

Freedom from a radical point of view

An evaluation of the concept of freedom in Ted Kaczynski's
Unabomber-manifesto

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Contents

Industrial Society 3
Disruption of the Power Process 4
What is Freedom? 7
The practical Implications of Freedom 10
Implications for Democracy 11
References 12

Ted Kaczynski (also known as Unabomber) argues in his manifesto that technological society is narrowing down human freedom. Based on an analysis of society and human needs, an argument is constructed that pleads for a revolution against the technological system. While his bombings killed three people and injured 23, can we still learn something from his arguments?

When a former Harvard attendee argues for a revolution against contemporary society, what can we learn from his argument? When he justifies several bombings with his conception of freedom, should we not pay attention? How is it possible that a highly gifted man who achieved a PhD in mathematics turns his energy towards cruelty – based on a value that seems to come right from the cultural mainstream – freedom? In 1995, *Industrial Society and its Future*, written by Ted Kaczynski became popular as the *Unabomber manifesto*. In this 232 paragraph-long manuscript, he argues that industrial society is consequently reducing human freedom. This is not a result of the actions of the elite or other actors but instead a result of the technological system which became independent of mankind. According to Kaczynski, the only way to achieve freedom is to rebel against the industrial society and overthrow the technological system.

Kaczynski lived most of his life in a remote cabin in the hills of Montana, U.S. - self-sufficiently and apart from society. In my essay I argue that the conceptualizations itself produce the conclusions which Kaczynski is drawing. Though his ideas implicitly rely on important theorists of the social science literature, e.g. Jaques Ellul and C. Wright Mills, his decisive formulation results in his radical position. I will explain why he can start with a widely accepted value like freedom to construct an argument that in the end aims to overthrow contemporary society. The analysis of this manifesto will serve as a critical mirror – to see society ‘from the outside’ on the one hand, and to understand the formation of radical thought on the other hand.

Industrial Society

To understand Kaczynski’s conception of freedom, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework in which it is developed. I will illustrate his idea of freedom by explaining the concepts of industrial system, power process and surrogate activity. The industrial system is never defined explicitly, though we can outline the concept based on how it is used in the manifesto. The industrial system is used synonymous with industrial society, the system, and society, it refers relatively broadly to the societal circumstances in which we are embedded. It is made clear that these circumstances are strongly influenced by technology. The word system though, clearly indicates specific properties, for example that it is unified and dividable into functional parts: “Modern technology is a unified system in which all parts are dependent on one

another” (Kaczynski 1995: §121). Society is understood as a system in which all parts are inter-related and where it is impossible to permanently change any part without changing all other parts as well. Political and economic developments are therefore subsumed under the paradigm of technological necessity, which is considered to be the core attribute of the technologic system. The ‘system’ is divided into functional elements. Let us consider the following quotes:

“The system has to order human behavior closely in order to function.”
(Kaczynski 1995: §114), “if the system needs scientists and mathematicians a campaign is run to get young adolescents to study these subjects.”
(Kaczynski 1995: §78)

Kaczynski anthropomorphizes the system by using a vocabulary that is connected to human action (“to order”, “to need”). In these sentences above, “the system” is the subject and “human behavior” and “young adolescents” are the objects of the sentence. This grammatical choice inverts the perceived agency and reduces the real agents, humans, to passive and receiving objects.

This grammatical choice outlines a general problem of functionalist approaches, which is the tendency to under-emphasize opportunities for agency. Referring to Parsons (1951) systemic functionalism, this was already criticized in the realm of the Social Sciences (Holmwood 2005, Wolin 1960).

When introducing a value like freedom into a macro-functionalist framework, it is obvious that the actor’s opportunities seem to diminish. Using passive grammar for human action and active verbs for the system’s ‘actions’ even reinforces that. Nonetheless, the ‘observed’ reduction of freedom is a result of the theoretical choices made, not an attribute of society that was ‘discovered’ by the theory.

Disruption of the Power Process

In the following, I will outline the power process. According to Kaczynski, it is a human need which originates in biology (Kaczynski 1995: §33). Its four elements are considered to be goals, effort, the achievement of goals, and autonomy. It is not the need for power that needs to be satisfied but the power process itself:

“Nonattainment of important goals results in death if the goals are physical necessities, and in frustration if non-attainment of the goals is compatible with survival. Consistent failure to attain goals throughout life results in defeatism, low self-esteem or depression. Thus, in order to avoid serious psychological problems, a human being needs goals whose attainment requires effort, and he must have a reasonable rate of success in attaining his goals” (Kaczynski 1995: §36-§37).



Based on these considerations, Kaczynski (1995: §39-40) introduces the surrogate activity defined as:

“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, or let us say, merely for the sake of the ‘fulfillment’ that they get from pursuing the goal. [...] In modern industrial society only minimal effort is necessary to satisfy one’s physical needs. [...] The only requirements are a moderate amount of intelligence and, most of all, simple OBEDIENCE [emphasis in original]”.

“But for most people it is through the power process — having a goal, making an AUTONOMOUS [emphasis in original] effort and attaining the goal — that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired. When one does not have adequate opportunity to go through the power process the consequences are (depending on the individual and on the way the power process is disrupted) boredom, demoralization, low self-esteem, inferiority feelings, [...] etc.” (Kaczynski 1995: §44).

All these symptoms are considered to occur in any society, though in modern society these symptoms are available on a large scale (Kaczynski 1995: §45). This is due to the fact that people have to live under conditions that are vastly different from those under which the human race evolved (Kaczynski 1995: §46). These abnormal conditions include “excessive density of population, isolation of man from nature, excessive rapidity of social change, and the breakdown of natural small scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe.” (Kaczynski 1995: §47) In paragraphs 48 – 58, Kaczynski argues that all these aspects have occurred in societies before (e.g. Kaczynski 1995: §56, the American Frontier Society as an example for rapid social change), but it never resulted in all the psychological suffering mentioned. He therefore argues, that these illnesses result mainly from the disruption of the power process.

“Men now live in conditions that are less than human. Consider the concentration of our great cities, the slums, the lack of space, of air, of time, [...]. Think of our dehumanized factories, our unsatisfied senses, our working women, our estrangement from nature”
(Ellul 1964: 7).

This quote from Jaques Ellul’s *The Technological Society* (1964) could also easily be taken from the manifesto. Ellul’s writings actually forestall many of Kaczynski’s arguments regarding technology and inhumane working conditions that were mentioned above.

The power process and its disruption condenses Kaczynski’s main critique of the abnormal life conditions and reflects the theoretical exceedance on Ellul’s groundings.

In the paragraphs 59 – 76, the disruption of the power process is elaborated in detail:

“We divide human drives into three groups: (1) those drives that can be satisfied with minimal effort; (2) those that can be satisfied but only at the cost of serious effort; (3) those that cannot be adequately satisfied no matter how much effort one makes. The power process is the process of satisfying the drives of the second group. The more drives there are in the third group, the more there is frustration, anger, eventually defeatism, depression, etc. In modern industrial society natural human drives tend to be pushed into the first and third groups, and the second group tends to consist increasingly of artificially created drives” (Kaczynski 1995: §59-§60).

These artificially created drives include surrogate activities and needs that are artificially created by the advertising and marketing industry (Kaczynski 1995: §63). The identity crisis is seen as a product of the search for a suitable surrogate activity (Kaczynski 1995: §64). Regular jobs are considered to be unsatisfying as they are directed towards others people’s goals and offer no autonomy (Kaczynski 1995: §65).

The power process, as described here, initially seems to be an incredibly powerful concept. Most psychological suffering in modern society is related to the disruption of it (Kaczynski 1995: §59). By defining the power process as a human need and then stating that there is a ‘disruption’ of it in modern society, Kaczynski constructs a theoretical weapon to point against industrial society. Men are damned to pursue surrogate activities, they are restricted and cannot achieve happiness in this form of society. After all his elaborations, who would disagree? The connotation of ‘abnormality’, which is brought by the claim that in contemporary societies life conditions do not allow a ‘real’ power process, enforces the radicality of the argument. Stating that there is something abnormal in our contemporary lifestyle and offering the examples of population density and breakdown of small-scale community cogently frames the theoretical picture. The direction towards a revolution though, is achieved through the notion of ‘abnormality’ itself. It is abnormal, therefore we have to find a way to get back to ‘normal’. It is true that humanity lived for the last 200.000 years in small-scale communities and constant social environments (Christian 2004: 171). Rapid change, population density etc. are circumstances humanity had to deal with especially in the 200 years since the industrial revolution. Analytically though, the concept of normality has no empirical content. The concept of normality is another tool to attach a normative direction to empirical observations – it is a contested concept that does not provide a more precise understanding of reality, but generates a notion of unhealthiness that makes the argument more persuasive.

What is Freedom?

Kaczynski (1995: §94) proposes the following definition of freedom:



“By ‘freedom’ we mean 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. Freedom means being in control (either as an individual or as a member of a SMALL [emphasis in original] group) of the life-and-death issues of one’s existence: food, clothing, shelter and defense against whatever threats there may be in one’s environment.”

To paraphrase this concept of freedom, it is (1) the opportunity to go through power process, (2) control of the life-and-death issues of existence, and (3) absence of large organizations interference with one’s own actions. Two and three are actually rearticulations of premises that are already found within the first aspect of freedom. Freedom is not a second argument for revolution but the concept of the power process. Once we understand the concept of power process, we already know that control of “life-and-death issues” is not possible in industrial society. This is a result of the following definition: As we know there are three types of human drives – those that can be easily satisfied, those that need serious effort, and those that cannot be satisfied however hard we work (Kaczynski 1995: §59). Control of life-and-death issues are in the third type of possible drives, as, in modern society, we are dependent on people working in the nuclear power plant doing their job correctly. We are dependent on politicians to avoid wars with other countries and we are dependent on the decision of large organizations to produce food and clothing in a benevolent way. Based on that, we cannot fully control the “life-and-death issues”. What is left as the definition of freedom is the opportunity to go through the power process.

This power process unfolds as the core concept of the manifesto. It is, by definition, impossible to go through it in modern society as we are always dependent on large organizations. Most activities we choose are unfulfilling surrogate activities because of the lack of autonomy. The fact that freedom is reduced in contemporary society is not an empirical observation, it is the result of a logical syllogism of ‘freedom’ and the ‘power process’. Defining the power process as a human need is a crucial postulate to create the tension that is needed to argue for a revolution. In the Social Sciences, the implications of social theory that ‘defines’ human needs was criticized by Fitzgerald (1985), who referred to the writings of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man* especially. Marcuse distinguishes between ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs, and analyzes late capitalist society from the axiom of the existence of ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs. Fitzgerald (1985: 89) outlined the authoritarian tendency and the denial of individual freedom that follows from this distinction. Though Marcuse never took action towards a revolution or a foundation of an educational elite, we see that the argument in the manifesto indeed resulted in an authoritarian approach: For Kaczynski (1995: §213-214), a revolutionary elite is necessary. And as we see in his bombings, it also resulted in the non-acceptance of individual freedom.

The conception of freedom based on the power process results in an understanding of freedom that is deeply undemocratic, meaning that it is only defined by individual needs and not in relation to other individual's needs. Freedom is only conceptualized as a personal freedom. By offering this narrow definition and by not offering the forum to discuss it, it has exactly the authoritarian tendency that was projected by Fitzgerald.

The practical Implications of Freedom

Kaczynski threatened to make further bombings, if the manifesto were not be published in major American newspapers (Skrbina 2010: 18). A threat like this can be considered an interference with other people's freedom, according to Kaczynski though, this threat is legitimate. In a paragraph on the freedom of the press he also positions himself to the bombings. The freedom of the press is considered to be a freedom with very low practical value on the individual level. It limits concentration of political power, but for the average citizen, it is practically worthless (Kaczynski 1995: §96). The problem about freedom of the press is that "anyone who has a little money can have something printed, or can distribute it on the internet or in some such way, but what he has to say will be swamped by the vast volume of material put out by the media.

[H]ence it will have no practical effect" (Kaczynski 1995: §96). The argument could easily be continued in the following:

"In a mass, far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion" (Mills 1956: 304).

This second quote is taken from C.W. Mills *The Power Elite*, not from *Industrial Society and its Future*. Both authors criticize the lack of opportunities to influence mass society. Mills works with a concept of political deliberation and democracy in his analysis, while Kaczynski uses freedom (to go through the power process) as a value rational point of reference. Kaczynski and Mills both state that there is less freedom, less autonomy, less democracy and more stress, more deprivation in the societies they analyzed. Mills concludes that a power elite is found at the top of society which influences the shape and development of a given society. Kaczynski goes beyond the social realm and concludes with the human need for the power process and the inevitable tendency

of technology to reduce human freedom. Kaczynski (1995: §96), though, continues his argument in the following:

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

I leave it to the reader to develop an opinion on this conclusion.

Implications for Democracy

Taken together, the radicality of Kaczynski’s argument derives from two crucial theoretical decisions. Firstly, the concept of freedom is introduced in a functionalist framework, this alone producing tension. Secondly, freedom is actually a reformulation of the power process – a concept that is by definition in conflict with contemporary forms of society. Therefore, Kaczynski’s concept of freedom is highly problematic logically and for its practical implications. However, the manifesto can serve as a tool for reflection – and in this way, there is still potential in the considered arguments.

The diagnosis of C.W. Mills that we live in a mass society is still up to date. Sending letter bombs to university and airline officials is doubtlessly an extreme way to handle mass society and the problem of not being heard. Democracy, defined only by its representational aspect, certainly contains the risk of not offering the chance of participation to all individuals. Consider low voter turnouts in most western democratic societies or the advent of right wing populism in many European democracies (Alber/Kohler 2008, Wodak/Mral/Khosravini 2013). It is an expression of frustration and nonparticipation of major parts of the commonality, even though one could assume that the advent of social media in the last years could have contributed to a feeling of participation. The problem of mass society and its undemocratic tendency was tackled by Blokland (2011: 395), what I have stated here in brief is developed there in full detail.

The great risk that I tried to unmask in this essay is the following: It is possible to build an argument that advocates killings and an armed uprising against contemporary society – based on accepted arguments of the realm of sociopolitical knowledge. This leads to two conclusions: First, we need to develop a critical view on the construction of radical arguments. But secondly and more strikingly: If there are excluded people that

can rely convincingly on sociopolitical knowledge to argue for revolution and murder – then we have to take these arguments even more seriously – not only as theorists but also, and more importantly, as public intellectuals.

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