

The Ableist Logic of Primitivism

A Critique of “Ecoextremist” Thought

Conor Arpwel

2018/12/30

In his recent article for *New York Magazine*, *Children of Ted*, John H. Richardson ruminates on the recent rise of a fringe political movement centered on the writings of Ted Kaczynski, the ecoterrorist widely known as “the Unabomber.” On its face, Richardson’s article amounts to an eccentric human-interest story for a mainstream publication. Yet, in typical liberal fashion, Richardson approaches his subject with a dangerous combination of cynicism and naiveté. He frivolously mischaracterizes much of modern anarchist thought by describing the article’s main subject, John Jacob, as an (idiosyncratic and largely mythical) type of leftist radical who is “sure that morality is just a social construct that keeps us docile in our shearing pens.” Richardson goes on to assert that “Kaczynski was Karl Marx in modern flesh, yearning for his Lenin”—a highly misleading and facile assertion. Due in part to this semi-implicit disregard for the potential for fundamental social change, Richardson does little to present alternatives to Kaczynski’s fascistic “solution” to our climate catastrophe that has already begun.

Although Richardson prefers to refer to this type of thought as “ecoextremism,” Kaczynski and his groupies are better understood as advocates for a callous strain of primitivism. This ideology is grounded in a belief that technological development must be stopped—even reversed. From Kaczynski’s perspective, industrialization and technological progress are responsible for societal instability and immense psychological suffering. To remedy this, Kaczynski advocates a prelapsarian “return to nature” in order to align our social realities to genetically prescribed human behavior. However, it is crucial to understand that this perspective is far more insidious than some romantic yearning for Thoreau’s Walden Pond. Kaczynski takes an artificially “constrained,” as Thomas Sowell describes it, view of humanity—namely, that we are defined by a “bedrock of selfishness,” over which altruism and cooperation manifest on occasion but remain mere exceptions to the cynical rule. This reflects the polemics of other reactionaries, such as white supremacist “race science” sophists and “intellectual dark web” charlatans like Jordan Peterson. Such ideologies all serve the same end: to foreclose the possibility of any systemic change to the status quo and dismiss any societal structure not predicated on hierarchy and subordination.

This notion runs counter to the fundamentals of socialist thought. While most socialists call for the destruction or dismantling of capitalism and believe in the necessity of working towards a stateless global society, primitivists want to go further: to, in a sense, turn back time, erasing every trace of industrial development—and with it, any advantages conferred by modern science. In other words, primitivism is hedged on the notion that humanity must cleanse itself, must build a new society on the bones of the weak and degenerate. Among other things, there’s a severe dearth of empathy here, shot through with an underlying assumption that people considered to be “extraneous” and “disposable” by capitalism and primitivism are rightly categorized as such. Socialists take the view that all people are in fact human beings who have an inherent right to fulfilling and dignified lives free of oppression. As it exists independently of

one's labor value and perceived utility, socialists hold that one's humanity must not be means-tested.

Although oftentimes a helpful formulation, the term “ableism” has been casually bandied about to the extent that using the word in some circles results in derision. Nevertheless, it is still a concise and cogent framework for describing the oppression that disabled people experience in their everyday lives, both interpersonally and systemically. Like all forms of oppression, ableism is a manmade system of power that emanates from and is perpetuated by thoughts and actions both conscious and subconscious. Such kinds of discrimination are a firmly embedded component of the societal superstructure. More specifically, ableism is what “disables” disabled people. In a world without ableism, disabled people would merely be individuals who possess variant traits. The 19th-century utopian novels of Charles Fourier depicted such a world, where human “brotherhood” was assumed rather than assigned, detached from any quantifiable metric of productive capacity.

The current iteration of ableism we live under is deeply tied to the capitalist system's bottomless lust for profit accumulation, labor exploitation, and the enforcement of rigid social hierarchies. In other words, while prior forms of ableism are understood to have existed long before the rise of capitalism, our contemporary conception of ableism is profoundly intermeshed with the logics of the economic base. This symbiotic relationship is particularly apparent when examining capitalism's maintenance of a “reserve” army of labor. When human labor is in high demand, people who were previously excluded from workforce participation are more likely to be hired. But these employees are often swiftly discarded and implicitly barred from formal wage labor when inevitable economic downturns—crises intrinsic to capitalism—dramatically shrink labor demand. Consequently, ableism manifests as one of the many forms of oppression that facilitate greater profit accumulation through the exploitation of marginalized communities. Due to this structural reality, the liberation of disabled people is impossible without the destruction of capitalism; likewise, capitalism cannot be considered fully destroyed until ableism too is dismantled. All veins of leftist thought should be united in at least recognizing the need to combat ableism and support the disabled community in the course of implementing the conscious ground-up redesign of society that a prerequisite for averting climate disaster.

Unlike most areas of socialist thought, primitivist ideology is inherently incompatible with disabled liberation. Although it is still a largely marginal viewpoint in most left-wing schools of thought, primitivism has a surface-level appeal that is likely to become more tempting as human suffering escalates under the mounting weight of the coming climate disasters. Under these dire circumstances, a cynical desire to destroy every trace of modern human development may prove quite alluring for some. While strong critique of technology and modernity is certainly merited in many respects, it is also crucial to remember that not all technologies facilitate the same types and degrees of oppression. Countless lives are entirely dependent on contemporary medicine and other recent innovations. There's real potential for envisioning a better future without

becoming a neo-Luddite. Some branches of leftist thought, such as “cybernetic” Marxists and similar proponents of fully automated production, are seeking approaches to retooling and reconfiguring production mechanisms in service of a better future. Such efforts point to a real potential for repurposing devices that were originally created for profit towards a socialist society predicated on ecological sustainability.

When practical realities are examined, it’s clear that a primitivist vision of the future is only achievable through fascist eugenics. This is especially evident in Kaczynski’s writings. In his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, Kaczynski writes,

“If the breakdown is sudden, many people will die, since the world’s population has become so overblown that it cannot even feed itself any longer without advanced technology. Even if the breakdown is gradual enough so that reduction of the population can occur more through lowering of the birth rate than through elevation of the death rate, the process of deindustrialization probably will be very chaotic and involve much suffering.”

On its face, this passage has a degree of sound internal logic. If the breakdown of industrial society is in fact inevitable, a world without efficient agriculture and basic medical services would indeed be a death sentence for billions of people. However, Kaczynski’s cynical pessimism is rooted more in his reactionary impulses than it is in an honest assessment of material reality. Crucially, Kaczynski’s argument in this passage is predicated on the notion of “overpopulation,” which is a myth belied by the realities of demographics, logistics, and productive capacity. There are not too many people, but there *is* a vastly unequal distribution of resources—thanks to capitalism. Individual consumer decisions can and do have large environmental impacts in the aggregate, but the largest individual carbon footprints are disproportionately concentrated within a small pool of wealthy people in Western countries. Rather than reaching a conclusion based on a sound analysis of present realities, Kaczynski’s beliefs on this subject are grounded in irrational fabrications, deriving in part from his contempt for the poor and disabled and marshaled in support of his misanthropic longing for global cataclysm.

Kaczynski’s political analysis also borrows heavily from 19th-century social Darwinism. In particular, Kaczynski writes,

“[I]t is certain that technology is creating for human beings a new physical and social environment radically different from the spectrum of environments to which natural selection has adapted the human race physically and psychologically. If man is not adjusted to this new environment by being artificially re-engineered, then he will be adapted to it through a long and painful process of natural selection. The former is far more likely than the latter.”

This passage’s emphasis on humanity’s supposed need to sculpt society around (Kaczynski’s fallacious conception of) our primordial roots amounts to a highly reductive understanding of human evolution. His motivated reasoning dismisses the evidence

that humans display overwhelming tendencies towards altruism and cooperation—when these natural bonds have not atrophied under the competitive conditions fomented by capitalism. And by creating a dichotomy between the natural and artificial, Kaczynski ignores the fact that the human brain’s boundless creativity and ingenuity is what has made it possible for us to engineer our social and physical environments. Though this transformational capability has of course been used for violent and destructive purposes on a multitude of occasions, our growing collective ability to mitigate death from disease and malnutrition is a fundamentally positive development.

Moreover, while Kaczynski dwells on fears about a future wherein people are genetically engineered to conform to the oppressive demands of a social system, he ignores the fact that his call to “return to nature” is itself a form of genetic engineering through artificial selection. In particular, he finds the notion of a world where millions die from lack of medical care to be less frightening than one where people change the composition of the human genome through other means. Nevertheless, critiques of Kaczynski’s perspective should take care to avoid imperialistic and chauvinistic readings of non-Western cultures that deliberately avoid the trappings of capitalistic modernity. In other words, it is crucial for us to respect indigenous cultures that still maintain societal practices dating back to, or deriving from, Neolithic hunter-gatherers. It’s bizarre to condemn other cultures as “backwards,” as if the longevity of a culture is somehow inversely proportional to its efficacy or value. Most ostensibly “advanced” Westerners are ignorant about the vast pools of knowledge that these communities possess—and the harms that our own practices inflict on us.

While critics of primitivist thought should be wary of reifying the colonialist mindset, it is also crucial to appreciate that subsets of Kaczynski’s current fandom are not known for their cultural sensitivity. In particular, online ecofascists have latched onto Kaczynski’s ideas and misanthropic persona. These types share his reactionary loathing for modernity and revel in the violent tactics he was willing to engage in to actualize his political agenda. While, in some of his writings, Kaczynski does denounce fascism, his primitivist politics are also fundamentally yoked to the ecofascist view of technology (and social justice) as forces that are perverting and undermining his acolytes’ precious, ahistorical, and incoherent notion of “Western civilization.” While violence is arguably a morally justified response to the horrors of oppression, the left is generally prudent and cautious about engaging in proactive force, due to the state’s monopoly on violence and the ever-present threat of repression. While nonviolent reactionary tendencies still play a crucial role in reinforcing the interests of capital, branches of fascist thought are free to be more cavalier, even fetishistic, about the bloodshed wrought by their historical antecedents. Consequently, while Kaczynski may insist that he does not want his politics repurposed in this manner, such developments remain an inexorable consequence of the fascistic mentality that undergirds his ideology.

Primitivist resentment towards left environmental organizing helps enable these reactionary impulses. This attitude is reflected in the writings of the Dark Mountain

Project, a collective that advocates for a contemporary articulation of Kaczynski's premises. In their manifesto, Dark Mountain writes,

"Today's environmentalists are more likely to be found at corporate conferences hymning the virtues of 'sustainability' and 'ethical consumption' than doing anything as naïve as questioning the intrinsic values of civilization. Capitalism has absorbed the greens, as it absorbs so many challenges to its ascendancy. A radical challenge to the human machine has been transformed into yet another opportunity for shopping."

Although this passage is an accurate critique of the recuperation that plagues neoliberal environmental activism, it erroneously ignores the far more radical strategies of established environmental justice organizing, which has paralleled the rise in ecosocialist thought. By failing to develop a more nuanced reading of the movement, The Dark Mountain Project exemplifies a reductive, purist demand for perfection among primitivists that only serves to reinforce a convenient artificial binary between the status quo and their destructive agenda.

Although the threat posed by climate change is apocalyptic, leftist thought has furnished humanity with a clear alternative: ecosocialism. More specifically, we can avoid Kaczynski's doomsday scenario through the deconstruction of capitalism, a humane strategy of degrowth, and the equitable distribution of resources. Unlike Kaczynski, ecosocialists understand that plenty of human beings can and do live in modern society while also maintaining small carbon footprint. And crucially, ecosocialist thought also recognizes that a handful of massive corporations and the inherent wastefulness of capitalism are largely responsible for our ongoing ecological disaster. (Typical of virulent, fascistic philosophies, Kaczynski's views declaims individuals and minority group as uniquely culpable and elides any rational systemic analysis that challenges existing power structures). In a system that is centered on human need and environmental sustainability, the lifestyles of wealthy people in the imperial core will change dramatically. But everyone will be adequately fed, and the number of people who have access to medically necessary healthcare will be drastically expanded. Forging this world will be one of the most difficult undertakings in human history, but *it is possible*. People are already building the foundations for this future in the here and now. In other words, you do not have to believe in luxury space communism to think that we can build a future where humanity survives climate apocalypse without devolving into murderous fascist eugenics.

So, why then are Kaczynski and his ilk in such a rush to condemn billions of people to certain death? In broad terms, they revel in these fantasies of human carnage because they buy into the fascist mythos of white supremacist and ableist purity. Kaczynski's own writings demonstrate his commitment to this violent ideology. In *Technological Slavery*, Kaczynski writes, "Take measures to exclude all leftists, as well as the assorted neurotics, lazies, incompetents, charlatans, and persons deficient in self-control who are

drawn to resistance movements in America today.” The underlying message here is that “degenerates” have no place in the world he hopes to build. Instead of recognizing the common thread of humanity we all share, Kaczynski sees those who do not possess normative traits as weak parasites who hold back people like himself, who are somehow more deserving of life.

Although Kaczynski claims that his politics are grounded solely in rational assessment of industrial society, his excessively nihilistic understanding of political economy demonstrates that his actual motives are more closely aligned with an impulse to scapegoat non-normative people for his personal failings and the alienation he has experienced under capitalism. The underpinnings of his ideology completely forego any appreciation for the joy and strength that can be derived from community and solidarity.

Our society is built from scaffolding that was forged in oppression, exploitation, and stratification. While cynical and pessimistic outlooks may be understandable, they are neither accurate nor productive. At a fundamental level, it is a mistake to assume that current circumstances predict future realities. The future is unwritten, and human beings are possessed of a profound social mutability. We all bear a multitude of emotional scars and flaws as a result of navigating the deep-seated indignities and inhumanities in our society, but we will always find healing through community. We may always find dignity and purpose in the struggle for collective liberation. We can and we must charge ahead and fight like hell for a world that, for all people, is worth living in.

Conor Arpwel is a writer, amateur graphic designer, and organizer. He is an advocate for accessibility and the disabled community in DSA. In his free time, he enjoys posting on Twitter @arpwel and making art.

The Ted K Archive

Conor Arpwel
The Ableist Logic of Primitivism
A Critique of “Ecoextremist” Thought
2018/12/30

<proteanmag.com/2018/12/30/ableist-logic-of-primitivism>

www.thetedkarchive.com