

A Critique of the Unabomber's Ideology

Ted Kaczynski was probably just insane

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From 1978 to 1995, Theodore J. Kaczynski sent sixteen bombs to airlines and universities, leading the FBI to codename his case the University aNd Airline BOMBER, or “UNABOMBER.” It was not until the publication of his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, published because the still anonymous Kaczynski had threatened to send a bomb with the intent to kill if he did not see his manifesto in the paper, that it became clear why he had chosen his targets. In his manifesto, he explained why he thought the techno-industrial system had to be destroyed for the good of the human race, hence his hatred and targeting of airlines, scientists, and programmers. While the man committed acts of terrorism and was sentenced to life in prison for murder, his manifesto is not simply the ramblings of a mentally ill evil genius. It contains a considerable amount of argumentation justifying the author’s deeds, and as political scientist James Q. Wilson wrote, “If it is the work of a madman, then the writings of many political philosophers—Jean Jacques Rousseau, Tom Paine, Karl Marx—are scarcely more sane”. Despite the actions of the author, a work of such ideological austerity deserves to be considered.

Ted Kaczynski’s main thesis is that “industrial-technological society cannot be reformed ... in such a way as to prevent it from progressively narrowing our sphere of freedom ... thus, permanent changes in favor of freedom could be brought about only by persons prepared to accept radical, dangerous and unpredictable alteration of the entire system. In other words by revolutionaries, not reformers”. As indicated, freedom is the highest good to Kaczynski, who defines freedom not as rights but 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”. In regards to his term, “power process”, Kaczynski thinks

Human beings have a need (probably based in biology) for something that we will call the “power process.” This is closely related to the need for power (which is widely recognized) but is not quite the same thing. The power process has four elements. The three most clear-cut of these we call goal, effort and attainment of goal. (Everyone needs to have goals whose attainment requires effort, and needs to succeed in attaining at least some of his goals.) The fourth element is more difficult to define and may not be necessary for everyone. We call it autonomy.

To Kaczynski, not all goals are equal. He uses

the term ‘surrogate activity’ to designate an activity that is directed toward an artificial goal that people set up for themselves merely in order to have some goal to work toward .. For many if not most people, surrogate activities are less satisfying than the pursuit of real goals ... Here is a rule of thumb for the identification of surrogate activities. Given a person who

devotes much time and energy to the pursuit of goal X, ask yourself this: If he had to devote most of his time and energy to satisfying his biological needs, and if that effort required him to use his physical and mental faculties in a varied and interesting way, would he feel seriously deprived because he did not attain goal X? If the answer is no, then the person's pursuit of goal X is a surrogate activity.

Therefore "science is a surrogate activity because scientists work mainly for the fulfillment they get out of the work itself," as is everything but goals that involve the satisfying of biological needs. Kaczynski classifies everything people do in modern society, from money making to research to social climbing to politics as surrogate activities and believes that these are less satisfying than "real", biologically necessary goals like hunting for food. Modern society disrupts the "power process" because "real goals" no longer take any effort and for people to approach happiness they must engage in surrogate activities which are less satisfying in themselves and which are often set up for them by "the system", disrupting the fourth element of the power process, which was evidently so necessary for Kaczynski that he developed out of his frustration a pure hatred for technological society and those who develop the technology that Kaczynski believes necessarily limits his freedom, regardless of who is in charge, as

The System is not George W. Bush and his advisors and appointees, it is not the cops who maltreat protesters, it is not the CEOs of the multinational corporations, and it is not the Frankensteins in their laboratories who criminally tinker with the genes of living things. All of these people are servants of the System, but in themselves they do not constitute the System (Skrbina & Kaczynski, 2010).

Kaczynski never clearly defines what the system is, but it becomes clear that the system is some abstract singularity of technology that influences human behavior in its own service, meaning the production of more technology and the restriction of "freedom", and not any particular oligarchy of organic tissue that actually has consciousness and can make decisions. This is of course lunacy yet it is clear that this is what Kaczynski thinks given his description of the "System" and his belief that no reform is possible, no changing of the guard, but only a revolutionary destruction of the technology itself is enough to bring back freedom.

This is how he justifies his bombings, and there is reason to doubt every bit of it. Kaczynski's ethical assumptions are conventional for his time period but not necessarily correct: the idea that human freedom and the happiness he associates with it are goods in themselves is not necessarily a correct one. Furthermore, on the descriptive plane, Kaczynski seems to ignore variation within the human population and essentially project his psychological make-up onto the masses. There is reason to believe that the average man would not be happier running around in the woods, under the threat of

starvation by the unforgiving Mother Nature if he fails to find a deer to spear, with no freedom to choose any differently, and finally, Kaczynski's technologically deterministic view of history is bizarre yet orthodox and itself might be a trick played on him by the system he wants to see destroyed, as to prevent him and those like him from acting in an effective manor.

Beginning with Kaczynski's ethics, it is clear that he sees his definition of freedom as one of if not the highest good, meaning that a system that necessarily restricts freedom should be torn down. This ethic, however, is suicidal and based on parochial hedonism, valuing the momentary pleasure of Ted Kaczynski above and beyond the pleasure of future humans and even the existence and security of life itself. Kaczynski is not combatting what he sees as impending destruction, rather, he believes that the continuation of "the System" will lead to "permanently reducing human beings and many other living organisms to engineered products". This is bad if freedom is the highest good, but would engineered products even feel that way? Probably not. Kaczynski is like a wolf lamenting the creation of dogs. "They're engineered products with no autonomy" says the wolf. But the dog's existence is infinitely more secure than the wolf's and furthermore the dog probably suffers less because the dog does not want autonomy like the wolf does, due to domestication. A dog on its own would be in trouble but in the instance of the creation of a domesticated class there must necessarily be a creator class that rules over the domesticated. It is the quality of this aristocracy that determines the morality of the domestication process insofar as existence and its security is the highest valued good. Kaczynski, being suicidal, does not recognize this and thinks that existence involving domestication is bad by default because freedom is the highest good and its lack is in itself bad. But dogs are not bad and Kaczynski's self destructive actions easily show the result of his ethic as it relates to existence. In defying his own valuation of freedom, his philosophy resulted in him pleading guilty to murder charges in exchange for a life of no freedom as to avoid execution. Kaczynski failed to consistently live by his ethic and when he did its results proved to be destructive and freedom depriving.

Furthermore the ethic seems to be based on Kaczynski's thought that it is the freedom of the power process that leads to happiness and contentment: "Consistent failure to attain goals throughout life results in defeatism, low self-esteem or depression". He does superficially admit that some people do not suffer from unhappiness due to a lack of freedom, saying "These are docile types who would have been happy as plantation darkies in the Old South". He thinks, however, that these are rare types and nonetheless he sneers at them, indicating that for Kaczynski, freedom is necessary for self-happiness and that his ethic is actually about the attainment of personal pleasure and only about the pleasure of the rest of humanity insofar as their psychologies are mere projections of Kaczynski's: "To their credit, most of the slaves were NOT content with their servitude. We do sneer at people who ARE content with servitude".

Kaczynski seems to fail to deeply realize that surrogate activities are not "less satisfying than the pursuit of real goals" and that the modern loss of certain freedoms

does not result in “low self-esteem or depression” in the majority of the population as it is. One analysis found that rights negatively correlate with national happiness, and when controlled for other factors their presence of lack explains no variation in national happiness (Diener³, 2009). Income was the second strongest predictor and while “individualism” was the strongest predictor, this factor is heavily correlated with more technological societies, primarily those with European populations, not less technological societies. Another analysis, this time of individuals, found that the quality of social relationships is as good of a predictor as work life, and health and positivity are both better predictors (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005). And work life itself generally means job ease and income level, not the degree to which it is similar to running around in the woods hunting. In fact, as Kaczynski demonstrated, almost anyone who wants to can still go live the hunter gatherer lifestyle in rural America can do so, yet people seem to be happier with their families, their electricity, and their white collar jobs. Kaczynski was highly neurotic, a trait that is a good negative predictor for individual happiness, and seems to have projected his painful perception of society into everyone and onto technology, when the data indicates that it was not modern comforts but more likely the lack of social relationships and positive perceptions of self and others that explained Kaczynski’s unhappiness (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005).

As people become more and more like “manufactured products,” they should become, on average, more and more content with restrictions to their freedom, and already the extent to which a nation has rights has a negative or null effect on the extent to which that nation is happy. Kaczynski would have been more correct to argue, then, that technology reduces social connections and positive perceptions of others and that because this causes a “lack of satisfaction” and “low self-esteem or depression,” technological progress is immoral. But this hypothetical argument and his actual argument are both flawed for another reason: nothing is inevitable without technology. Kaczynski’s technologically deterministic view of history is flawed. Technology has increased human autonomy in many ways and the recent trend of freedom restriction via control technologies is not inevitable. Like a hammer, any technology can either be used to build houses or to bash in the skulls of scientists: its use depends on the wielder.

While also implying that the system is some type of abstract technological singularity, bound to the will of no men, which is not true, and that therefore it cannot be reformed, only destroyed, he more explicitly states he believes in history as being “the sum of two components: an erratic component that consists of unpredictable events that follow no discernible pattern, and a regular component that consists of long-term historical trends”. These trends are not controlled by people: “ Societies develop through processes of social evolution that are not under rational human control”. Societal trends are, of course, dictated by technological changes and not by rational human will:

The conservatives are fools: They whine about the decay of traditional values, yet they enthusiastically support technological progress and economic

growth. Apparently it never occurs to them that you can't make rapid, drastic changes in the technology and the economy of a society without causing rapid changes in all other aspects of the society as well, and that such rapid changes inevitably break down traditional values.

Kaczynski seems to ignore the variance of human will, thinking that all societies will respond to technological changes in the same way. Saudi Arabia's existence is a strong testament to this fact. Israel is rich but still prohibits gay marriage and has many policies, such as those prohibiting or discouraging non-Jews from voting, that are seen as racist relics of the past in the United States. So no, there is nothing about the invention of the radio, car, television, internet, or automation that necessitates the breakdown of freedom or other values. While these technologies may allow certain changes, or make them affordable, they certainly do not necessitate them, even if they were evolutionarily optimal. One example that Kaczynski uses to try to argue that technology inevitably reduces freedom is the car: he observes how now to get around people must buy a car, they must obey all the rules of the road and walking is more difficult because of intersections and dangerous highways. This ignores the fact that in many other countries walking is much easier and if vehicular travel is necessary at all there is abundant public transport, cutting down on the frustrations of driving and maintaining a car, allowing people to either walk like they would in the past or to sit on a cheap bus and do something else while they are easily taken from one point to another far more efficiently than before the invention of vehicles. It was a choice made by American leaders to not have this foreign reality, but rather to develop unlikeable highways and car-crammed cities sprawled out so that a car was necessary. This was despite the fact that public transport and having things in walking distance is more optimal in terms of a nation's fuel consumption and productive space. The leaders made an error, possibly to line their own pockets by selling cars, and they are the problem in Kaczynski's traffic frustration, not the invention of the car itself. This can be even further illustrated since it can be demonstrated that the car has actually increased travel freedom, even in the US, compared to how it was in the past. Previously, it was obviously functionally impossible to travel as far and with as much ease and with as much choice as it is now with a car, or if it was possible it was a highly onerous and dangerous Pilgrim's expedition that often resulted in death. Furthermore, even in terms of locations that are in suitable walking distance, Kaczynski seems unaware of the fact that free travel was illegal in medieval Britain and elsewhere! In fact, he seems ignorant of the conditions of serfdom and ancient peasantry in general. In a far less technological time Kaczynski would not have been allowed to go to Harvard as a nobody from a small town, and then to go sit in the woods and hunt and make bombs and freely travel to the mailbox to send them. Hunting was illegal for serfs, and they were expected to work their whole lives on a piece of land assigned to them by birth. In no way could these people satisfy their power process as much as Ted Kaczynski was allowed to in the technologically developed, American 20th century. He would not have

been allowed any choice in his surrogate activity, which was math, much less the option of dropping out of society to pursue the “real goal” of hunting or starving in the woods. And since any destruction of technology would be more likely to revert humanity to a pre industrial farm life instead of a hunter gatherer lifestyle, since farming is not a technology as much as it is a different set of food acquisition instincts versus those of the super-ancient proto humans, Kaczynski is essentially advocating for a return to serfdom in the interests of people being better able to achieve the “power process”. It’s absurd.

Kaczynski’s entire scheme of self justification is extremely shaky. His primary stance is that he was justified in his bombings because the technological system must be annihilated in the interests of human freedom. However, it is unclear that human freedom should be of any good in itself. It is also unclear that technology necessarily limits human freedom, even as Kaczynski defines it. It is likely that Kaczynski developed this ideology by projecting his own psychology onto everyone else, leading to his determinism error which ignores variance of human wills and his empirically unsupported claims about what gives people satisfaction and happiness in life. What this means is that more than being something he wrote because it is true, Kaczynski wrote this manifesto as a post-hoc rationalization of his criminal urges. While it would be unimaginable for a Harvard graduate math genius to go 35,000 words without making an interesting point, Kaczynski’s central thesis is empirically suspect and his motivation are of course even more so. His lasting semi-popularity indicates a common frustration with “the System”, but mail bombs and techno-regression are not the optimal way forward. Rather, it is human behavior, caused by certain genotypes which use technology as their tool, that causes Kaczynski’s frustrations. Some sort of genetic intervention like embryo selection is the only way forward.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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This essay was written a few years ago and never released. I figured I would release it now due to Ted Kaczynski's recent passing.

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