

Ted Kaczynski was wrong about violence but mostly right about technology

James Schultz

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Ted Kaczynski died June 10 in a federal prison. He was there because he killed three people and injured 23 others.

At worst, we might remember him as nothing more than a deranged killer. A more sympathetic view would see him as a brilliant mathematician whose isolation and mental illness drove him to violence (which, to be clear, I do not condone). Whatever story we tell about his character, I think it is important that we understand what he had to say about technology, because for the most part, he was right.

In his 1995 manifesto, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” Kaczynski proposed that we abandon industrial society because it is bad for human freedom, dignity, and well-being. He argued that it already causes problems like “poor diet, excessive labor, environmental pollution [,] noise, crowding” and mental anguish from the mismatch between industrial society and the conditions in which humans evolved. In the future, he argued, technologies like nuclear weapons, fossil fuels, genetic engineering, and “intelligent machines” will make it likely to cause even greater suffering.

Most people seem to think we can either reform our way out of these problems or that even if we can’t, there is no alternative. Kaczynski rejected both of these positions. He argued that it was not possible to separate the “‘bad’ parts of technology” from the “‘good’ parts.” Technology is “a unified system.”

As an example, he wrote that progress in “modern medicine” depends on progress in “chemistry, physics, biology, computer science.” Progress in those fields depends on “a technologically progressive, economically rich society.” Such a society inevitably gives rise to the “‘bad’ parts of technology” because these cannot be “predicted in advance.” Industrial society is too complex, changing too fast, and is without historical precedent.

As a positive ideal to oppose industrial society, Kaczynski argued we should look to “wild nature” and “primitive man.” We should “live close to nature,” in small communities, use “small-scale technology,” and support ourselves via subsistence farming, herding, fishing, or hunting. He said that “primitive man . . . was better satisfied with his way of life than modern man” because “primitive man” is in direct control of the important decisions affecting his (or her) security and well-being and can pursue challenging goals autonomously. In his view, getting from industrial society to “primitive” society will involve a “revolution.” This revolution need not be violent or sudden, but it will require reducing the human population.

Recent developments seem to make Kaczynski’s arguments even more compelling than they were in 1995. Last month, the Earth Commission group of scientists published a report, as summarized by the Associated Press, finding that, “Earth has pushed past seven out of eight scientifically established safety limits and into ‘the danger zone.’” Also recently, Geoffrey Hinton, one of the “‘godfathers’ of the modern artificial intelligence movement,” warned about the threat that AI poses to the continued existence of the human species. In a recent study, psychologists found that the Hadza, traditional hunter-gatherers, reported higher levels of happiness than Polish people. And if we include the interests of nonhuman animals in the calculation, then the case against industrial society is even stronger.

Taking on industrial society sounds like an overwhelming task, but there are practical steps we can take right now to get us closer to the ideal of “wild nature.” People can educate themselves. They can start by reading Kaczynski but also others — Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, Jacques Ellul, David Skrbina, Derrick Jensen, and John Zerzan — who’ve challenged the merits of industrial society. We can empower girls and women. When they have control over their lives, fertility rates go down. We can oppose new development. We can support legislation that restricts access to technology. And we can support organizations like the Green Party and the Anti-Tech Collective.

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