

“Evil the Natural Way”

**The Chimerical Utopias of Henry David Thoreau and
Theodore John Kaczynski**

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[Abstract]

This article contrasts the lives of poet and essayist Henry David Thoreau and convicted “Unabomber” Theodore John Kaczynski, focusing particularly upon their written work. Using Thoreau’s *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience” and Kaczynski’s “Industrial Society and Its Future” as a foundation for analysis, this article contrasts the authors’ views on industrialization, on autonomy and self-sufficiency, and on the appropriate deference to law. Although their lives followed different trajectories, both men formulated similar worldviews. Both quit society, going into the wilderness to live deliberately and to think. Both wrote passionately about the evils of contemporary society and urged people to create authentic lives through simplification. Both were skeptical about the moral authority of law. Indeed, Kaczynski’s murderous bombing campaign can be interpreted as the culmination of many of the principles previously articulated by Thoreau.

Introduction: Voices Crying Out in the Wilderness

“There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life. No—in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way.”

—H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1970, pp. 207–08

In late March of 1845, 27-year old Henry David Thoreau quit society and went to the woods. Convinced that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” and sickened by their apathy; persuaded that men were enslaved by their possessions, and troubled by their rapacious materialism; yet ultimately believing that an authentic life was attainable, Thoreau used a borrowed axe to construct a squatter’s cabin upon the banks of Walden Pond. He spent 26 months there, living at the margins of civilization, thinking and living and writing. The experiences of these months led Thoreau to write two seminal works in the American canon: his 1866 essay, “Civil Disobedience,” and his 1854 book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. In turns poetic, philosophical, critical, and meditative, *Walden* is a declaration of personal independence, an articulation of the transcendental ideal, and — ultimately — a utopian manifesto. Although the book was not commercially successful in Thoreau’s lifetime, *Walden* established Thoreau as an icon, and etched his name into the pantheon of American heroes. The Columbia Encyclopedia suggests that “Thoreau’s quiet, one-man revolution in living at Walden has become a symbol of the willed integrity of human beings, their inner freedom, and their ability to build their own lives” (2004).

Thoreau, however, is not the only American to quit society and to retreat into the solitude of the wild. In June of 1971, 29-year old Theodore John Kaczynski purchased a 1.4 acre parcel of land and constructed a modest cabin four miles south of Lincoln, Montana. Convinced that technology inevitably stripped people of their autonomy, and fearing that technology could not be stopped by rational means; frustrated by social institutions that denied people essential human dignity, and convinced that conventional social and political mechanisms could not rectify the situation; Kaczynski — like Thoreau — isolated himself at the margins of society, thinking and living and writing. In his years in the wild, Kaczynski, it is believed, wrote one highly influential work: *Industrial Society and Its Future* (1995). Quickly dubbed “the Unabomber Manifesto” by the FBI, *Industrial Society and Its Future* is a dense, opaque essay of

sociopolitical criticism; like Thoreau's *Walden*, it, too, is a declaration of independence, an articulation of a philosophical vision, and an ardent outline for a perceived utopia. But Kaczynski did much more than write.

While he lived in the wilderness of Montana, Kaczynski also conducted a 17-year campaign of terror, sending letter bombs to academics and technophiles, killing three individuals and wounding 23 others (Luke, 1996, p. 81). The 18-year investigation to find him, "America's most-wanted serial killer," was the longest and costliest manhunt in FBI history (Douglas and Olshaker, 1996) but ultimately, it was not detective ingenuity that identified Kaczynski as the Unabomber — it was Kaczynski's own brother, David (Chase, 2003, p. 21).

These two men — Thoreau and Kaczynski — are an interesting dichotomy. While Thoreau is *famous* for his life and his writing, Kaczynski — now serving four consecutive life terms and 30 years in a supermax prison (Mello, 1999; Oleson, 2004) — is *infamous*. In the popular understanding, Thoreau towers as a philosopher-poet and hero while Kaczynski is demonized as a madman and a villain (Duffy, 1996; Morse, 1996; Survivors Condemn, 1998). Thoreau and Kaczynski, however, are not as antithetical as the public might like to believe. Both men were exceptionally intelligent, Harvard educated, and solitary by nature. Both were deeply disappointed by society's failings — particularly its obsession with material goods — and both championed freedom, autonomy, and independence. Both turned their backs on teaching careers and retreated to relative isolation, building small cabins on the edges of small towns, eking out lives hallmarked by simplicity and self-sufficiency. Both men emphasized the importance of wild nature and undeveloped land. Both men wrote, and wrote well; both men were anarchists, were suspicious of the authority of law, and believed that higher laws should be served when man-made laws were incompatible with them; and both men were eventually incarcerated and labeled as criminals. There are, of course, essential differences between the two men but in many ways the criminal acts of Ted Kaczynski are consistent with the ideals of Henry Thoreau.

Walden; or, Life in the Woods

“Nineteenth century American society had an optimistic and self confident tone...”

—T.J. Kaczynski, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, 1995, ¶56

There is widespread agreement that *Walden* is a paragon of American literature (see e.g. Anderson, 1973; Paul, 1962; White, 1954). Sayre (1992) agrees that it is an important book but notes that it is also difficult. “Walden is a great book, but it is also a hard one” (p. 1). Sayre is right: *Walden* is something of a puzzle. It is not a novel, poem, or play. It has neither plot nor story line, and although it is based on Thoreau’s life at Walden Pond, it is not an autobiography. It possesses some characteristics of a sermon, of a political tract, and of a naturalist’s account. It remains a volume without a genre, although over the years, a great deal of ink has been spilled in the attempt to definitively categorize the book.

Thoreau addresses his readers very directly, offering them advice, hoping to provoke them into thought and action. He does so, dividing *Walden* into 18 chapters, covering varied topics such as “sounds” (Chapter Four), “the ponds” (Chapter Nine), and “brute neighbors” (Chapter Twelve). A great deal of the book is a meditation on the majesty of untamed Nature. With a watchful eye and a golden pen, Thoreau fills *Walden* with eloquent passages about nature:

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by two and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fish hawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither; and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country (Thoreau, 1970, p. 246).

But there is more to *Walden* than a poetic celebration of the woods of Walden Pond. The book is also a self-help book, a how-to manual, and an exhortation to simplify our lives and liberate ourselves from servitude to our possessions. Horrified that “men have become the tools of their tools” (Thoreau, 1970, p. 175), Thoreau went to the

woods to determine if a more-authentic life was in some way possible. His 26-month hermitage upon the banks of Walden Pond was intended as an experiment in living. In an oft-quoted passage, Thoreau explains exactly what he hoped to determine on those wooded shores:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion (Thoreau, 1970, p. 222).

In order to ascertain if what he was living was *life*, Thoreau borrowed an axe and in late March of 1845, he went to Walden Pond and constructed a squatter's cabin with his own hands (Thoreau, 1970, p. 177). He describes the construction of his rough-hewn shelter in great detail, from the selection of a building site about one and a half miles south of Concord, Massachusetts (pp. 217–18), to the purchase of a shanty he cannibalized for building materials (p. 180) to the digging of a six-by-seven foot cellar (p. 181), to the construction of the walls and roof (p. 181). Of his finished product, Thoreau wrote:

I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-foot posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite (p. 185).

In addition to describing the physical construction of his cabin, Thoreau also provides his reader with a detailed financial account of the endeavor. With an exactitude that could satisfy the most demanding IRS auditor, Thoreau balances his expenses and revenues to the penny (e.g., pp. 186, 190, 194, 195). He does so in order to prove that it is possible to live — and to live well, albeit modestly — without enslaving oneself to an occupation that crushes the human spirit.

Thoreau claims that people labor, subjecting themselves to backbreaking work, because they believe it is *necessary* to have a grand and well-furnished house, fashionable new clothing, and a well-stocked larder. They do not realize that, in slaving to attain these things, people become possessed by their possessions. Accordingly, Thoreau pities the farmer who, through sacrifice, obtains a house, only to learn that “he may not be

the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him” (Thoreau, 1970, p. 172). Once saddled with property, many owners find themselves unable to sell it, and their homes become cages. “[O]nly death will set them free” (p. 172). Our homes are tombs and mausoleums, Thoreau argues, purchased by the unhappy sweat of decades; our fields and farms are graves, and farmers begin digging them for themselves on the very day that they are born (p. 147).

To throw off these shackles, Thoreau advocates the divestiture of material goods. By consuming less, we shall spend less; and because we shall spend less, we will not need to work as much, or as hard. Thoreau invites us to adopt a simple, vegetarian diet (pp. 196–99), believes that most furniture is unnecessary (p. 199), and cautions that we should be suspicious of any endeavor that requires a new suit of clothes (p. 163). Thoreau claims that by working as an occasional day laborer, he could live comfortably (though modestly) by doing just six weeks of work per year (p. 203). It was a better life, he claims, than the strained existence he maintained as a schoolteacher.

I have thoroughly tried school-keeping, and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain (pp. 203–04).

But by governing his appetites, Thoreau could keep his time. Saddened by the modern man who “has no time to be anything but a machine” (p. 148), Thoreau set out to prove that a better life was possible. Six weeks of work per year: the remainder of his life remained his own.

The quintessential Mertonian rebel (Merton, 1968), Thoreau rejects society’s allegiance to consumerism, and embraces an altogether different goal: freedom (Thoreau, 1970, p. 204). He seizes up the freedom to study the classics (pp. 231–233), the freedom to spend time in nature and to see through the open eyes of the poet and the naturalist (pp. 419–20), and the freedom to pursue deeper truths (pp. 229–30). Thoreau writes of “economy,” but in his view, these freedoms are the things with real value. More than love, more than money, more than fame, Thoreau ached for the truth (p. 445). And he believed that freedom would allow him to better obtain it. By rejecting the necessity of earning and acquiring, and by seeing the possibilities of life through a different lens, Thoreau ventured outside his tribe. Functionally, he lived in an altogether different world from his contemporaries in the town of Concord, just one and a half miles away (p. 263).

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia’s

Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe (pp. 219–20).

Thoreau was not physically isolated from his peers. He had neighbors only a mile away (p. 262), regularly heard the thunder and howl of the railroad (p. 250), and at one point describes viewing 100 men cutting ice just outside his window (pp. 416, 418). Thoreau was not *physically* isolated, but he inhabited a different philosophical universe from his contemporaries. Thoreau scholar Philip Van Doren Stern suggests:

As far as most Concordians were concerned, Thoreau was ... cold, proud, antisocial, indifferent to public opinion, a man who could say no much more easily than yes, a creature who preferred the solitude of the fields to the best of whatever town had to offer (Van Doren Stern, 1970a, p. 19).

An outsider among them, Thoreau challenged their assumptions, flouted their conventions, and violated their norms. He was iconoclastic. And like many iconoclasts before him (e.g. Socrates, Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc), Thoreau's disregard for the customs and rules of society precipitated his incarceration. In *Walden*, he briefly describes his arrest in late July 1846:

One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler's, I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the State which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle, at the door of its senate-house. I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society (Thoreau, 1970, p. 301).

Thoreau describes this event in greater detail in his influential 1866 essay, "Civil Disobedience."

Civil Disobedience

“It may be that the conscience of mankind is a stronger force for good than all the laws on the statute books.”

—P. Van Doren Stern, 1970b, p. 453

Thoreau lectured on the subject of his imprisonment in January of 1848, scarcely two years after he had been arrested and jailed for refusing to pay his poll tax. A copy of his lecture was published under the title, “Resistance to Civil Government,” in 1849, but the work was not titled as “Civil Disobedience” until it was published posthumously in 1866 (Van Doren Stern, 1970b, p. 452).

Thoreau’s July 1846 arrest was not the first time he had refused to pay a tax. He describes a previous episode in which the state demanded money from him to support the clergyman of a church that Thoreau had never attended. He writes, “I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it” (Thoreau, 1970, p. 468). In July of 1846, however, no one else came to his immediate aid, and Thoreau was jailed for one night.

The conditions of his confinement were not particularly severe. He describes his whitewashed cell as “the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably the neatest apartment in town” (p. 470). His cellmate, a man accused of burning down a barn, was described as “a first-rate fellow” (p. 470), and was permitted to go out, unsupervised, to work in the hayfields (p. 473). These aspects of his account are prosaic but much of Thoreau’s description is lofty and high-minded. Reflecting upon the thick stone walls of the jail, he concludes that it is not the prison walls that separate him from his contemporaries. “I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was” (p. 468). As far as Thoreau was concerned, *he* was free and beyond the reach of the state (p. 468). It was only his body — his flesh and blood and bones — that could be locked up (p. 469). And Thoreau was not embarrassed to be locked up. Rather, he was proud of his confinement. Although the story in which Emerson asked Thoreau, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” and in which Thoreau answered by asking, “Waldo, why are you *not* in here?” is apocryphal (Van Doren Stern, 1970b, p. 451), Thoreau’s essay *does* declare that, “[u]nder a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (Thoreau, 1970, p. 465).

Thoreau believes that a government of laws is, at best, an expedient means to an end (p. 455). But sometimes the laws of government are unjust. And because these unjust laws do exist, Thoreau reasons, we must not follow our laws blindly:

I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right... Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice (pp. 456–57).

Thoreau believes that there are three kinds of people. The first group, encompassing the bulk of the population, is well meaning but apathetic. They are patrons of virtue, and “[t]here are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man” (p. 460). They may oppose injustice in principle (p. 459) but they lack the moral courage to stand against it, and obey law blindly, for right or for wrong. “The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies” (p. 457). These individuals do not use their judgment or their moral sense at all, and therefore have the same worth as horses and dogs. The second group uses their intellects. Legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders serve the state with their heads. But in so doing, they do not make moral distinctions, and are — Thoreau says — as likely to wind up serving the Devil (although without intending to do so) as serving God. Only a rare few serve with both head and heart. But the state cannot distinguish its friends from its foes (p. 469), and it typically regards these most-faithful allies as its enemies. “A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and *men*, serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly regarded as enemies by it” (p. 457, italics in original). Members of this elect group — *men* — are an endangered species in Thoreau’s America.

O for a man who is a *man*, and, as my neighbor says, has a bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through! Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large. How many *men* are there to a square thousand miles in this country? Hardly one (p. 461, italics in original).

What makes a *man*? Thoreau believes that a *man* is one who acts from principle, who is sufficiently awake to perceive right action and who is sufficiently courageous to perform right action (p. 462), even though it may be denounced as evil by the state. He writes:

Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine (p. 462, italics in original)

Thoreau acknowledges that channels and mechanisms exist to implement social change, but rejects them as inefficient. “They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to” (p. 463). Then he frames the question in this way: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (p. 462).

Thoreau believes the answer is obvious: the man of conscience breaks bad laws because obeying them, even temporarily, would necessitate his complicity in injustice.

The essence of civil disobedience, then, lies in this simple rule: Be party to no evil, even if the law commands it of you.

Industrial Society and Its Future:

“There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root”

—H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1970, p. 209

As far as the public is concerned, convicted Unabomber Theodore John Kaczynski was party to a number of evil acts. On January 22, 1998, Kaczynski formally pleaded guilty to 13 federal bombing offenses and acknowledged responsibility for 16 bombings that took place between May 1978 and April 1995 (Sentencing Memorandum, 1998). While Kaczynski never acknowledged writing the now-infamous Unabomber Manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future* (see Chase, 2003, p. 383 n. 85), there are good reasons to believe that Kaczynski is the author of the document. Content analyses of the essay demonstrate striking linguistic similarities to Kaczynski’s previous written work (Chaski, 1998; Foster, 1998), and drafts of the manuscript were discovered in his mountain cabin when FBI agents raided his home on April 3, 1996 (Corey, 2000, p. 171; Unabomber Timeline, 2004).

It is true that there are significant differences between the Kaczynski who penned *Industrial Society and Its Future* and the Kaczynski who built bombs and incendiary devices in remote forests. The Kaczynski who wrote the essay is a revolutionary who is committed to the use of instrumental violence to realize a benevolent social objective (Kaczynski, 1995, f 96), while the Kaczynski who sent letter bombs to academics and administrators acted upon craven revenge fantasies. In his 1971 diaries, Kaczynski wrote, “My motive for doing what I am going to do is simply personal revenge. I do not expect to accomplish anything by it” (Sentencing Memorandum, 1998). The Kaczynski who wrote the essay was a champion of wild nature (e.g. Kaczynski, 1995, f 184), while the Kaczynski who built and mailed letter bombs mocked such sentimental environmentalism in his private diaries:

I believe in nothing ... I don’t even believe in the cult of nature-worshippers or wildernessworshippers. (I am perfectly ready to litter in parts of the woods that are of no use to me — I often throw cans in logged-over areas or in places much frequented by people; I don’t find wilderness particularly healthy physically; I don’t hesitate to poach.) (Sentencing Memorandum, 1998).

Most journalists (e.g. Duffy, 1996; Gibbs, 1996), criminologists (e.g. Davidson, 1997; Douglas and Olshaker, 1996), and legal scholars (e.g. Mello, 1999) have focused upon

Kaczynski as the Unabomber. Everyone wants to discuss the genius that became a serial murderer, and with few exceptions (e.g. Luke, 1996; Corey, 2000), no one wants to discuss Kaczynski as author and social revolutionary. Here, however, it is the defiant, utopian vision of *Industrial Society and Its Future* that is our focus.

Sayre (1992) suggests that Thoreau's *Walden* is a difficult piece of writing. And so it is. So, too, is Kaczynski's manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*. Kaczynski's dense essay lacks the graceful poetry of Thoreau's *Walden*, and proceeds with a dogged determination, advancing from paragraph to paragraph like a stubborn mathematical proof. *Industrial Society* is not difficult because it employs particularly novel or innovative concepts. Indeed, "[e]xcept for the call to violence, its message was ordinary and unoriginal" (Chase, 2003, p. 89). Kaczynski's substantive arguments had been articulated elsewhere in many forms (e.g. Commoner, 1971; Ellul, 1964; Gore, 1992; Schumacher, 1973). Notions such as "crowding increases stress and aggression" (f 48) or "technology advances with great rapidity and threatens freedom" (f 130) appear to us today as time-worn cliches and truisms.

The opacity of *Industrial Society* does not inhere in its use of jargon or stratospheric vocabulary words, either. On the contrary, Corey (2000) suggests that the essay eludes the grasp of most readers because it struggles to convey such expansive and nuanced ideas with such pedestrian language. He argues that Kaczynski "understands the complexity of the ideas and tries to compress them into language so simple it cannot carry the weight" (p. 174). Corey also notes that the structure of the essay is awkward, leaping from a well-written introduction into a sudden digression on leftist psychology, but he concludes that the core of the argument is sound (p. 158, n.2). Certainly, the essay is intellectually rigorous and socially important. Indeed, the work is *so* important that Ted Kaczynski committed himself to 17 years of murder and terrorism to successfully extort its publication into the *Washington Post*. He writes:

If we had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted. If they had been accepted and published, they probably would not have attracted many readers, because it's more fun to watch the entertainment put out by the media than to read a sober essay. Even if these writings had had many readers, most of these readers would soon have forgotten what they had read as their minds were flooded by the mass of material to which the media expose them. In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people (Kaczynski, 1995, f 96).

Kaczynski murdered three people and maimed numerous others to increase interest in this essay. What message could possibly justify such suffering? What could he have to say that would warrant such violence? Interestingly, the message of the essay echoes faintly of Thoreau's (1970, p. 222) call of "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" In

Industrial Society, Kaczynski argues that the Industrial Revolution has accelerated the pace of modern life, enslaving people to technology, carving out a dismal landscape of anomie and apathy. How has this happened? Kaczynski claims that human beings have a biological need for a “power process” (f 33). To satisfy one’s need for power, an individual must have goals, must exert effort in the attainment of their goals, and must have a reasonable chance of attaining their goals (f 33). But in modern society, only minimal effort is needed to satisfy biological needs (f 40), leaving many people wanting and unsatisfied, seeking other mechanisms to satisfy their need for power. Some people focus on attaining wealth or status; others engage in scientific or artistic pursuits; and others find a sense of personal power by identifying with powerful collective groups. These, however, are *surrogate* activities, and cannot satisfy the need for the power process in a truly meaningful way (f 40–41). To find *real* fulfillment, people must be able to satisfy their biological needs as individuals (or as part of a small group). He argues that “the power process is disrupted in our society through a deficiency of real goals and a deficiency of autonomy in pursuit of goals” (f 67). Deprived of autonomy and meaningful goals, we have surrendered our freedom. And this is unthinkable to Kaczynski. Like Thoreau, he rejects the socially-ascribed goal of material success and in its place, substitutes the goal of freedom, which he defines as the “opportunity to go through the power process, with *real* goals not the artificial goals of surrogate activities, and without interference, manipulation or supervision from anyone, especially from any large organization” (f 94).

Kaczynski believes that our single greatest obstacle to freedom is technology. Indeed, in a technological society, Kaczynski dourly concludes that the restriction of freedom (as he defines it) is “unavoidable.” Although people prize both fulfillment of the power process and the comforts of modern technology, our appetite for technology is a more powerful social force than our need for freedom (f 125–135). The “human race with technology is just like an alcoholic with a barrel of wine” (f 203). We are *addicted* to technological society. Therefore, we subtly coerce people to conform and obey, and we use a host of subtle psychological techniques to socialize behaviors that support — rather than undermine — the sustainability of technological society. Scott Corey writes:

In “The Unabomber Manifesto,” dedicated partisans of freedom are urged to battle human oppression, which does not come in the iron fist of raw physical coercion so much as the deceptive manipulations of, among other things, psychology. Policemen and soldiers are not the important enemy. The enemy is Dr. Spock and his manual for child rearing, and hell is psychologist B. F. Skinner’s *Walden II* — a society full of happily unfree drones. Freedom is more like the original *Walden*, a life of early 19th century radical self-reliance described by Henry David Thoreau (1998).

We use other tools to enforce conformity, as well. Kaczynski alludes to our Orwellian society of surveillance (f 147) and suggests that we increasingly resemble the soma-

choked brave new world of Huxley (1946), using mood-altering drugs to control our runaway depression (f 145). He even envisions a dystopian *Matrix*-like existence in which people have electrodes planted directly into their brains, allowing society to directly manipulate their thoughts and feelings with electrical impulses (f 157), and describes a *Terminator*-like future, in which humans exist as the slaves of intelligent machines (f 173). Aware that many of *Industrial Society's* readers will dismiss his idea as science fiction, Kaczynski scolds his skeptics, reminding them that “yesterday’s science fiction is today’s fact” (f 160).

Because technology is fundamentally incompatible with freedom (f 113), and because freedom is indispensable to authentic human happiness, Kaczynski recommends the revolutionary overthrow of technology, by violent means if necessary (f 193). He considers the possibility of reconciling the two antagonistic goals by somehow limiting technology (f 111), but concludes that reform is unlikely and actually more difficult to implement than wholesale revolution (f 140–142). Kaczynski repeatedly emphasizes that this revolution is not political in nature (f 4, 193) but centered upon the wholesale rejection of technology (f 167, 170, 179). He writes:

[T]wo tasks confront those who hate the servitude to which the industrial system is reducing the human race. First, we must work to heighten the social stresses within the system so as to increase the likelihood that it will break down or be weakened sufficiently so that a revolution against it becomes possible. Second, it is necessary to develop and propagate an ideology that opposes technology and the industrial society if and when the system becomes sufficiently weakened. And such an ideology will help to assure that, if and when industrial society breaks down, its remnants will be smashed beyond repair, so that the system cannot be reconstituted. The factories should be destroyed, technical books burned, etc. (J 166).

Kaczynski does not wish to bomb modernity back into the Stone Age, but he does hope to regress us to an earlier social state. The 19th-century American frontier, in particular, is extremely attractive to Kaczynski (J 55–57). The wholesale destruction of technology, Kaczynski suggests, will precipitate a shift from an industrial-urban society — what Tonnies (1957) called *Gesellschaft* — to a village-like community of individuals — what Tonnies called *Gemeinschaft*. But it will take a bona fide revolution, on an international scale (J 193) to so reverse the march of technology.

This revolution is premised upon a *rejection* (of technology), but it also encompasses an *acceptance* (of Nature). Kaczynski writes, “[A]n ideology ... must be FOR something as well as AGAINST something. The positive ideal that we propose is Nature. That is, WILD nature” (J 183). Kaczynski claims that nature is a perfect counter-ideal to technology. In fact, nature is the opposite of technology (J 184). Corey (2000) suggests that Kaczynski aligned his anti-technology philosophy with the environmental movement for strategic reasons, not because of any genuine commitment to nature.

Certainly, Kaczynski's private journals suggest that he was no starry-eyed environmentalist (Sentencing Memorandum, 1998). But if it *is* a strategic inclusion, it is a prudent one.

Most people will agree that nature is beautiful; certainly it has tremendous popular appeal. The radical environmentalists ALREADY hold an ideology that exalts nature and opposes technology. It is not necessary for the sake of nature to set up some chimerical utopia or any new kind of social order. Nature takes care of itself (J 184).

Nature does not require rescue at the hands of Luddite anti-technologists, Kaczynski writes. Nature *is not* in need of salvation. But the modern individual, denied autonomy and authentic freedom, *is*. Those people who exist within the clockwork of the modern industrialized system are in desperate need of the utopia that Kaczynski mentions. And interestingly, it is Nature that offers the skeleton key to that utopia; it is Nature that stands as a viable counter-ideal to technology; it is a return to Nature that can deliver us from the myriad evils of the system. Kaczynski's message in *Industrial Society and Its Future*, then, ultimately bears a striking resemblance to the message articulated by Thoreau in *Walden*. Both Thoreau and Kaczynski are troubled by the pernicious and dehumanizing influence that material culture exerts upon individuals in society. Both believe that established mechanisms for social change are inadequate to rectify this problem. Yet both believe that change is possible, and root the basis for that change in wild Nature.

Kaczynski Wakes: Analysis and Discussion

“Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep... The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake.”

—H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1970, p. 221

Despite superficial similarities — the fact that both men attended Harvard University, the fact that both men were politically inclined toward anarchism, the fact that both men quit teaching to withdraw from society to the woods, the fact that both men constructed modest cabins on the edges of small towns, or the fact that both men were jailed (see Chase, 2003; Van Doren Stern, 1970a) — the public thinks about Henry David Thoreau and Theodore John Kaczynski in very different terms. Thoreau is celebrated as an embodiment of American individualism (e.g. White, 1968) while Kaczynski is denigrated as a madman (e.g. Duffy, 1996; Mello, 1999; Morse, 1998).

But perhaps the public has misunderstood both of these men. Perhaps Thoreau is not the benevolent patron saint of Walden Pond that we have characterized him as being, but a serious political critic, whose social venom is overlooked because of the beauty of his writing. Perhaps Kaczynski is not the raving serial killer that the press made him out to be. And perhaps he is not the broken soul that other writers have described (e.g. Chase, 2003; Seipel, 1997), damaged by a 167 IQ score that isolated him from his contemporaries and by an ivy-league education that left him feeling doomed. Perhaps, instead, Kaczynski is a hero, a man who awoke from the dreaming masses and was willing to act upon what he saw. Perhaps Kaczynski — the Kaczynski who wrote *Industrial Society and Its Future* and who killed three and injured 23 others — is the embodiment of the very principles that were articulated in Thoreau’s celebrated book, *Walden*. Surely, both Thoreau and Kaczynski would agree that people are enslaved, not liberated, by technology. Technological innovation often seems miraculous and society eagerly implements new inventions, but we are often unable to foresee how these technologies will affect our lives — for ill, as well as for good. Innovations that seem benevolent often later threaten or limit personal freedoms. Thoreau, for example, was suspicious of the encroaching railroad:

The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day. They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well-conducted institution regulates a whole country. Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than they did in the stage-office? ... To do things “railroad fashion” is now the byword” (1970, pp. 249–50).

The railroad was more than a physical machine; it was also a powerful sociological force. It exerted profound collateral effects on American society, implicitly tethering us to timetables, and accelerating the pace at which we acted (Toffler, 1970). Thoreau was not convinced that the benefit was worth the cost. He skeptically wrote, “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (1970, p. 223). Kaczynski (1995) provides a more modern — and more invasive — example:

When motor vehicles were introduced they appeared to increase man’s freedom. They took no freedom away from the walking man, no one had to have an automobile if he didn’t want one, and anyone who did choose to buy an automobile could travel much faster than the walking man. But the introduction of motorized transport soon changed society in such a way as to restrict greatly man’s freedom of locomotion. When automobiles became numerous, it became necessary to regulate their use extensively. In a car, especially in densely populated areas, one cannot just go where one likes at one’s own pace one’s movement is governed by the flow of traffic and by various traffic laws. One is tied down by various obligations: license requirements, driver test, renewing registration, insurance, maintenance required for safety, monthly payments on purchase price. Moreover, the use of motorized transport is no longer optional. Since the introduction of motorized transport the arrangement of our cities has changed in such a way that the majority of people no longer live within walking distance of their place of employment, shopping areas and recreational opportunities, so that they HAVE TO depend on the automobile for transportation (J 127).

An optional technology can quickly become compulsory, hemming in human freedom. And all of the compulsory costs associated with ownership further straitjacket individual choice. While the owner of an automobile must work, earning money to pay for the car, its registration, gasoline, and insurance, the man on foot is free. This is why, in writing about the railroad, Thoreau wrote that “the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot” (1970, p. 189). But if Kaczynski is correct when he asserts that some technologies have become so pervasive that they are no longer optional, it may not be possible for the ordinary traveler to go on foot. Participation in “the system,” then, may become an evil of necessity.

Certainly, Thoreau's contemporaries believed that they were constrained by necessity. Indeed, with great pathos Thoreau describes a conversation with his neighbor, John Field (1970, pp. 333–337). Because Field consumed expensive foods like tea, coffee, butter, milk, and fresh meat, he had to slave many long hours in the peat bogs with his hoe; and because he worked so hard in the bogs, he consumed copious amounts of tea, coffee, butter, milk, and meat (p. 334). It was a vicious cycle. Because he worked so hard at bogging, he required thick boots and sturdy clothing which quickly wore out and needed to be replaced. Yet to pay for them, he would return to the bogs, and the cycle would continue (p. 335). Thoreau described this life of moneygrubbing necessity as “a fool’s life” (p. 147). Kaczynski also blames perceived “necessity” for a great deal of human suffering. He believes that technological society cannot be made to serve human needs, and that — instead — human behavior is subordinated to the smooth operation of our social system.

The system, for good, solid, practical reasons, must exert constant pressure on people to mold their behavior to the needs of the system... No one stops to ask whether it is inhumane to force adolescents to spend the bulk of their time studying subjects most of them hate. When skilled workers are put out of a job by technical advances and have to undergo “retraining,” no one asks whether it is humiliating for them to be pushed around in this way. It is simply taken for granted that everyone must bow to technical necessity and for good reason: If human needs were put before technical necessity there would be economic problems, unemployment, shortages or worse (J 119).

Myopic, most people never understand that an alternative to “necessity” exists. The system is so expedient, so efficient, and so encompassing that to swim against the current is not only hopeless, but irrational and perceived as a sign of madness (Luke, 1996, p. 85). Thus, blinkered and blind, people focus on the minutiae of their lives, struggling for wealth or status or professional achievement. Thoreau recognizes that many people are so caught up in their jobs that they lack time “to be any thing but a machine” (1970, p. 148), but he condemns these jobs as insignificant busywork. “As for *work*, we haven’t any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus’ dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still” (p. 223, italics in original). Kaczynski echoes Thoreau’s sentiment, “sneering” at those who are content with leading lives of servitude (1995, f 78).

Thoreau and Kaczynski also agree that the social system currently in place does little to alleviate human suffering. This, however, is hardly surprising if Kaczynski’s premise that humans exist to serve the system, and not vice versa, is correct. In any event, both authors concur that “[t]he mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation [and believe that w]hat is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (Thoreau, 1970, p. 150). Indeed, the endemic unhappiness of our culture is what drove both men from

the cities: Thoreau, to conduct his experiment in simplified living, Kaczynski, to carry out his jihad of death.

Both men withdrew from society and lived on its periphery. Although they were not true hermits, and had friends and coworkers (Chase, 2003; Van Doren Stern, 1970a), they both lived in a state of solitude uncommon for human beings (Storr, 1988). Thoreau preferred it this way:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers (1970, p. 267).

Kaczynski, too, appreciated the value of privacy. Although he lived four miles south of Lincoln, Kaczynski complained that his 1.4 acre lot, nestled among many summer cabins, was “not nearly as isolated as I would have liked” (Chase, 2003, p. 330). Indeed, he was surrounded by the din of snowmobilers and gold prospectors and sport hunters. The aggravating distractions of these noisy neighbors, however, served one essential purpose: they steeled Kaczynski’s resolve to wage a one-man war of terror against technological society.

Would Thoreau have condoned Kaczynski’s bombing campaign? Possibly. Thoreau had, for example, stated that “to be a philosopher is ... to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (1970, p. 155). And, by distributing 16 bombs, Kaczynski had assuredly tried to solve the problem of industrialization in a practical manner. But Thoreau had also claimed that while a man has no duty to eradicate evil, it *is* his duty to wash his hands of evil, and “not to give it practically his support” (1970, p. 461). So, would Thoreau have supported Kaczynski’s anti-technology bombing campaign? The answer to this question may depend, in large part, upon *which* Kaczynski was responsible for the Unabomber’s crimes, as two different Kaczynskis have been described.

One of them, the Kaczynski described in the government’s sentencing memorandum (1998), is a modern “Underground Man” (Dostoevsky, 1989), a grubby misanthrope who acted not out of ideology but out of revenge. This Kaczynski is the hypocritical mountain man who pinned salvation upon WILD nature in *Industrial Society and Its Future*, but then boasted about littering and poaching in his private diaries. This is the Kaczynski denounced as a madman, as a paranoid schizophrenic (Mello, 1999) and who, in attacking technology and scientists who pursue abstract and meaningless goals, was attacking those parts of his own alienated identity that he had come to despise. If *this* is the Kaczynski who distributed letter bombs to university campuses, then his acts are merely crimes, and reprehensible ones at that.

But there is another Kaczynski. This Kaczynski is the philosophical author of *Industrial Society and Its Future*, Harvard educated, a former Berkeley mathematics

professor who turned his back on the academy and went to the woods. This Kaczynski is a genius whose 167 IQ would be shared by only four people in a million (De la Jara, 2002); he is a man, a *man*, who opened his eyes, understood that technology has enslaved humanity, and who possessed the moral courage to act on this understanding. This Kaczynski is a man who did not send bombs because he was vengeful but because he had *hope*; he believed that his acts of violence were *necessary* evils, catalysts to trigger the revolution that would set people free. This is the Kaczynski who — like a modern John Brown, the abolitionist who tried to spark an anti-slavery revolution by seizing the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry — acted with violence because it was necessary to achieve a better world (Mello, 1999). If *this* Kaczynski was the Unabomber, Thoreau would have supported his actions.

Certainly, Thoreau had sympathized with John Brown. He had delivered a lecture, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” in October of 1859, and described Brown as “an angel of light” (Thoreau, 2004). Society condemned John Brown as a madman and a villain, but Thoreau was reluctant to place too much stock in the judgments of his contemporaries. He wrote:

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? (Thoreau, 1970, p. 152).

Thoreau is deeply suspicious of philanthropy. He mistrusts do-gooders. But he has tremendous admiration for those who would follow their consciences, regardless of the public perception. He writes that, in such a situation, he would not “stand between a man and his genius” and, almost as if he were speaking across the centuries to address Kaczynski directly, Thoreau writes, “[T]o him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, *Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil*, as it is most likely they will” (1970, p. 207, my italics). Even the use of violence can be forgiven. Speaking of John Brown, Thoreau claimed, “I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable” (2002). If John Brown’s armed siege on Harper’s Ferry could be justified by his abolitionist ideology, surely Ted Kaczynski’s mail bombings can be justified by his own utopian goal: liberating modern society from the shackles of technology and materialism. While shedding blood to achieve this goal is deplorable, there are wounds that cut deeper than physical injuries. There are dehumanizing social conditions more damaging than any bloodshed. Writing about the risks of civil disobedience, Thoreau reasoned:

But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now (1970, p. 466).

The poetry of the sentiment is unmistakably Thoreau but the suggestion is faithfully echoed 146 years later in Kaczynski's *Industrial Society and Its Future*. There are social evils at work in our society that are infinitely more destructive than death:

[O]ne has to balance the struggle and death against the loss of freedom and dignity. To many of us, freedom and dignity are more important than a long life or avoidance of physical pain. Besides, we all have to die some time, and it may be better to die fighting for survival, or for a cause, than to live a long but empty and purposeless life (J 168).

Conclusion

“Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal.”

—H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1970, p. 434

The American public celebrates Henry David Thoreau as a beloved “sort of Nature Boy” (White, 1968, p. 27) while it demonizes Theodore John Kaczynski as “diabolical” (Survivors Condemn, 1998) and “mad” (Duffy, 1996). But, despite some differences, they share numerous characteristics (Chase, 2003; Van Doren Stern, 1970a). Both were Harvard educated teachers who turned their backs on education and withdrew to the woods; both built modest cabins on the outskirts of small towns; and both lived in relative isolation, writing prolifically. Both believed that modern society is pathological, and attributed human suffering to our dependence on material goods. Both believed that salvation can be found in simplification, and through a return to nature. Both claimed that, if people could divest themselves of property and shake off their dependence on technological systems, we could be free. We could enjoy real liberty, and would be happier and healthier for it. We could live in a utopian society of individuals.

Thoreau tried to establish this utopia by example and exhortation, but Kaczynski went a step further. He employed annihilation, murdering three people and injuring twenty-three others in an attempt to trigger an anti-technology revolution. For this, the public condemned Kaczynski as evil, and branded him a madman (Davidson, 1997). It sensationalized his arrest, and hyped his “non-trial” (Mello, 1999). But because the Unabomber Manifesto was almost entirely ignored by the public (Chase, 2003, pp. 8889), few people debated the merits of his ideas, or his actions. *No one* in the mainstream dared to support Kaczynski — to suggest that he was right, and justified in killing. But there is at least one figure in history that would have defended the indefensible Ted Kaczynski. In all likelihood, our own beloved Nature Boy, Henry David Thoreau, would have condoned — or quite possibly applauded — Kaczynski’s acts. He had championed the cause of the abolitionist John Brown; surely, he would also come to the aid of the anti-technologist Ted Kaczynski. Thoreau, in articulating the principles of simplicity and a return to nature, was a kind of prophet; Kaczynski, acting on these principles — sacrificing human lives to realize them — is a kind of a doomed messiah. Thoreau and Kaczynski are not as different as we pretend they are: in truth, the crimes of Theodore Kaczynski are the culmination of many of the principles laid down by Henry Thoreau.

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The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



J.C. Oleson

“Evil the Natural Way”

The Chimerical Utopias of Henry David Thoreau and Theodore John Kaczynski
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