

Death and the cabin

Paul Demarty considers the life and death of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. There are lessons for Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and all who despair of majoritarian politics

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In April 1996, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation descended upon an obscure location, five miles south of the small town of Lincoln in Montana.

Their target was a cabin, without electricity or running water, built to house one man - and ultimately the man himself, Theodore (Ted) Kaczynski, who was photographed on the perp-walk to the feds' car. In the pictures, he looks exactly as you would expect of such a frontiersman: old jeans ripped and faded, beard bushy, rough and unsculpted, affectless in defeat. But, of course, he was not arrested for being a rural eccentric, of which there are a great many in 'Big Sky Country'. He was arrested for a series of mail-bombings, of increasing sophistication, spread over the best part of two decades, which killed three and injured dozens, several of whom were permanently maimed.

Kaczynski is now dead, at 81. He died in a prison hospital, where he had been moved from a Colorado 'supermax' prison in 2021 after a terminal cancer diagnosis. His death is believed to have been by suicide.

In life, he was always contemptuous of attempts to diagnose him as insane - indeed he sacked his legal team when they proposed such a defence, preferring to make a plea bargain for life in prison without parole. The question of his sanity is interesting, and complicated. Yet more interesting is the way his strange life predicted anxieties that have only become more pronounced over time, especially today. On the left and the right, one finds people prepared to allow him some credit for his worldview - laid out most extensively in the 35,000 word manifesto, *Industrial society and its future*, which he succeeded in strong-arming his pursuers into having published in *The Washington Post*. No doubt, with his terminal return to the front pages, many more will finally get round to reading it.

Online rightists sometimes speak of being 'Tedpilled', when they realise the role modern technology plays in the pervasive alienation they reject. Yet it is not only the right. John Zerzan, the anarcho-primitivist icon, carried on a correspondence with him in prison, though Kaczynski thought little of the primitivist movement himself. His criticisms of the emptiness of industrial civilisation find further echoes in the writings of people like Paul Kingsnorth (who, admittedly, is no longer straightforwardly categorised as leftwing). And his attempts to put his ideas into practice serve, perhaps, as a warning for the contemporary green, direct-action movement - from Extinction Rebellion to Just Stop Oil, to Andreas Malmö.

Cabin fever

Kaczynski was born into a working class Polish-American family in 1940s Chicago. From an early age, he demonstrated a fearsome intellect, as a result of which he was put forward a year at school. This seems to have begun a pattern of alienation from his peers - exacerbated when he was admitted to Harvard University at only 16. There he was enrolled in a bizarre psychological experiment, in which the subjects were

abusively berated for their personal aspirations, with their humiliations being recorded and played back to them for many years. He nonetheless graduated with flying colours in mathematics, and went on to write a prize-winning PhD thesis; but his career as an academic stalled out quickly, because he was incapable of teaching due to his social impairments.

It was after that, in the early 1970s, that he moved to his famous cabin. Though he hoped to become self-sufficient, he remained reliant on support from his family. Yet, in late-20th-century America, there was only so far one could get from civilisation. As it encroached on his paradise, he began to fight back with low-level acts of sabotage; at this time, also, he began to read political writings - especially by the Christian anarchist, Jacques Ellul - that gave his anxieties a more concrete form. The first of his bombings took place in 1978; he stepped up the pace of his campaign after a road was built through a favourite hiking spot in 1983.

His targets had enough coherence to give rise to the FBI codename UNABOM - "university and airline bomber" - that got him his popular soubriquet of 'Unabomber'. Yet they are a slightly strange assemblage. There were academics in various technical fields, yes, and an attempted airline bomb that could have had truly awful consequences; but also the owners of various computer stores, an advertising executive and a timber industry lobbyist. All had flitted across Kaczynski's attention as either pliant servants of the machine or violators of humanity's relationship to nature and itself. He left clues for the authorities deliberately, often red herrings.

Yet he had a problem: if he could see the coherence of his campaign, nobody else could. His motivations were ideological - but nobody had access to his ideology. He thus took his most audacious step, promising to end his bombing campaign if a major news outlet would carry, in full, his manifesto, entitled *Industrial society and its future*. Initially the editors of the pornographic magazine *Penthouse* agreed, but Kaczynski held out for a better offer - *Penthouse* could print it, but he "reserve[d] the right to plant one (and only one) bomb intended to kill", unless a more august periodical stepped in. After more frantic conferences between state agencies and editors, *The Washington Post* stepped in.

Kaczynski's brinksmanship proved to be the act of hubris that the authorities hoped for. In a bitter twist, his brother and sister-in-law recognised many of Ted's talking points and catchphrases, and realised, to their mounting horror, the identity of the mysterious Unabomber. They tipped off the FBI and, in due course, brought federal agents to the door of that Montana cabin.

Manifesto

Kaczynski's life thereafter - in the bowels of a supermax prison - was necessarily less dramatic than his years as an enigmatic domestic terrorist. Yet they were enlivened by correspondence with many interested parties on the outside. Whatever else *Industrial*

society and its future was, it was not the work of a psychotic or a moron. It is a coherent exposition written out in numbered, cross-referenced paragraphs, as if it were an analytical philosophical demonstration. Its focus is narrow - on technological society's deleterious effects on human wellbeing - and the text is all the clearer for it. (Despite his association in the popular mind with 'deep green' causes, he explicitly brackets the environmental questions and barely mentions them).

Indeed, the first significant section is merely a series of psychologising criticisms of the left: he characterises leftism, from communists to "politically correct types", as a symptom of a frustrated will to power and in most cases of "oversocialisation" (an overidentification with moral codes that are, in practice, often ignored in social life). He is not simply being mean: indeed, his point is that 'leftists' merely exhibit in heightened form pervasive defects of technological society (in this respect the manifesto can be compared to Christopher Lasch's *The culture of narcissism*, though Lasch's psychology is distinctly Freudian and notably less crude than Kaczynski's).

Why are we all so miserable, then? Kaczynski posits an evolved psychological need for what he calls the "power process" - the experience of defining a goal, working towards it alone or as part of a small group, and then reaping the benefits, and doing so "autonomously" - not under the domination of others. By satisfying our basic needs, technological civilisation throws a wedge into the "power process": it thereby breaks the link between human needs and the ordinary activity of humans themselves. The result is the proliferation of "surrogate activities", whether they be done for wages or merely as a hobby, that have no meaningful connection to one's needs or wellbeing.

Science, the paradigmatic activity of the age of technology, is the most surrogate of all activities: Kaczynski ridicules the idea that the scientific activity might be motivated by curiosity or philanthropy rather than a pathetic attempt at displacing the anomie of the society that science has built. The natural terminus of technological civilisation is the transformation, by means of social and genetic engineering, of the human individual into something altogether different and wholly pliable to the machine.

Against this he proposes a "revolutionary" struggle in terms that might almost be confused with some toytown Bolshevik sect, but for his *open* contempt for the rabble. The ideology of the 'revolutionaries' must offer a sharp contrast between the masses and the elites, and be strictly internationalist (since national competition is a great spur to technological progress ...). Perhaps, in the end, the whole thing might come off without violence (except in the case of the poor sods whose fingers he had already blown off, of course).

An early version of this essay was apparently written in 1971, and it can be assumed that Kaczynski would have encountered student radicalism in his days at Berkeley. The fact that he writes almost like a sub-Maoist urban guerrilla sect member is thus presumably no accident - building castles in the air and (not quite) calling it the "mass line". Taking that into account, the strange incongruity of his anthropological-political speculations and the bombings they sought to justify can be explained: the process is exactly the other way round. At a certain point, Kaczynski despaired of the political

prospects of his ideas; he took to living off-grid as best he could; but he could never get far enough from the world.

We have noted his use of the grammar of psychological diagnosis to critique the left, something which must in the end be called out as an illegitimate tactic. That said, we are reduced to the same thing, and must diagnose him not as a paranoid schizophrenic (as his lawyers attempted to do), but a depressive. Individual terrorism - so consistently and laughably ineffective in achieving its aims over its whole existence - can only bespeak despair and consequent nihilism. His assertion that this was the truth of leftism was, alas, so much projection.

Does Kaczynski have inheritors today? We have mentioned certain esoteric figures on the right; his strange pop-psychology categorisation of types and enumeration of human needs reads almost like it might have appeared in an over-ambitious Substack post, and still more his rather snippy anti-leftism. His identification of technology with bureaucratic tyranny finds an echo in the conspiratorial rightists who are obsessed with the 'great reset', in which some Davos worthy is going to force everyone to live in pods and eat bugs (or whatever it is this week).

But we must draw a connection to elements of the left, roughly speaking. It is undeniable that we are living through another vogue for eco-activism of a direct-actionist stripe: plainly the *actions* involved are not morally comparable to Kaczynski's exploits, but they remain acts of individual terrorism. The ideology behind Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and the like is avowedly and proudly minoritarian, as in *Industrial society*.

Failure

And there is a logic which drives some such actors towards more dangerous territory: the failure of mainstream greenism and intergovernmental jollies to make even a dent in global warming leads to XR; the failure of XR leads to more aggressive tactics on the part of Just Stop Oil and the like; JSO's inability to attack oil infrastructure leads it to attack ... oil *paintings*, with no better reasoning than Kaczynski had for bumping off random computer shop managers. That will not work either; the temptation, for some individuals, will be to go the final step (that temptation will be heightened by the dishonest activities of state provocateurs), For those who demur without abandoning the minoritarian, sub-Bakuninist framing of the struggle, the result will be disillusionment and demobilisation - perhaps the purchase of a small cabin somewhere remote!

Fortunately, Kaczynski was wrong about the conditions of political action in 1995, just as Erica Chenoweth was more recently. Of course, all politics *begins* with minorities - somebody has to have the idea first - but the revolutionary moments of the past make perfectly clear that broad masses are quite capable of playing an intelligent, active role in political activity. They are neither the idiotic mob feared by Kaczynski nor the dead weight of complacency that drives climate direct-actionists up the wall.

We said that *Industrial society and its future* was not the work of a madman or an idiot, but it clearly is the work of a man living in a cabin, digesting his favourite books, cut off from any common project that might have disciplined his speculations, or his programme of carefully-planned yet somehow random violence. He is exactly wrong about surrogate activities, which he equates with membership of large organisations - be they mass employers, political parties or whatever else.

Secession from society - to the Montana cabin or to Walden Pond - is the surrogate: *collective action* is the true method of confronting our particular existential needs. Kaczynski ridiculed the idea that 'good' technology could be separated from 'bad', but could only do so by rewriting primitive society as a mirror image of the American frontiersman. It is mass society that allows us to diagnose any problems with any societies at all.

The Ted K Archive

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