

Ted Kaczynski, Anti-Left Leftist

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Ted Kaczynski was recognized as a genius at an early age. He graduated high school at age 15, began attending Harvard at 16, and earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics at 20. Five years later, he had attained a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Michigan. The next fall, he began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, and was soon awarded a tenure-track appointment, making him the youngest professor ever hired by the institution.

Then he abruptly resigned after just two years at Berkeley. He moved to the outskirts of Lincoln, Mont., where he built and began residing in a cabin with no electricity or running water—working odd jobs here and there, and engaging in intensive private studies of social theory. Within a few years, he began experimenting with explosives. Over almost two decades, he would carry out a series of bombings against scientists and corporate representatives that killed three, maimed several, and created widespread panic and fascination.

In a 1995 letter sent to a number of prominent media outlets, Kaczynski vowed to end his campaign of terror if a major journalistic outlet would run his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, in its entirety and unedited. He seemed to believe that the publication of this document would trigger a revolution. On Sept. 19, 1995, *The Washington Post* ran the “Unabomber Manifesto” in accordance with Kaczynski’s specifications. And true to his word, Kaczynski sent no more bombs. Contrary to his hopes, however, no revolution materialized. While some cultural critics lauded particular elements of the manifesto as poignant, provocative, or insightful, many others were unimpressed. Few read through the full 35,000-word tract. And in any case, there was little appetite for revolution in the 1990s.

Instead, Kaczynski was arrested shortly after the manifesto was published. His brother had recognized the writings and tipped off federal law enforcers to his whereabouts. Kaczynski was sentenced to eight consecutive life sentences, without the possibility of parole. He spent the next quarter-century in a supermax prison in Colorado. In 2021, he was transferred to a less secure facility in North Carolina owing to his declining health. There, he committed suicide and was found dead in his cell on June 12, 2023, aged 81.

Despite the lackluster reception of his original manifesto, Kaczynski began to enjoy something of a “moment” toward the end of his life. In the wake of the Great Recession and the Great Awakening, Kaczynski’s writings were interpreted in a new light, and he began drawing acolytes from across the political spectrum (there was even a term for it: getting “Ted-pilled”). Multiple documentaries have been released in recent years analyzing his life, his deeds, and his thought. A collection of his essays, entitled *Technological Slavery*, was published in 2010, with a fourth edition released last year.

On the whole, Kaczynski’s writings aren’t as original or interesting as he seems to have believed. He drew intensely from a small number of thinkers, whom he didn’t credit. His arguments, minus the calls for violence, largely expressed the conventional wisdom of his day. As his biographer Alston Chase puts it, “the manifesto was ignored not because its ideas were too foreign, but because they were so familiar.... Its message

was ordinary and unoriginal. The concerns it evinced about the effects of technology on culture and nature are widely shared, especially among the country's most highly educated." The document, says Chase, amounted to "cliché."

Yet there are moments of striking lucidity that help explain his appeal. In an essay collected in *The Technological Society* titled "The System's Neatest Trick," Kaczynski observed that there is widespread frustration in society, and many have an impulse to rebel against the conditions and constraints they are forced to operate in. However, they don't know exactly who or what they should be fighting to solve their malaise. "The System," the Unabomber argued, "is able to fill their need by providing them with a list of standard and stereotyped grievances in the name of which to rebel: racism, homophobia, women's issues, poverty, sweatshops ... the whole laundry-bag of 'activist' issues. Huge numbers of would-be rebels take the bait." In embracing these causes, activists end up working to entrench and reinforce the System, even while they mistakenly view their behaviors and commitments as dangerous and subversive.

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In the past, he wrote, "the System was not yet committed to equality for black people, women, and homosexuals, so that action in favor of these causes really was a form of rebellion." This makes it possible to conceptualize antiracism, feminism, gay rights, and environmentalism as "radical," despite the reality that the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency, multinational corporations, and almost all prominent cultural and knowledge-producing institutions aggressively embrace these causes today.

Yet in truth, "agitation against racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like no more constitutes rebellion against the System than does agitation against political graft and corruption. Those who work against graft and corruption are not rebelling, but acting as the System's enforcers: They are helping to keep the politicians obedient to the rules of the System." Likewise, he argued, those who campaign against homophobia, sexism, or racism are ultimately helping the System suppress attitudes and behaviors that lead to instability and inefficiency.

In all this, the Unabomber foreshadowed what's now taken for conventional wisdom in the corporate boardroom. As UBS Wealth Management Chief Economist Paul Donovan has shown, identity-based bias, prejudice, and exclusion tend to be quite expensive for multinationals. In the hyper-competitive global spaces in which many companies operate, the pursuit of profit maximization often aligns cleanly with the pursuit of greater diversity and inclusion. It increases the efficiency of capitalist enterprises to avoid losing access to talent, partnerships, or customers due to "irrational" discrimination. Properly managed, diversity provides a range of competitive advantages with respect to innovation, problem-solving, forecasting, knowledge production, and quality control. Indeed, economists estimate that 20 percent to 40 percent of all economic growth in the United States since the 1960s was due simply to improved allocation of talent—particularly, the opening of more opportunities to highly talented women and minorities at the expense of less skilled, less "hungry," and less innovative white men

(who had largely taken their positions for granted prior but are now “hungry” as well, owing to heightened competition, which only enhances corporate profits further).

It thus shouldn’t be surprising that, as legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw has observed, “every corporation worth its salt is saying something about structural racism and anti-blackness, and that stuff is even outdistancing what candidates in the Democratic Party were actually saying.” And it isn’t just words or high-profile donations to organizations like Black Lives Matter. Multinational corporations have also leveraged their political clout to defy and overturn laws perceived to disadvantage immigrants and racial and sexual minorities. This shouldn’t be mistaken for altruism or mere cynical gesturing—it is in the material interests of many symbolic-economy institutions to become more diverse and inclusive and to resist external impediments to their ambitions in this regard; there is nothing radical about it. Or in the words of JP Morgan Chase honcho Jamie Dimon:

I’m not woke. And I think people are mistaking the stakeholder capitalism thing for being woke.... What we give a shit about is serving customers, earning their respect, earning their repeat business.... Any senator or congressman who says that’s woke, they’re not thinking clearly because I want to win in the marketplace. I want the best employees, I want happy employees.

The point isn’t to change the world. It’s to make more money. The System’s neatest trick, Kaczynski argued, is to convince its would-be opponents that causes like feminism, antiracism, and gay rights are genuinely subversive and anti-capitalistic. Insofar as they labor under this illusion, aspiring radicals are coopted into serving as the System’s enforcers.

As Kaczynski explained, there are still a solid number of people “who resist the social changes that the System requires, and some of these people even are authority figures, such as cops, judges, or politicians.” Engaging in acts of #Resistance against this minority faction of contemporary elites reinforces a sense among activists that they are “fighting the power,” instead of serving it. The misunderstanding is magnified when activists chastize their ideological fellow-travelers for being insufficiently committed to their expressed ideals or insufficiently radical in putting them into practice.

Even though most institutional authorities completely embrace the social changes that the System demands, “would-be rebels insist on solutions that go farther [*sic*] than what the System’s leaders consider prudent, and they show exaggerated anger over trivial matters.” In so doing, they hold leaders’ feet to the fire on behalf of the System, while often fully convinced that they are working against its interests.

And in addition to serving as the System’s enforcers, Kaczynski argued, these “rebels” also function as convenient lightning rods. They serve as foils for popular frustration over new rules, expectations, and norms that are being imposed on behalf of the System.

For instance, the ease with which people are “canceled” today (across the political spectrum), and the heavy degree of self-censorship that many undertake to minimize risk of “cancellation,” are fundamentally a product of weak workplace protections. In-

stitutional gatekeepers are allowed to wield too much arbitrary power and surveillance (extending even into our personal lives or internal states). And craven institutional leaders permit social-media mobs to dictate institutional behaviors and policies. This, even though they know that these mobs will soon rage against some other target next week, forgetting all about the current controversy.

In response, workers could collectively demand reform: greater privacy (and better protections) with respect to their off-work activities; more due-process protections; increased transparency for internal investigations and decision-making; an end to back-room arbitration requirements for wronged employees; sounder grievance procedures for intra-office disputes, larger severance packages in the event of sudden termination; fewer part-time and contingent roles; more benefits-eligible permanent full-time positions; and more freedom-of-expression and conscience protections at work (most places of employment literally have none—not even those enshrined in the First Amendment). These are, in short, the historic demands of labor progressivism, and for those alarmed or frustrated by “cancel culture,” measures like these could meaningfully reduce the prospects and costs of “cancellation” for workers across the board.

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However, rather than focusing on these kinds of issues—rather than putting the onus on employers to change how they do business (as they are typically the ones who make the ultimate decision to “cancel” or not), people take out their anxiety and frustration against “SJWs” and “snowflakes” run amok. The spectacle of the activists, their flamboyant and abrasive rhetoric and methods, their often unreasonable demands and expectations—all this diverts attention away from the actual power structures, relevant decision-makers, and institutional mechanisms at work in these cases.

Kaczynski mirrored this failure to reckon with the institutional contours of “the System.” Rather than attend to concrete decision-makers and local contexts in his social analysis, he devoted almost all of his intellectual efforts to railing against “the System” in the abstract. And as a consequence, rather than transcending shortcomings in how others theorize and discuss society, his work largely reflects the same patterns of thinking as the leftists he mocked and condemned.

René Girard famously declared that “the effort to leave the beaten path forces everyone inevitably into the same ditch.” The writings of Ted Kaczynski provide an excellent illustration of this maxim.

Kaczynski never actually named the System he was railing against. He defined the object of his ire primarily in negative terms. This is perhaps because he despised the left and didn’t want to appeal to, validate, or align with socialists, communists, or liberals in any way. However, from his writings, it’s clear that what he was fundamentally against was globalized capitalism and the legal, political, and technological structures that enable it. What’s more, despite his efforts to distinguish himself from the left, Kaczynski’s analysis of the System suffered from the same defects that plague left-aligned theory and rhetoric today.

In contemporary discussions of inequality, “systemic,” “institutional,” or “structural” interpretations of inequalities have become all the rage. On one level, this is laudable. Looking at social structures, how institutions operate, or how systems function in concrete terms can provide powerful insights into how inequalities arise, are sustained, and replicate themselves over time. However, when these ideas are mobilized in less concrete ways, an appeal to “systems,” “structures” and “institutions” can serve as a means to mystify, rather than illuminate, social processes. These frameworks can be, and regularly are, deployed by elites to absolve themselves of responsibility for social problems and to justify inaction. They are evoked in hazy ways to avoid getting into specifics—because the specifics are both complicated and uncomfortable.

For example, many academics and media types who insist upon talking about inequalities as “systemic” decline to think, in concrete terms, about their own place in the system and that of the institutions they support. In fact, many rail against “systemic” inequality while persisting in the belief that the losers in the symbolic economy—“fly-over country,” downwardly mobile whites, workers connected to manufacturing and extractive industries—are the primary ones to blame for the world’s ills. Meanwhile, these same elites are often explicit in counting themselves among the victims of the prevailing order (typically in virtue of identifying with some historically disadvantaged or marginalized group). Such assertions are more or less completely devoid of serious consideration of social structures or institutional operations—they must be. It would otherwise be impossible for people at or near the top of the social order to convince themselves that they are near the bottom, while painting the system’s victims as its beneficiaries.

In a similar vein, elites who identify with historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups regularly pretend as though a “win” for them personally is a “win” for the groups they identify with. In doing so, they fail to consider the social structures that prevent gains for people like them from “trickling down” in any meaningful way. Elites enriching themselves, empowering themselves, or pampering themselves does little to assist the genuinely vulnerable, impoverished, and excluded. A truly “structural” analysis of inequality would make this clear. Yet many who are keen to evoke “systems,” “structures” and “institutions” in abstract ways persistently decline to consider the extent to which their personal fortunes—to say nothing of their values, priorities, and worldviews—actually are (or, more likely, *aren’t*) meaningfully connected to most others in the groups they identify with.

Perhaps most convenient, the largely abstract focus on social structure typically elides considerations of individual agency. In truth, structure and agency are deeply intertwined: As a result of social structure, we all make decisions under constraint. Some have many more constraints than others—particularly those who have little financial or symbolic capital. The flip side, however, is that some have far more agency, and their decisions have a disproportionate impact on others. Those working in fields like academia, journalism, consulting, and other symbolic professions must be counted among this privileged group. Evoking “the system” is often a way of obscuring this

fact. By claiming to be mere cogs in the machine, helplessly bound by the prevailing order just like everyone else, contemporary elites implicitly absolve themselves of any unique responsibility for social problems (or any unique obligation to make sacrifices or changes to address those problems).

In a similar fashion, many contemporary intellectuals and media personalities evoke “history” as a chief cause of contemporary injustices. However, history doesn’t do anything. Analyzing contemporary injustices in historical terms often obscures how and why certain elements of the past continue into the present. For instance, present-day racial inequalities aren’t some inevitable byproduct of America’s history of slavery and Jim Crow. They are instead reflections of people today, here and now, taking actions that systematically favor certain groups of people over others. Consider racialized differences in home appraisals: Studies consistently find that real-estate agents value homes at significantly different levels depending on the race of the seller. Even the exact same property can be appraised differently depending on who identifies himself as the seller. This tendency isn’t a mere product of “history.” In fact, far from being a holdover of the past, racial gaps in property appraisal have grown dramatically since the 1980s. Likewise, large cities across the United States were more segregated in 2019 than they were in 1990.

These recent trends aren’t going to be well-explained by appeals to slavery, Jim Crow, and historical redlining. The growing gaps are instead overwhelmingly a function of contemporary practices and policies. Although appeals to America’s racist and sexist history are often portrayed as some kind of critique of the social order, they often serve as an alibi: It isn’t we who are to blame, but those terrible people in the past (who are all conveniently dead and thus can’t be held to account).

“Historical,” “structural,” “systemic,” or “institutional” narratives also tend to present an overly mechanical and deterministic picture of the world. In truth, events are often quite contingent. Societies and institutions are highly dynamic. People cycle in and out of institutions, geographic areas, relationships, and life altogether. Individuals learn and grow. The physical environment is constantly evolving. New ideas and technologies are constantly being developed. Resources are ceaselessly being extracted, transformed, and shifted around. Money is always changing hands. Actors external to a particular society or institution are constantly attempting to shape the world in the service of their own ends, influencing the possibilities and incentives for others. Structural and/or cultural persistence in the face of this constant churn doesn’t just “happen.” It’s an accomplishment.

However, there is very little agency in Kaczynski’s writings. Everyone and everything seem to be pawns of the System, and the System itself has no master (leaders in the System are ultimately subservient to it). Nor does the System have a genuine will of its own (despite regular allusions to what the System wants or needs). Within this framework, it can be hard to get a handle on how or why anything happens.

Were we to analyze how systems and institutions operate in more concrete terms, rather than just waving our hands at “the system,” “history,” or related abstractions,

it would become clear that inequalities within institutions tend to be produced and sustained by everyday practices in local contexts. They can be modified or unmade by the same.

Likewise, it is in discrete behaviors and interactions by actual people in concrete places at particular points in time that abstractions like “race” or “gender” or “class” or “sexuality” express themselves in the world. To the extent that the macro forces and abstract notions that sociologists focus on exist at all, it is only through people enacting them in local contexts at specific times. And agents typically have many degrees of freedom with respect to if and how they enact a social order. However, cosmetically radical narratives about “systems,” “structures” and “history” are often mobilized by the winners in the prevailing order to absolve us of responsibility for the choices we make, through hyperbolically deterministic narratives on the one hand, and unduly pessimistic analyses on the other.

Again, Kaczynski’s writings bear all the hallmarks of contemporary mainstream left analysis. Like most who prefer to blame capitalism (in the abstract) for social problems, rather than getting into the weeds of how adverse conditions come about and how they might be ameliorated, Kaczynski could only imagine wholesale systemwide destruction and rebirth as a cure for what ailed society.

Marx famously insisted that capitalism was bound to be supplanted by communism in the near future because capitalism was rife with internal contradictions that could only be resolved by abolishing private ownership. Kaczynski likewise claimed that the System would inevitably destroy itself, that a revolution was on the horizon.

Taken to their logical endpoints, these deterministic assumptions rendered Kaczynski’s writing and terrorism more or less superfluous. Even in a world where a revolution did occur as imagined, it could not have been a consequence of anything Kaczynski said or did. According to his own arguments, the System’s days would be numbered, and a revolution would occur independent of whether or not he ever came to understand these realities or tried to act upon them at all.

In principle, then, Kaczynski should have been able to see the vanity of his actions. In a world where the revolution would occur regardless of whether or not Kaczynski murdered and maimed a bunch of people, his choice to engage in violence served little purpose beyond satisfying his own bloodlust. He was no hero. He was no martyr. He was simply killing time by killing people until the System collapsed of its own accord. Unfortunately, intellectuals are notorious for failing to apply their own theories to themselves. Kaczynski relentlessly mocked the left for lacking self-awareness and engaging in futile or counterproductive struggles. This did not help him avoid the same pitfalls.

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One of the great tragedies of Ted Kaczynski’s life is that, although he managed to go off the grid for a spell, even in his cabin in Montana he couldn’t manage to bring himself out of the clouds. He studiously avoided examining specific institutions and processes with an eye to how they might be reformed. Instead, he ended up avoiding society

altogether—first as a recluse, then as a prisoner—while railing incessantly against “the System” in the abstract. Despite denigrating modernity for forcing people to conform to technological abstractions, he tried to make the world conform to his own mental model. To the extent that he is remembered, it will be less for his ideas than for the damage he did to others in pursuit of utopia.

If there is anything to learn from Ted Kaczynski, it’s to touch grass before you end up as worm food.

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The Ted K Archive

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