.’ This powerful bias should be borne in reading any attempts to analyse my psychology.

This paranoid outlook and resistance to being “analysed” may have its roots in Kaczynski’s experiences as an undergraduate student at Harvard. There, according to an investigative report in *The Atlantic*, he volunteered as a test subject in “purposely brutalizing” psychological experiments run by one Dr. Henry Murray. Along with 21 other students, he was subjected to “intensive interrogation—what Murray himself called ‘vehement, sweeping, and personally abusive’ attacks, assaulting his subjects’ egos and most-cherished ideals and beliefs” in lengthy sessions. The experiments, wildly unethical by any modern standard, were apparently intended to study different individuals’ responses to acute stress, and had their roots in work Murray did for the Office of Strategic Services—the precursor to the CIA—during World War II. There, Murray had screened potential covert agents for their ability to resist interrogation, and “had long shown interest [...] in the whole subject of brainwashing.” It would be easy to get conspiratorial here, and it’s important to note that the mistreatment Kaczynski received doesn’t absolve him of his later crimes: his actions are still morally atrocious. Still, being intentionally traumatized in this way, involving tactics designed for soldiers, can’t possibly have helped his mental state. It seems likely that the military-industrial complex contributed to both the Unabomber’s hatred of science and scientists, and his belief that he could trust no one.

More fundamental to Kaczynski’s ideology, though, was his loathing for the political left. Throughout *Industrial Society and its Future*, he complains almost as bitterly about “leftists” and “leftism” as he does about technology itself. Leftists tend to be “oversocialized types who try to satisfy their drive for power by imposing their morality on everyone,” he writes, and they “tend to hate anything that has an image of

being strong, good and successful” on principle. Their stated concern for social and environmental issues is only “an excuse for them to express their own hostility and frustrated need for power.” (No projection here, of course.) As a result, “a movement that exalts nature and opposes technology must take a resolutely anti-leftist stance and must avoid all collaboration with leftists,” because “leftism is in the long run inconsistent with wild nature, with human freedom and with the elimination of modern technology.” Some of this language sounds like it was ripped straight from Fox News, and it may go a long way toward explaining why Kaczynski seems to have shunned the environmentalist groups of his day. Most of them were concerned, to a greater or lesser degree, with notions of social justice, and therefore too “leftist.”

The Unabomber manifesto displays a deeply cynical worldview, one which dismisses out of hand the idea that people might have *sincere* concerns for each other and their shared world and that these sentiments might be more than simply a mask for neurosis or a lust for power. Rejecting the humanitarian commitments of the left in this absolute way, Kaczynski closed himself off from the possibility of forming a broad “movement” at all, even with others who, generally speaking, might have shared his views. For him, the plan wasn’t necessarily to create a better or more just society; it was simply to destroy the existing one, and let “human freedom” take over from there. What kind of world would result, and whether or not anyone actually wanted it, was beside the point. With the supreme confidence of a man used to being lauded for his intellect, Kaczynski had decided *for* everyone, and was content to wage his bombing campaign without anyone’s help. The whole thing is distinctly crankish and narcissistic, but perhaps not surprising. When a core part of your politics is the desire to be left alone, alone is exactly where you end up.

None of this is without precedent. Historically, terrorism has always been the politics of the desperate and the isolated, and people have turned to individual acts of violence to express all kinds of social and antisocial agendas. For parallels, we can look to the Nihilists of pre-revolutionary Russia, who (unlike the later Bolsheviks) saw little hope in mass politics, and opted for bomb-throwing and assassination attempts as their tactics of choice. Or there are the anarchist assassins, such as Leon Czolgosz, who successfully killed President William McKinley in 1901, and Alexander Berkman, who almost did the same to the steel magnate Henry Clay Frick in 1892. Most of these figures were more discriminating than Kaczynski, both in their choice of targets and their stated goals: anarchism and nihilism, for all their flaws, are at least coherent and historically-rooted ideologies, rather than the quixotic creation of one man. They’re more realistic than simply trying to get rid of technology *as such* via pipe bomb. But radical terrorism of every stripe shares a similar whiff of futility. Even when its practitioners succeed in their plots, they rarely change the world in the way they’d hoped. After McKinley’s death, he was simply replaced with Roosevelt, and Tsar Alexander II with Alexander III. The underlying society rolled on, relatively unbothered.

In the aftermath of the 1978 Sydney Hilton hotel bombing, the Libertarian Socialist Organization of Australia put out an excellent little pamphlet called *You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship*, laying out their objections to political violence:

[F]oul means, far from being justified by distant ends, merely provide a guarantee that the ends achieved will be horrible. You can't blow up a social relationship. The total collapse of this society would provide no guarantee about what replaced it. Unless a majority of people had the ideas and organization sufficient for the creation of an alternative society, we would see the old world reassert itself because it is what people would be used to, what they believed in, what existed unchallenged in their own personalities.

If only Kaczynski had read this along with his Ellul! He might have seen that his bombing spree, and a thousand acts like it, had already been anticipated. As the Australian socialists argue, such eruptions of violence are not only futile in themselves, but they stigmatize whatever cause they're committed to by associating it with bloodshed and terror, and they provide a pretext for greater repression of that cause's adherents by the state. "When by their own actions terrorists serve such ends," they conclude, "they are contributing to the destruction of politics and the closing of various options for the spreading of ideas before they have been fully utilised."

This, then, is the tragedy of the Unabomber. By conventional measures, Ted Kaczynski was a brilliant man, even a genius—but he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of power, and the possibilities for effecting real societal change. If he'd been serious about opposing the ills he saw in the modern world, the thing to do was to remain in society—to actually try to *convince* people, rather than blowing them up, and to build bonds of solidarity with his fellow human beings. There's no telling how many allies he might have gained, and what they might have accomplished together. But instead, he took a selfish and small-minded path. He killed not only three innocent people, but an entire alternate self—Ted Kaczynski as he should have been, Ted Kaczynski the world-renowned activist and advocate. We are left with only Ted Kaczynski the murderer, and he leaves only pointless misery in his wake.

The Ted K Archive

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