

Book Review: Industrial Society and Its Future

Dominik Tujmer

2022-05-26

Contents

The Psychology of Modern Leftism	3
Oversocialization	5
The Power Process	6
Sources of Social Problems	7
Disruption of the Power Process in Modern Society	9
Technology is a More Powerful Social Force Than the Aspiration for Freedom	10
Revolution is Easier Than Reform	12
Strategy	12

I'm writing this on a fast computer, sitting comfortably on a comfortable couch while drinking my coffee which was imported probably from Brazil, made with purified local water, which was boiled using an electrical stove top that doesn't emit pollutants into the air in my house. And the coffee mug is a very cheap, high-quality ceramic mug that has "Super Grandma" and a heart on it. The ceramic won't leach random harmful chemicals into my coffee because there's a giant body of institutions that sort of take care that this just isn't a thing that happens.

Continuing that line of thinking, why is my computer fast? There are complex and *intentional* causal chains that finish with "cheap and fast laptop", and I could go into an arbitrary amount of detail, but this is all to say that our modern industrial society is pretty good at what it does in comparison to previous societies.

Yet, **Industrial Society and Its Future**, also known as the **Unabomber Manifesto**, starts with:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.

In his ~~Twitter thread~~ manifesto, math professor Ted Kaczynski develops his entire philosophy for why everything that I listed in the introduction is unimportant, and why, overall, the modern industrial civilization is net bad. It appears that the seventeen years of bombings preceding his essay were the world's longest marketing campaign. Seventeen years is a long time to build up an audience. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published only two years after the *Unabomber Manifesto* and it has around 120 million copies sold. And J. K. Rowling has not, to my knowledge, been sending bombs for the 17 years before that to raise awareness. Maybe if Ted learned about how the industrial civilization works, he might have also learned a thing or two about marketing and PR.

Ted continues about the consequences of the industrial revolution:

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.

"Destabilized society" is such a vague term. What does that even mean? We'll find out more about the *specific* ways how our lives have become unfulfilling and undignified. Ted finishes his introduction and moves on to...

The Psychology of Modern Leftism

I have to admit that I was confused by this jump because I didn't understand what he meant by leftism. In my mind, leftism is roughly "trying to make society kinder,

more equitable and more progressive”. But it seems that the Unaboomer has a different type of definition: he is talking about people who suffer from feelings of inferiority and who are oversocialized:

By “feelings of inferiority” we mean not only inferiority feelings in the strict sense but a whole spectrum of related traits; low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, depressive tendencies, defeatism, guilt, self-hatred, etc. We argue that modern leftists tend to have some such feelings (possibly more or less repressed) and that these feelings are decisive in determining the direction of modern leftism.

Ok, here I can sort of see the point. I know a great number of activists (environmental, social justice) who follow roughly the same type. Their general vibe is being frustrated by (perceived) injustice. Ironically, kind of like Teddy here. But I mean, if injustice is actually there, then the feelings of frustration are at least justified, even maybe good. Like, if someone keeps taking your lunch, your feeling of frustration is no guarantee that you will stand up for yourself, but it’s at least something. It’s definitely better than saying “ok, I guess I will keep having my lunch taken”.

The disagreements between such activist types and more centrist (maybe more rationalist?) leaning types are:

- Is the injustice intentional and one-sided?
- What’s the actual scope of the injustice?
- Do we have a way of resolving it?
 - Also, will that way accidentally destroy the economy and kill millions of people? Because that would be kind of bad.

Trying to separate the discussion into fine granular threads is good because you can actually *figure out your disagreements*, but Uncle Ted whizzes right past that into:

When someone interprets as derogatory almost anything that is said about him (or about groups with whom he identifies) we conclude that he has inferiority feelings or low self-esteem.

Sure, there are some people like that. But that’s a strawman. Again, **if** there actually is injustice, then it is reasonable to be angry about derogatory statements about the victims of injustice, in particular when they come from privileged people who don’t have to experience that injustice. I would definitely be mad if someone told me simply to eat cake if I had no bread. According to Teddy Bear, I have low self-esteem. In reality, I have low calorie intake.

This is my general vibe with his text, and it's only getting worse throughout the reading: he simply states some *diagnosis* without any caveats, any explanation of base rates or context, and builds from there. However, he also sometimes does have a point. Like, it's very clear that rich, privileged leftists sometimes wear "luxury beliefs". It's also clear that there is that type of leftist who will gladly criticize some failing in Western society, but will make excuses for it in a non-Western society.

It is true that one can ask serious questions about the foundations of scientific knowledge and about how, if at all, the concept of objective reality can be defined. But it is obvious that modern leftist philosophers are not simply cool-headed logicians systematically analyzing the foundations of knowledge. They are deeply involved emotionally in their attack on truth and reality. They attack these concepts because of their own psychological needs. For one thing, their attack is an outlet for hostility, and, to the extent that it is successful, it satisfies the drive for power.

I don't think that leftists attack truth and reason, they attack their tribal enemies, and it just so happens that "truth and reason" are disputed ground.

Notice the masochistic tendency of leftist tactics. Leftists protest by lying down in front of vehicles, they intentionally provoke police or racists to abuse them, etc. These tactics may often be effective, but many leftists use them not as a means to an end but because they PREFER masochistic tactics. Self-hatred is a leftist trait.

...every suicide bomber fits this bill, much more than people who lie in front of vehicles. Does their self-sacrifice mean that they suffer from a feeling of inferiority?

I don't know why it's so hard to imagine people actually believing what they say they believe, and then explaining their actions through a combination of their beliefs and cultural norms for what's an appropriate action. It's true that people are drawn to tribal conflict. It is also true that people believe things. Discounting underlying beliefs makes it seem like people are fighting automatons who might install whatever as the cause of their conflict-seeking.

But what does any of this have to do with how industrial civilization is bad?

Oversocialization

The moral code of our society is so demanding that no one can think, feel and act in a completely moral way. For example, we are not supposed to hate anyone, yet almost everyone hates somebody at some time or other, whether he admits it to himself or not. Some people are so highly socialized that the attempt to think, feel and act morally imposes a severe burden on

them. In order to avoid feelings of guilt, they continually have to deceive themselves about their own motives and find moral explanations for feelings and actions that in reality have a non-moral origin. We use the term “oversocialized” to describe such people.

I’m not sure this is a thing even. “We are not supposed to hate anyone”... not really though? I mean, people won’t hold sermons with the message “hate is good”, but not only everyone hates someone, I have a feeling that it’s totally fine and accepted. So I guess he means “you hate person X, but you can’t just hate them for no reason, so you make up a political reason”. Okay, I can sort of see that. I know a lot of people who I really dislike, but it’s hard to express the *core* of my dislike, so I talk about random things that annoy me, even though I actually just don’t like them because of the way they walk and talk and look at me. If “oversocialization” is a name for “making up legible reasons for your actions/feelings because your feelings are illegible to you”, then yes, I agree that we have oversocialization in our society.

However, I disagree with the implicit attitude that it’s new or somehow worse today. If anything, describing how you feel is more popular than ever. Everyone’s going to therapy, and many people are posting their introspective monologues on social media. But we do have just... *more* things happening anyway, so you could hide your actual feelings in more layers of politics and ideology. So I’m kinda on the fence here. I guess I think that the problem of oversocialization is not new and not significantly more present than before, but separating feelings from political attitudes has become more complex because political attitudes are more complex.

But oversocialization seems to be not only that — it’s when an entire range of emotions is taken away from you by a society. Like, when you feel guilty for fantasizing about bad things, so you become incapable of fantasizing about them. Again, I don’t think this is anything new. If anything, the popularization of therapy has made it easier to express your true emotions without being ostracized by society. Not only therapy but the entire machinery of industrial society makes it much easier to unleash your Jungian Shadow without suffering devastating consequences. Just visit any anonymous comment section on the internet.

The Power Process

These first two chapters gave more context into what’s up with society, but as far as I understand, the actual “meat” of the argument is that industrial society disrupts the “power process”, which is:

1. You have some goals. (Not having goals = you’re not happy.)
2. You make an effort to achieve them. (Not having to make an effort = you’re not happy.)

3. You attain at least some of your goals. (Not having any success = you're not happy.)
4. (optional) You were autonomous in how you achieved your goal. (Not being able to decide your approach = you're not happy.)

The claim is that these precise steps are necessary for people to be happy and satisfied, and that industrial civilization is disruptive to them. Therefore, industrial civilization *delenda est*.

I have two disagreements:

1. The “power process” probably doesn’t cover everything required for human happiness. If you can imagine someone following all these steps and still being unhappy and unfulfilled — even if in a primitive society — then it’s obviously not enough. And I think that if you looked at people in a primitive society and observed the power process, you’d still see a desire to do more, be more.
2. Industrial society doesn’t disrupt the power process. You’re just not ambitious enough.

Let’s say that you are not performing any “surrogate” activities. You’re living in 10,000 BC. Your goal is to get food. You go hunt and expend a lot of effort into killing a deer. You manage to kill it and bring it to your tribe. Success and autonomy, a feast! A couple of days later your child dies from an illness. Sure, your entire tribe has built a lot of psychological coping mechanisms like telling stories about your child now living with the spirits and so on. But if you could push a magical button that makes your child not just randomly die, you’d do it.

Modern industrial civilization is just a series of such button pushes.

All these giant complex inhuman systems we’ve built are here because we are just trying to make our lives better. We’re trying not to die from a random illness, we’re trying to make it easier to build shelter, to get to places.

Does solving these problems make it impossible to be happy because we now don’t need to expend any effort towards *actual* activities, only surrogate ones? Only if you’re very unambitious. Like, if the ideal of life is to get born, then try to get food for your entire life, and then die, sure, modern civilization sucks because it’s pretty easy to get food. However, if you are trying to build something bigger, if you want to peer into the past, or into the future, or visit distant stars — then things are still very, very hard.

Sources of Social Problems

Among the abnormal conditions present in modern industrial society are excessive density of population, isolation of man from nature, excessive

rapidity of social change and the breakdown of natural small-scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe.

These things are somewhat true. Life can be disorienting and it's true that extended families have lost their role in social life. This is one place where I think it may be beneficial to RETVRN to tradition. Fortunately, the housing market seems to be solving it for us. With skyrocketing prices, people are moving into less dense areas and, also, you can't easily move out of your family's home. Extended family again!

a technological society HAS TO weaken family ties and local communities if it is to function efficiently [...] Suppose that a public official or a corporation executive appoints his cousin, his friend or his co-religionist to a position rather than appointing the person best qualified for the job. He has permitted personal loyalty to supersede his loyalty to the system, and that is "nepotism" or "discrimination," both of which are terrible sins in modern society. [...] an advanced industrial society can tolerate only those small-scale communities that are emasculated, tamed and made into tools of the system.

This is all true and Good Actually. You want to have a norm where the most qualified person is put to the job, not someone's cousin. I don't see how this is a problem. Things work better when qualified people are operating things, therefore put qualified people behind the wheel. One specific thing to note here is that Kaboomski is talking about a general weakening of family/tribal structures. But there is no reason to suppose that you can't have a society where people have strong familial relations, but the cultural norm is that you can't be a nepotist with the questions of the state.

We contend that the most important cause of social and psychological problems in modern society is the fact that people have insufficient opportunity to go through the power process in a normal way.

...all of this seems untrue to me, except in two aspects: working "bullshit" jobs and being separated from a natural environment. Bullshit jobs take a particular toll on the psyche because you know you're doing deeply unimportant work. I don't know how I'd quantify this, but it has to do something bad to you. And this comes hand in hand with the separation from the natural environment, which includes physical movement and social contact. There definitely is a sense in which we are like rats in a maze, doing pointless tasks for rewards in an artificial, unstimulating environment. But you know... just go out. I mean, you can (you literally can) follow Theodore's footsteps and go live somewhere remote. Nobody's going to stop you. Society's default is that you're provided with the essentials and that you play a role in the economic machine, but you can just choose to not do that. I'm usually not a big fan of "just do X" type of advice because it's regularly not that easy — you need to have a different society to

be able to do X. But in this specific case, rebelling against the artificial defaults our society sets... is actually easy. You can literally opt out. Or opt out partially. It seems weird to criticize industrial society for its many indignities when everyone has a choice how much modernity they want in their life.

Disruption of the Power Process in Modern Society

the power process is disrupted in our society through a deficiency of real goals and a deficiency of autonomy in the pursuit of goals

I'm just repeating myself, but trying to make humans a multi-planetary immortal species is just as "real" as trying to find some food when you're hungry. And trying to build a successful startup is also "real". And trying to build an extension to your house is also "real". There are just a lot of real goals!

It is true that primitive man is powerless against some of the things that threaten him; disease for example. But he can accept the risk of disease stoically. It is part of the nature of things, it is no one's fault, unless it is the fault of some imaginary, impersonal demon. But threats to the modern individual tend to be MAN-MADE. They are not the results of chance but are IMPOSED on him by other persons whose decisions he, as an individual, is unable to influence. Consequently he feels frustrated, humiliated and angry.

It is a little weird that someone who sends bombs to people, and sees these people not as people but as pawns of an inhuman optimizing process, makes a distinction between human and non-human threats to the individual. Some threats carry a human face, some don't — what difference does it make?

It's overall also weird to me that our spicy tinkerer finds it preferable to have **less** security but more illusion of control, than **more** security and less illusion of control.

People have many transitory drives or impulses that are necessarily frustrated in modern life, hence fall into group 3. One may become angry, but modern society cannot permit fighting. In many situations it does not even permit verbal aggression. When going somewhere one may be in a hurry, or one may be in a mood to travel slowly, but one generally has no choice but to move with the flow of traffic and obey the traffic signals. One may want to do one's work in a different way, but usually one can work only according to the rules laid down by one's employer. In many other ways as well, modern man is strapped down by a network of rules and regulations (explicit or implicit) that frustrate many of his impulses and thus interfere with the power process. Most of these regulations cannot be dispensed with, because they are necessary for the functioning of industrial society.

Yes, we have made acceptable ways to do things. E.g. if you want to fight, go to an MMA gym. Also, fighting still happens in the same way as it did throughout history, so it's unclear if modern society has done anything to reduce fighting. But these acceptable ways are sometimes stupid and fail spectacularly. And these acceptable ways are the cost of running a complex civilization.

Legally there is nothing to prevent us from going to live in the wild like primitive people or from going into business for ourselves. But in practice there is very little wild country left, and there is room in the economy for only a limited number of small business owners.

Most people would give up living in a completely primitive way. In fact, many actually primitive tribes do in fact do that. That's because industrial civilization is overall preferable!

Technology is a More Powerful Social Force Than the Aspiration for Freedom

Overall, I find that Ted Kaczynski makes many good points, but I disagree with the conclusion. Many of the criticisms are actually valid, and it is true that you can't really reform industrial society so that it works just as well as a pre-industrial society. You kind of have to take the bad parts with the good parts. You *can* reform some parts, but these parts aren't the parts that Ted is interested in.

A good point that Bang Bang Teddy makes is about cars:

1. You have no car and you have freedom to walk everywhere, at whichever speed.
2. You can get a car, so you get to places faster.
3. Places get rebuilt to accommodate cars.
4. Everyone now needs a car to get places.
5. Cars need to be regulated, which means that both car and non-car movement is also regulated, which means that your freedom has drastically decreased.

All of the above is true. The best places for freedom of movement are still old places where cars can't easily penetrate, for example very old European towns. And it's really not that easy to solve that problem. I'm starting to understand his point about technological encroachment on freedom. You can easily live a primitive life if you just go out into the wild. But you can't keep your friends or family, you can't keep working as a carpenter in your town etc. That is — you can't opt out of some things, and have to instead adapt to them (the system definitely won't adapt to you).

While technological progress AS A WHOLE continually narrows our sphere of freedom, each new technical advance CONSIDERED BY ITSELF appears to be desirable.

As a whole, it narrows your freedom in the sense that you can't walk to the store if you're in a US town that sucks. But you can go visit other places, or move to places which don't use cars. I think technology, as a whole, narrows your freedom in a very narrow way. And it widens your freedom in a more general way. It's just always a tradeoff, and I'm not convinced that pre-modern humans were any more "free" than we are today. It's just different types of oppression, and I find that whether oppression carries a human or inhuman face is... irrelevant.

Few people will resist the introduction of a genetic technique that eliminates a hereditary disease. It does no apparent harm and prevents much suffering. Yet a large number of genetic improvements taken together will make the human being into an engineered product rather than a free creation of chance

Yes.

In general, Primitive Ted would prefer polio to the Borg, and I honestly can't say for sure which of those sound worse. They both sound pretty bad when you consider the worst possible outcomes. And we sorta know what's the worst possible outcome for an anarcho-primitivist society: you just die gruesomely and humanity doesn't reach the stars. The potential upside is: you live a fulfilled life as a hunter or berry collector or fisherman, have children, none of them die before you, you die, and humanity still doesn't reach the stars. So, overall, very limited upside, pretty limited but definite downside.

On the other hand, a transhumanist society has almost unlimited upside and almost unlimited downside. It could really go really really well, and it could really go catastrophically, S-risk bad. And we just can't tell which way the distribution (of both probability and possible badness) skews. So the overall ideological question is are we ready to risk it? Will we risk freedom (and much more than whether you can walk without traffic regulations) and trust that we can reform it on-the-go so that people don't suffer while we're reaching for the stars?

But it is NOT in the interest of the system to preserve freedom or small-group autonomy. On the contrary, it is in the interest of the system to bring human behavior under control to the greatest possible extent.

Just a short note of disagreement here: this doesn't follow. It is in the interest of the system to control human behavior to the extent necessary to make the system function. In this sense, "the System" is a satisficer, not a maximizer. Nobody is walking with an implant in their brain that makes it impossible to cross a road on a red light. So that's one reason to be more optimistic of the prospects of reforming the system.

Revolution is Easier Than Reform

We hope we have convinced the reader that the system cannot be reformed in such a way as to reconcile freedom with technology.

You have not.

Strategy

The technophiles are taking us all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown.

Utterly reckless? Maybe. Into the unknown? For sure. But it is pretty hard to see electricity or plumbing and conclude that these things have definitely made life *worse* for people. There's definitely a danger lurking in the future — e.g. an artificial super-intelligence that's not aligned with human values — but returning back to tribalism is no solution at all.

Ted lists how this anti-tech pro-Nature ideology should be popularized:

We have no illusions about the feasibility of creating a new, ideal form of society. Our goal is only to destroy the existing form of society.

and

On the more sophisticated level the ideology should address itself to people who are intelligent, thoughtful and rational. The object should be to create a core of people who will be opposed to the industrial system on a rational, thought-out basis

and

On a second level, the ideology should be propagated in a simplified form that will enable the unthinking majority to see the conflict of technology vs. nature in unambiguous terms.

This part is interesting and makes me think about how the publication of this manifesto may have actually affected many anti-progress types that post on Twitter:

History is made by active, determined minorities, not by the majority, which seldom has a clear and consistent idea of what it really wants. [...] Any kind of social conflict helps to destabilize the system, but one should be careful about what kind of conflict one encourages. The line of conflict should be drawn between the mass of the people and the power-holding

elite of industrial society (politicians, scientists, upper-level business executives, government officials, etc.). It should NOT be drawn between the revolutionaries and the mass of the people. For example, it would be bad strategy for the revolutionaries to condemn Americans for their habits of consumption. Instead, the average American should be portrayed as a victim of the advertising and marketing industry, which has suckered him into buying a lot of junk that he doesn't need and that is very poor compensation for his lost freedom. Either approach is consistent with the facts. It is merely a matter of attitude whether you blame the advertising industry for manipulating the public or blame the public for allowing itself to be manipulated. As a matter of strategy one should generally avoid blaming the public.

Ok, you manage to destroy industrial civilization. What happens then?

So it is clear that if the industrial system were once thoroughly broken down, refrigeration technology would quickly be lost. The same is true of other organization-dependent technology. And once this technology had been lost for a generation or so it would take centuries to rebuild it, just as it took centuries to build it the first time around. Surviving technical books would be few and scattered. An industrial society, if built from scratch without outside help, can only be built in a series of stages: You need tools to make tools to make tools to make tools ... A long process of economic development and progress in social organization is required. And, even in the absence of an ideology opposed to technology, there is no reason to believe that anyone would be interested in rebuilding industrial society. The enthusiasm for "progress" is a phenomenon peculiar to the modern form of society, and it seems not to have existed prior to the 17th century or thereabouts.

This is true, and also false. You would get people in the same state where they were before. This means that they would have the same types of problems they had before. And, depending on their luck, they would resolve these problems again, by using — technology. So the most you can do is postpone technological progress. Things *will* get rebuilt.

Would society EVENTUALLY develop again toward an industrial-technological form? Maybe, but there is no use in worrying about it, since we can't predict or control events 500 or 1,000 years in the future. Those problems must be dealt with by the people who will live at that time.

To me, all of this simply shows a lack of ambition and no great vision. Of course you should worry what's going to happen a thousand years into the future!

The entire manifesto finishes with yet another criticism of leftism and why leftists shouldn't be allowed into the revolutionary ranks, how rugged individualism + love for Nature should be the prevailing criterion, and some reservations around the professor's epistemic status. I am generally not a fan of the work, but I'm not a hater either. I think that there are definitely some great points. There *is* a definite tendency to reduce everyday freedom. We simply accept it as a cost of the benefits.

Depending on how far out you look, technology may increase freedom. For example, right now you don't have freedom to go to Mars in any sense of that word, but in the future you might. Hell, you might become a space pirate! The Earth could be turned into a primitivist reservation, a planet where no non-local technology may be brought. Of course that is not acceptable to Freedom Club because that sort of freedom is given, not taken, so it's not actually freedom.

But whatever way you look at it, at a long enough time scale, technology **is** the stronger force than anything else. Technological progress **will** happen, so any sort of anti-tech revolution (not reform) will fail in about a couple of hundred of years. Probably sooner because you can't destroy tech globally, so you'll get imports from regions that weren't destroyed. The best you can is try to guide it away from terrible outcomes. So it's good to look at examples where we have managed to do that:

- In the Netherlands, cars dominated the streets in the 70s. But now bicycles dominate the streets.
- There seem to be no terrible consequences of having electricity and plumbing in buildings.
- We have banned pesticides like DDT or refrigerants like R-22, and have in fact banned many harmful things. And instead of coming back, non-harmful or less harmful alternatives appear.

There are much more, these three are just off the top of my head. Technology will keep advancing by leaps and bounds, simultaneously encroaching on our freedom and expanding the freedom in the future. It is up to us to tame the tech, and to cut out the most harmful parts. It's not just that we can do this, we must do this. We don't really have a choice. But — and this is important — we can do this.

The Ted K Archive

Dominik Tujmer

Book Review: Industrial Society and Its Future

2022-05-26

<<https://blog.d11r.eu/industrial/>>

Author correspondence: blog@d11r.eu

www.thetedkarchive.com