Alienation is the Philistinism of the Intellectual

James Ley on the Underground Man

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12 Mar. 2023

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Dostoevsky's reactionary sleight of hand in psychologising his demonic revolutionaries was to shift the political ground from the social to the individual.

> '. . . tell them I've gone to America.'
>
> He put the revolver to his right temple.
>
> — *Crime and Punishment*

1

From 1959 to 1962, a Harvard professor of psychology named Henry Murray conducted a series of CIA-sponsored experiments into the effects of extreme stress. Volunteers were recruited from the student body with the vague claim that they would be participating in a study of 'certain psychological problems' with respect to the 'developments of personality'. They were interviewed at length, subjected to a barrage of preliminary tests, made to fill out elaborate questionnaires, and instructed to write a series of essays that revealed private thoughts and intimate biographical details. This information was used to draw up a comprehensive psychological profile of each participant.

The volunteers were then asked to write another essay that explained their most fundamental beliefs, their guiding philosophy of life. At the culmination of the experiment, they were invited to a meeting under the impression that they would be participating in a respectful one-on-one debate with a fellow student about their philosophical views.

The 'debate' was a ruse. The subjects were instead taken into a brightly lit room and made to sit facing a one-way mirror. They were wired to machines that monitored their physiological responses. One participant said it felt like being strapped into an electric chair. A dazzling light and a movie camera were aimed at their faces. They were then ready to meet their interlocutor, who was not a fellow student, but a lawyer skilled in the art of cross-examination and forearmed with detailed knowledge of their personal histories, their hopes and fears, their psychological vulnerabilities. The lawyer had been instructed to attack their beliefs in the most contemptuous and belittling terms, scorn them for being so shallow, sentimental, illogical and unoriginal. He would continue his aggressive verbal assault until the subjects broke down, stormed out, or exploded with rage.

As a coda to their humiliation, the subjects were summoned to a final meeting, in which Murray played them the footage of their distressed reactions, pointing out their visible agitation and the incoherence of their attempts to defend themselves.

Some of the participants in Murray's experiment claimed to be unaffected by their ordeal; others reported feelings of anger and embarrassment. One participant, the youngest, described the experience as 'devastating'.

2

Ted Kaczynski, who would later become notorious as the Unabomber, was a talented mathematician, precocious enough to have won admission to Harvard at sixteen. He was self-conscious about his relative youth and midwestern working-class background, which made him sensitive to the condescension of his wealthy and privileged academic peers. They, in turn, remembered him as a reserved and lonely figure. He was clean-cut and shy, but evidently possessed a strong sense of propriety. Participants in Murray's experiment were assigned code names based on their psychological profiles. Kaczynski's was 'Lawful'.

Kaczynski maintained that, though he was young and vulnerable, and though he found the experience distressing at the time, his involvement in Murray's unethical experiment had no lasting psychological effects. At his trial, when his defence team tried to argue that he was a paranoid schizophrenic and raised the Harvard experiment as a formative trauma, Kaczynski viewed the attempt to pathologise his actions as a betrayal. He considered himself a rationalist, insisted that his lethal bombing campaign, conducted over seventeen years and primarily targeting universities, was politically principled, carried out in accordance with the convictions he had explained at length in his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*. It was important to him that his intellectual justifications be taken seriously, that they not be dismissed as the ravings of a crank or a lunatic. It was a matter of pride.

The need to be taken seriously had led to his capture. Kaczynski betrayed himself when he demanded the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* publish his 35,000 word manifesto. The FBI, lacking substantive leads, decided it was worth the risk. The act of hubris resulted in Kaczynski being identified by his brother and sister-in-law, who thought the arguments in the manifesto sounded disconcertingly like the sorts of things Ted was always raving about. He was tracked down and arrested in April 1996, dragged from his remote cabin in Montana, his hair and beard wild, his clothes shredded and filthy, the very image of a deranged hermit.

The manifesto was written in the first-person plural to mask the fact that Kaczynski was acting alone. When he says 'we', he really means 'I'.

The plural pronoun gives an imperious air to the manifesto's most chilling pronouncement: 'In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people.'

3

Much of the media coverage of the Unabomber case was fascinated with the idea of Kaczynski as an intellectual. Shortly after his arrest, a mass-market paperback was rushed into print. Written by a team of journalists from *Time* magazine, it portrayed him as a 'mad genius', compared him to Dostoevsky's Underground Man, and noted

that his favourite book was *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad's novel about a plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. NPR sought the expert counsel of a literature professor from NYU, who explained that if Kaczynski was indeed modelling himself on fictional terrorists, as the FBI had suggested, he would appear to have 'misunderstood' Conrad's ironic intentions.

The eminent political scientist James Q. Wilson, one of the few people named in the manifesto, wrote an article for the *New York Times*, in which he proposed that Kaczynski was no more a madman than Rousseau, Paine or Marx. The language of the manifesto, observed Wilson, was 'clear, precise and calm. The argument is subtle and carefully developed, lacking anything even faintly resembling the wild claims or irrational speculation that a lunatic might produce'.

Lucy Ellmann penned a wry column, in which she confessed to being a little bit 'in love' with the Unabomber, 'the discerning woman's serial killer', who differed from other notorious murderers with their run-of-the-mill psychopathologies, in that his 'reasons seem potentially fathomable'. She wondered if the arguments in the manifesto could be dismissed as rationalisations of murderous impulses, or if perhaps Kaczynski really did set out to kill and maim people so as to draw attention to his ideas. 'Maybe,' she speculated, 'he is just a frustrated writer.'

Several months later, Cynthia Ozick published an essay in the *New Yorker*, in which she reflected on the Dostoevskian tenor of the Unabomber case. In excited tones she argued that Kaczynski represented a new and different class of American criminal, one familiar from the pages of European literature, but uncommon in the United States. The Unabomber's manifesto was the work of an ideologically motivated 'visionary'. It revealed Kaczynski to be a 'philosophical criminal of exceptional intelligence': a man so uncompromising that he had reasoned his way to murder. 'America,' declared Ozick, 'has at last brought forth its own Raskolnikov.'

At last?

4

At the very end of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, there is a passage notable, among other things, for its change of tone. The Underground Man has spent the preceding pages in a state of perpetual agitation and indignation. His strenuous attempts to make himself disagreeable have culminated in his rape of the prostitute Liza, the only character to have shown him any understanding and compassion. At this point of absolute moral degradation, having established beyond doubt that he is thoroughly odious, the Underground Man gathers himself for a moment, slipping for the first time into what seems like a genuinely reflective mode. He steps outside the frame of his confessional narrative to acknowledge that he is a fictional character, constructed for a purpose. 'A novel needs a hero,' he observes, 'whereas here all the traits of an anti-hero

have been assembled *deliberately.*' He states plainly that the spectacle of his debased personality is supposed to be unpleasant. His confession has been a cautionary tale.

In this moment of sober reflection, in a condition of unequivocal guilt, the Underground Man switches, uncharacteristically, into the first-person plural. For most of the novel, his neurotic conscience has been trapped in an exhausting and unresolvable argument with itself. The narrating 'I' compulsively second-guesses and argues with the responses of an imaginary 'you'. Now, for the first time, the Underground Man appeals to a shared understanding, makes a universalising statement: 'we've all become estranged from life, we're all cripples, every one of us, more or less'.

Earlier, Liza had interrupted one of his obnoxious rants to observe that everything he says sounds like something from a book. The line has penetrated his defences enough for him to admit its truth. 'Leave us alone without books,' he claims, 'and we'll get confused and lose our way at once — we won't know what to join, what to hold on to, what to love or what to hate, what to respect or what to despise.'

5

The screenplay calls for him to examine himself in the mirror, but the director suggests he improvise a little, maybe talk to himself.

He is alone in his small apartment. The place is a mess, squalid and decaying like the rest of the city. He wears a bulky jacket, military green, concealing two holstered guns and a third tucked into his jeans. He folds his arms, considers his reflection, approves. In his right sleeve is a fourth handgun, a Colt .25, attached to a homemade rail system he has strapped to his forearm. When he flicks his wrist the pistol slips instantly into his hand. He practises drawing the gun on his reflection. Click-click.

The thinnest of smiles.

'Faster than you.'

He resets the mechanism, composes himself, begins to imagine a scene. He is out in the street, minding his own business, and some shitheel makes a smart remark. No way he's letting something like that slide. So now it's a face off.

'I'm standing here,' he says to his reflection. 'You make the move. It's your move . . . You talking to me? You talking to me? You talking to *me*?'

He looks around the empty room.

'I'm the only one here . . . Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?'

Barely a minute long, the scene short-circuits the culture. Its implosion of myth and ideology becomes an instant cinematic cliché. The damaged veteran, once a defender of his country, is bringing home the violence of its imperial adventures. The romanticised archetypes of the soldier, the gunslinger, the outlaw, the gangster, the vigilante and the urban guerrilla collapse into one, reveal their kinship with the madman.

Martin Scorsese initially approached screenwriter Paul Schrader with the idea of adapting *Notes from Underground* into a film. Schrader already had the script. He

had written *Taxi Driver* in 1972 at the age of 26, having recently read Sartre's *Nausea*, a novel that transposes the psychological insights of Dostoevsky's ur-text into the philosophical idiom of existentialism. Schrader would later refer to the script as 'juvenilia'.

The film's underlying premise is that Travis Bickle is a creature from the Dostoevskian underground, an existential anti-hero, a European archetype relocated into an American context. For Schrader, this meant making Travis more ignorant and more violent, qualities he saw as symptoms of the nation's immaturity. When a man cracks up in Europe or Japan, Schrader observed in an interview, that man goes away and kills himself, but when an American cracks up he goes out and kills someone else.

'Travis's problem is the same as the existential hero's,' said Schrader — 'that is, should I exist?' His fatal flaw is that he is 'not smart enough to understand his problem'.

Taxi Driver retains a formal trace of its debt to *Notes from Underground* in its use of a voiceover to relate the contents of Travis's diary, giving us direct access to the 'bad ideas' that are forming in his mind. De Niro's improvisation before the mirror opens up the deeper psychological abyss. It's the best thing in the film, said Schrader, and it wasn't in the script.

'You talking to me' is the structuring principle of the Underground Man's confession; it is the structure of his psyche, a compulsive mode of thinking. His antagonistic use of the second-person 'you' gives *Notes from Underground* its disconcertingly confrontational tone, even though, strictly speaking, the Underground Man is arguing with himself: 'if I write as if I were addressing readers, that's only for show, because it's easier for me to write that way. It's a form, simply a form.'

When *Taxi Driver* was released in February 1976, the bicentenary year of the Declaration of Independence, reviewers immediately recognised it as an arthouse version of the lurid vigilante films that were popular at the time. They reached for comparisons with such retrograde fare as *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*. The film was criticised for failing to rise above the implausibility and sensationalism of its generic qualities. Its aestheticised depiction of an urbanised society in a state of advanced decay could not help but absorb and reflect something of the sick eroticism of a culture that fetishises guns and violence. In seeking to elevate 'pulp into myth', it was argued, *Taxi Driver* remained in thrall to the masculine warrior ethos that gives form to Travis' mental breakdown and leads to the film's bloody climax.

Travis Bickle has come to be interpreted as a prescient figure, a definitive representation of a soul-sick society. He has been credited as 'the first mainstream cultural appearance of a line that has continued through the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, the Unabomber, any number of school shooters and beyond'.

6

In 1946, half a century before Kaczynski's arrest and thirty years before the release of *Taxi Driver*, William Phillips published an essay in *Partisan Review*, the journal he co-edited with Philip Rahv, in which he argued that 'the conflicts, tensions and neuroses of the literary man have become symptoms of the fate of culture in the West and are connected with at least one side — perhaps the most important one — of the modern sensibility'.

The archetype of this neurotic sensibility was Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who represented the 'dominant type: a morbid, frustrated, sensitive and prophetic man — in short, a browbeaten superman'.

Partisan Review was the house journal of an influential clique of writers that came to be known as the New York Intellectuals. Its editorial ambition at that time was to build the intellectual foundations of an anti-communist American left. When Phillips refers to 'disillusioned radicals', he is referring to himself and his immediate peers, veterans of the ideological battles of the 1930s, whose politics were forged in respose to the rise of Stalinism and the war against European fascism.

His essay on the Underground Man is a minor example of the importance the New York Intellectuals granted to the dark and pessimistic strains of modernist literature as a check on ideological dogmatism. Part of Dostoevsky's usefulness was that he offered a stern rebuke to the more wayward enthusiasms of the far left. 'Dostoevsky's recoil from the socialist principle was couched in terms that have become wholly relevant to political thinking,' argues Phillips; '. . . what it most interesting to us at this point is that he saw the hand of the devil in the revolutionary impulse, for its ruthless practice appeared to Dostoevsky simply another version of the criminal impulse.'

The essay positions the Underground Man in a wider literary and philosophical tradition of the 'irrational' — one that also includes Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Melville, Nietzsche and Kafka — and enlists this tradition on the side of the 'truly human' against the 'spirit of science and rationalism', which is held to be responsible for the oppressive determinisms of modernity. 'Not only does it attribute the dreaded mechanization of life to the spread of scientific belief,' writes Phillips, 'but it makes the more fundamental criticism that the scientific approach cannot yield moral values.'

The arch word 'dreaded' is an ironic acknowledgement that Phillips was drawing on ideas that were, as he drily observes, 'far from unfashionable'. His interpretation of *Notes from Underground* was already quite conventional.

7

The Underground Man insinuated himself into postwar American culture with an air of philosophical gravitas acquired on his transformative journey through French literature, where his many competing manifestations and reinterpretations — Gide's

concept of the gratuitous act, Breton's surrealist manifesto, Céline's savage pessimism, Camus' philosophy of the absurd, Sartre's existential nausea, Bataille's fascination with transgression and evil — had the cumulative effect of shifting his compulsive negations into a different register, granting them moral ambiguities that extended well beyond the original intentions of Dostoevsky's pointed political satire.

One of the legacies of these reinterpretations, born of the unprecedented crisis of European civilisation in the first half of the century, was to invert the ethical meaning of the Underground Man's anti-social behaviour. His 'evil' personality was granted a perverse integrity. His irrational outbursts became a howl of existential despair, a principled rejection of the phony morality of a corrupt and decadent civilisation, a revolt against the coercive rationalism of modernity itself.

8

'Philosophers, metaphysicians, you are like dogs baying at death,' Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1947; '. . . this "tragic" feeling of existence, this consciousness of the absurd, I observe in men who lead very skilful, successful lives; they hold forth on the subject of anguish to fashionable audiences in lecture halls, and it becomes a topic for scholarly essays; people sit in cafés and newspaper offices writing about anguish, cleverly, shrewdly, technically, and with verbal elegance.'

9

The Unabomber's hostility towards technological society and the ostentatious gesture of renunciation in his ascetic backwoods existence seemed to cast him in the role of eco-terrorist, but his politics were ultimately a version of right-wing libertarianism. His manifesto shows him to be primarily concerned with technology as a threat to individual freedom. Nature functions in his thinking as the positive antonym of technological society. It represents the ideal of an uncoerced existence: an absence of social obligation and political imposition akin to the mythical 'state of nature' theorised by the early modern political philosophers.

And it is true that the manifesto is a coherent document, up to a point, at least in the sense that it appears to express a consistent worldview grounded in a number of recognisable realities and clearly stated philosophical principles. Its argument goes something like this. In the post-industrial era, our lives have come to be organised around technology. Useful inventions, like cars and computers, promise freedom; they seem to open up new possibilities. But they end up restructuring society in such a way that we become dependent on them. We are forced to integrate ourselves into the new reality they create; we must alter *our* behaviour to accommodate *them*. Kaczynski proposes that many of the social and psychological problems of the present day can

be attributed to the compromises and deformations of character that are necessary to adapt to our unnatural environment. 'Imagine a society that subjects people to conditions that make them terribly unhappy,' he scoffs, 'then gives them drugs to take away their unhappiness.'

The essential point for Kaczynski is that, in determining the structure of society, technology reveals itself to be the ultimate constraint on individual freedom, beyond any specific laws or political arrangements that might obtain. He thus devotes considerable space in the manifesto to attacking what he calls 'leftism', which he derides as a quasi-religious impulse and a psychological sop. The political concerns of leftists, he argues, amount to little more than a laundry-bag of ameliorative social justice issues, which are pursued to satisfy a desire to feel virtuous and slightly rebellious, but do nothing to address the systemic nature of our technological enslavement. He takes a token balancing swipe at conservatives, whom he dismisses as fools for failing to recognise that technological progress makes the destruction of their cherished values inevitable. Systemic oppression, he insists, is an inalienable feature of technological society. It cannot be avoided or brought under control by regulation. Once the technology exists to split the atom or manipulate the genome, it *will* be used. And it is this remorseless autotelic quality that leads Kaczynski to his drastic conclusion. Because the onward march of technology is inexorable, the only available course of action is to attack and destroy technological society by whatever means necessary.

The manifesto proposes no alternative social vision. It is hostile to the very notion of a negotiated resolution. The principle it upholds is self-reliance. It seeks to occupy a position outside of society, staking its integrity on the proposition that it is only from an external perspective that the systemic oppression can be adequately understood and addressed.

10

In 1952, Philip Rahv observed that the intellectual and creative classes were being absorbed into a postwar culture defined by an absence of a viable left-wing politics. 'We are witnessing a process that might well be described as the *embourgeoisment* of the American intelligentsia,' he wrote, '. . . the idea of socialism, whether in its revolutionary or democratic reference, has virtually ceased to figure in current intellectual discussion.'

11

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the defining characteristic of Dostoevsky's art is its dialogism. An idea for Dostoevsky 'is not a subjective individual-psychological formation ... no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-

subjective — the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion *between* consciousnesses'.

The drama in Dostoevsky's major novels is the product of this polyphonic, intersubjective quality. Characters who represent competing philosophical positions argue among themselves, but they also reflect each other, presenting us with what Bakhtin calls a 'sociology of consciousness'. Dostoevsky thus demonstrates the impossibility of intellectual autonomy. In doing so, he undermines the monological concept of unified reason. The tragic element in his work arises from the tortuous exertions of the individual consciousness, which remains trapped in an unresolvable state where 'discourse about the world merges with confessional discourse about oneself. The truth about the world, according to Dostoevsky, is inseparable from the truth of the personality. The categories of self-consciousness . . . — acceptance and nonacceptance, rebellion and reconciliation — now become the basic categories for thinking about the world.'

In treating ideas as extensions of personalities, Dostoevsky pathologises politics. He explodes the concept of individualism, yet makes it seem inevitable. Consciousness becomes a state in which desires and principles cannot be considered distinct. The result is a radical ambiguity. Dostoevsky maintained that the noblest character in modern literature was Don Quixote, whose essential goodness derives from his idealism, his determination to make his fantasy a reality. The revolutionaries in Dostoevsky's novels are demonic for a similar reason: their grand theorical abstractions are projections of their desires and resentments, fatally tainted by violent egoism, and consequently a form of madness.

12

'The works of Baudelaire, like Dostoevsky's or Rimbaud's, may take on a revolutionary meaning,' observes Lefebvre — 'provided that they are understood and situated within a general critique of everyday life. Taken in themselves, in isolation, these works provoke absurd, illusory feelings; situated in the overall context of the human problems of our time, their character changes.'

13

The storyline about Travis Bickle's unsuccessful attempt to assassinate a presidential candidate named Charles Palantine had its real world analogues. Five months before *Taxi Driver* was released, former Manson girl Lynette 'Squeaky' Fromme tried to assassinate Gerald Ford. An elfin figure in a flowing red dress, Fromme approached the president as he was greeting people in a Sacramento park and drew a Magnum .45 from the holster she had strapped to her leg. She claimed her actions were an environmental protest.

A few years earlier, in 1972, presidential candidate George Wallace was gunned down at a campaign rally, one of the bullets severing his spinal cord. His would-be assassin, Arthur Bremer, had targeted Wallace after a half-baked plan to kill Richard Nixon came to nothing.

Bremer's incriminating journals were published the following year as a trashy paperback, his many egregious spelling errors retained for authenticity. The introduction compared him to Raskolnikov and Meursault, but the illiterate text revealed him to be a lackwit and a vacuous fantasist, who had dreamed up the idea of assassinating Wallace while watching *A Clockwork Orange* and whose banal motivation was to become famous. The book's sole point of interest was Bremer's garbled sense of himself as both the author and heroic protagonist of his own existence, his titillating belief that he would be remembered as a notorious actor in a historical drama: 'Like a novelist who knows not how his books will end — I have written this journal — what a shocking surprise that my inner character shall steal the climax and save the anti-hero from assassination !! I may sound exciting and fasinating [*sic*] to readers 100 years from now — as the Booth conspricy [*sic*] seems to us today . . . As I said befor [*sic*], I Am A Hamlet.'

Five years after the release of *Taxi Driver*, John Hinkley Jr tried to assassinate Ronald Reagan. Hinkley had watched the film obsessively. He had developed a fixation with the actor Jodie Foster, who played the child prostitute Iris. He thought shooting Reagan would please her.

14

In 1967, two years before she shot Andy Warhol, Valerie Solanas wrote the *SCUM Manifesto*, in which she asserted that men were defective females who were incorrigibly egotistical and incapable of empathy. Men, she argued, were no more than a bundle of negative emotions and 'conditioned reflexes'. They equated 'solitariness with individuality' and thus existed in a state of perpetual alienation. 'Trapped inside himself, emotionally isolated, unable to relate,' Solanas wrote, 'the male a has a horror of civilization, people, cities, situations requiring an ability to understand and relate to people.'

The defining male characteristic was, consequently, self-loathing. 'Rational men,' Solanas observed, 'want to be squashed, stepped on, crushed and crunched, treated as the curs, the filth that they are, have their repulsiveness confirmed.'

15

In his essay on the Underground Man, William Phillips interprets his subject as an extention of Dostoevsky's personality. 'He lived in the shadow of insanity,' Phillips argues; 'his creative world was an abyss of criminality and derangement.'

The essay thus arrives at a cautious paradox. Having linked the Underground Man to the 'fate of the culture', Phillips warns that 'any attempt today to create a cult of the irrational and the irresponsible in the name of art and morality must be characterized as thoroughly retrograde and lacking in seriousness'. He acknowledges that Dostoevsky's political views were 'shamefully reactionary'. But he endorses the 'irrational' psychology of the underground as the creative wellspring of modern literature and an affirmation of the idea that 'consciousness cannot be contained in any purely scientific philosophy'.

The contradictions are profound, perhaps terminal. Consciousness resists the factual, the scientific. The marginal becomes central, its violent pathologies deemed politically necessary but fundamentally unserious, unstable, uncontainable. Writers and artists, the modern Prometheans, are tasked with creating and occupying the intellectual space outside the determinisms of society, defining the space of resistance, seizing the fires of madness and insight, yet they are estranged from the social contexts that might give their insights political meaning beyond the symbolic act of rejection itself.

Dostoevsky's reactionary sleight of hand in psychologising his demonic revolutionaries was to shift the political ground from the social to the individual, to create a seemingly unresolvable conflict between the egoism of individual actors and a tragically unreformable reality, and he succeeded so brilliantly that he convinced scores of subsequent writers that the symptom of alienation was an imperative.

In the early 1950s, Nelson Algren wrote that a 'certain ruthlessness and a sense of alienation from society is as essential to creative writing as it is to armed robbery'. He enlisted the Underground Man in support of his argument. 'The great paradox of Dostoevsky lies in the vitality he drew from degradation,' he argued: 'American writing, it is this observer's notion, will remain without vigor until it draws upon the enormous reservoir of sick, vindictive life that moves like an underground river beneath our boulevards.'

With characteristic intellectual recklessness, Norman Mailer ran the Dostoevskian logic in reverse: if the revolutionary impulse is criminal, the criminal is a revolutionary; if politics is pathological, the psychopath must be a figure of political significance. The technocratic atrocities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, argued Mailer, had created a world in which the threat of annihilation was ever present; under such intolerable conditions, the psychopath 'may indeed be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over'. He defined the psychopath with reference to the psychologist Robert Lindner, citing a book now remembered primarily because it provided the title for a James Dean film about a disaffected teenager. The psychopath, wrote Lindner,

is ‘a rebel without a cause, an agitator without a slogan, a revolutionary without a programme: in other words, his rebelliousness is aimed to achieve goals satisfactory to himself alone’.

16

‘Today many people praise *Notes from Underground* without any idea that they are unearthing a caricature of themselves written a century ago,’ René Girard observed in 1961. Dostoevsky’s influential novel, he wrote, was ‘a ferocious parody of the intellectual myths of our time’.

17

Satire is a kind of glass and culture is a hall of mirrors, where the self loses itself and the usual determining logic of cause and effect does not apply. Influences cannot be anticipated or established with any degree of certainty. The elusive nature of cultural production is to feed on itself, reinforce its assumptions in the process of hollowing them out. Reiterations become misrepresentations and distortions become truths. Received ideas are rendered opaque through familiarity. The parody can be the source of the intellectual myths it parodies.

18

There was another quality of *Industrial Society and Its Future* that was remarked upon at the time: its lack of originality. The manifesto leans heavily on *The Technological Society* by Jacques Ellul, in particular, but its anti-technology stance drew comparisons to the machine breakers of the early nineteenth century and the back-to-nature romanticism of Thoreau. There was certainly nothing unfamiliar about the notion that our industrialised, urbanised, regulated and surveilled modern lives are oppressive and alienating. Technological paranoia was a common trope of the Cold War. Alston Chase, author of the most thorough and measured account of Kaczynski’s exploits, observes that the manifesto was little more than ‘a compendium of philosophical and environmental clichés’ that reflected ‘the conventional wisdom of the entire country’.

Kaczynski was so rankled by the charge of unoriginality that he wrote a postscript to the manifesto, in which he claimed that he was not *trying* to be original. His intention was merely to set out, as clearly as possible, ideas that were demonstrably true for the benefit of people who would never read Ellul’s ‘difficult text’. His flinty self-defence gives off sparks of intellectual arrogance.

‘Clearly, the critics can’t answer the substance of the Manifesto’s reasoning,’ he wrote, ‘so they try to divert their own and others’ attention from its arguments by attacking irrelevant aspects of the Manifesto.’

The broad point can be conceded: ideas do not have to be original to be valid.

Nor does repeating an idea make it any truer, except maybe to yourself.

19

At his trial in 1970, Charles Manson said: ‘These children who come at you with knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn’t teach them . . . I am only what lives inside each and every one of you. My father is the jailhouse. My father is your system . . . I am only what you made me. I am only a reflection of you.’

Manson was addressing the court, but speaking beyond it. He was an intelligent and highly adept criminal sociopath, who understood that he embodied certain fears. The court had provided him with a stage and a role to play, so he played it. He used the media attention his trial had attracted, itself a product of the sheer ghastliness of his crimes, to project an image of himself as a messianic figure and a sacrificial victim, knowing perfectly well how his words would be reported and interpreted. The press sensationalised him as a psychopathic monster. The Weathermen, a radical splinter from the violent edge of the sixties counterculture, praised him as a ‘revolutionary hero’. Norman Mailer called him ‘Raskolnikovian’.

Manson’s speech, Michael André Bernstein observed, was in fact a generic statement: a near perfect encapsulation of the defining tropes of the ‘abject hero’. The rhetorical force of his accusatory ‘you’ derives from the way that the abject hero’s ‘critique — his condemnation of the smugness and moral indifference of civil society — is never entirely undercut by the revelation of his own ignominy and corruption’. Manson was able to manipulate his public image, because he understood that to embrace his own criminality, to speak from a position beyond the constraints of morality, was to claim a certain demonic authenticity. The fact of his abjection cast him in the role of the bearer of certain truths, granted him the lived authority to summon the latent guilt and paranoia of society. He understood this instinctively because the archetype of the Underground Man was so thoroughly naturalised: absorbed into the culture as the definitive account of the underlying darkness of human nature. ‘The underground was reinterpreted not as an alternative or disruptive space but as the true foundation of the entire cultural edifice,’ wrote Bernstein. ‘And it is is this constellation of tropes that our era has absorbed so deeply that it has become a central element of the stories consumed by illiterates as much as by college students, by professors as much as prisoners waiting for parole, and by unwanted kids like Charles Manson, abandoned in a succession of juvenile homes.’

‘The concept of the psychopath,’ observes Janet Malcolm, ‘is, in fact, an admission of failure to solve the mystery of evil — it is merely a restatement of the mystery.’

It's a form, says the Underground Man. It's simply a form.

20

'Mystical or metaphysical criticism of everyday life, be it from poets or philosophers, ends up in a reactionary position,' observes Lefebvre, 'even if and above all when its arguments have *formal* similarities with those of the "left". Escape from life or rejection of life, recourse to outmoded or exhaused ways of life, nostalgia for the past or dreams of a superhuman future, these positions are basically identical.'

21

In his mind, Travis Bickle is a man of integrity. When he applies for his job as a taxi driver, the boss asks about his driving record. 'Clean,' he says, 'like my conscience.' He imagines himself an honourable knight, on the side of good, a defender of the weak, taking a stand against the corruption and sleaze he sees all around him. His degraded social position affords him no security, no status, no dignity, so he means to reclaim them by force. He will stand up for himself. The morality of his position becomes indistinguishable from the assertion of his self-respect.

But his empowering fantasy is a closed loop. His performance before the mirror confronts you with the unnerving spectacle of a mind turning in on itself, uncoupling from reality in real time, its peculiar intensity arising from the way it draws you into his fracturing consciousness. The scene is spliced with the mirror's reversed images. When Travis draws his gun, you are not looking at him, but his reflection. His hair is suddenly parted on the opposite side; now the gun is in his other hand. The camera assumes his point of view, forcing you to see through his eyes, as he aims the gun at himself, at the phantoms of his diseased imagination. He is his own enemy. But he is also aiming at you, as you become him.

Travis is disturbing because his fantasies of integrity and puissance have been instilled in him by the same culture that demeans him. He is the cracked product of a society that makes promises it will never keep, less an aberration than the logical outcome of its deracinating forces. He is an embittered outsider, a mentally unstable loner, a nobody who becomes an agent of destruction because he imagines himself a hero. The film cleaves to his perspective in formal recognition of the fact that his feelings of rage and disgust are not groundless. He is isolated and socially maladjusted, uncouth in a way that sometimes seems like innocence, but he is not merely delusional. The disintegration of his sanity occurs in a world that is every bit as sleazy and corrupt as he perceives. He looks out at a decadent reality where concepts of honour and virtue seem to have no purchase, no credible idiom. When he enacts his fantasy before the mirror, he slips into the culturally naturalised pose of a mobster or hoodlum, the illegitimate

shadows of the businessman and the lawman, whose power they arrogate and whose authority they parody. He is seduced by the negative glamour of their criminality, their semblance of defiant autonomy.

In the absence of any reliable social compact, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate authority has no meaning. There is no functional difference between the businessman and the mobster, the policeman and the criminal, the politician and the confidence man — they are all part of the same corrupt system, the same sick society. Where there is no justice, no responsibility, no adequate means of redress, no respect, there is only will and force. In such a context, the assertion of righteousness assumes an inverted form. The only path that appears to remain open to Travis is self-reliance. His desire for integrity thus draws him into the reactionary role of the vigilante, whose integrity is violence and whose morality is lawlessness.

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'If Dostoevsky is right, our heroes are false,' wrote Girard. 'They are false because they flatter our illusion of autonomy. Our heroes are just new romantic lies destined to prolong the Promethean dreams to which the modern world desperately clings.'

23

In Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Red Parts*, there is a scene where she attends a screening of *Taxi Driver*, a classic film she has not seen before. As she waits in line, she becomes aware that the audience consists almost entirely of young male film students, who it transpires have seen the film many times before and proceed to treat the screening as an uproarious occasion. Her amusement at their antics disappears when the film arrives at the scene where Travis picks up a passenger, played by Scorsese, who describes in grotesque detail how he is going to murder his unfaithful wife. The subject of Nelson's memoir is the reopening of the case of her aunt, murdered more than three decades earlier, and the disjunction between the misogynistic dialogue and the whooping and guffawing of the audience suddenly seems obnoxious. The fictional representation of horrific realities is reabsorbed into the culture as kitsch: it has become so familiar that its meaning is trivialised and obscured.

The film itself seems to anticipate the ambiguity. *Taxi Driver* has the general form of a tragedy, but of a distinctly modern kind. It is the story of the catastrophic downfall of a pathetic nobody. It culminates in a stage strewn with corpses. Yet there is no catharsis. The film does not conclude with the indelible image of the fatally wounded Travis, his ammunition exhausted, pointing a bloody finger at his temple and miming blowing his own brains out — a detail that is in the script (it's what he has been wanting to do all along, said Schrader) — but with a dreamy sequence that makes

sense only as an implausible dying fantasy, in which Travis saves Iris and becomes celebrated as the virtuous hero he imagined himself to be. At the last moment, the film turns away from its own terminal logic, cloaking itself in bleak irony. There is no way out of the delusion.

24

So clearly does the Unabomber's manifesto seem to reflect certain commonplace philosophical themes that Alston Chase, in his biography of Kaczynski, incriminates one of the more unusual culprits in the annals of true crime: the Harvard curriculum. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he argues, the General Education course was steeped in cultural pessimism. Students were taught that there was no rational basis for morality, since all ethical positions could ultimately be traced back to emotional or egotistical impulses. They were presented with what Chase — himself a Harvard graduate of that era — describes as a 'double whammy of pessimism. From humanists we learned that science threatens civilization. From the scientists we learned that science cannot be stopped.'

Chase contends that Kaczynski was deeply affected by this culture of despair, unable to resolve or move beyond the apparent philosophical conflict. The result was a textbook case of underground psychology. Kaczynski 'wanted to say "Fuck you!" to the world and to be appreciated by it . . . He revered science, yet blamed science for the world's ills . . . he hated everything about himself.'

The psychological determinism that Kaczynski was anxious to escape thus seems to capture him all too easily. His court-ordered psychiatric assessment found that he was mentally competent to stand trial, but provided ample evidence of his deep personal unhappiness and social alienation. He was unable to form friendships; he had never had an intimate relationship. The report traced his first murderous impulses to his time at the University of Michigan, where he had earned his PhD in mathematics. Kaczynski had planned to approach a psychiatrist about the possibility of a sex change operation, but lost his nerve. He was afraid the psychiatrist would think he was sick and try to control his mind.

His manifesto adopts the rhetoric of a revolutionary, but his journals provide ample evidence of his vanity, resentment and rage. 'My motive for doing what I am going to do is simply personal revenge,' he wrote in April 1971, at the start of his bombing campaign. 'I do not expect to accomplish anything by it.'

Kaczinski believed that he was smarter and better than other people: 'The fact that I was able to admit to myself that there was no logical justification for morality illustrates a very important trait of mine . . . I have much less tendency to self-deception than most people . . . I tended to feel that I was a particularly important person and superior to most of the rest of the human race.'

'I'm guilty inasmuch as I'm cleverer than everyone around me,' says the Underground Man.

25

The lurid fiction, the arthouse schlock, its sensationalism ratified on the grounds of its literary and philosophical pretensions, becomes the prophetic truth; the twisted romanticism of the anti-hero's heroic fantasy is the true harbinger of social disintegration. The real murderer wears the mantle of fiction. He appears before us in the legible form of an intellectual, a frustrated writer, a character from a novel, a twisted shard of modernity. We know him in advance, and in so knowing him we don't really know him at all.

'As soon as the subject who desires recognizes the role of imitation in his own desire,' writes Girard, 'he has to renounce either his desire or his pride.'

Dostoevsky tells us that the Underground Man does not exist, but *must* exist.

This essay was written with the support of the Australia Council for the Arts.

James Ley
Alienation is the Philistinism of the Intellectual
James Ley on the Underground Man
12 Mar. 2023

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