

What We're Still Getting Wrong About the Unabomber

Ted Kaczynski's violence—reexamined in a new
biopic—fascinates US audiences, but not for the reasons we
think.

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In 1995, *The Washington Post* published a 35,000-word manifesto in a bid to prevent the detonation of a bomb at Los Angeles International Airport and end the FBI's most expensive manhunt to date. The text, "Industrial Society and Its Future," was penned by Theodore Kaczynski, otherwise known as the Unabomber. Between 1978 and 1995, Kaczynski, a Harvard-educated mathematician living off the grid in Lincoln, Mont., killed three people and injured 23 more with bombs that he constructed in his cabin and sent through the mail. He was known to the public as the Unabomber in reference to his targets, which were almost exclusively universities and airports.

It is uncomfortable to admit that the manifesto, while the product of a morally unjustifiable actor, is not the ranting of a lunatic. Violence doesn't need to be justifiable to be comprehensible. As citizens of an imperial power, we are in fact quite good at understanding and even justifying violence—in the name of progress, democracy, economic stability, the rights of women—so perhaps we should be a bit more curious about the function of our parallel and ghoulish obsession with the supposedly inexplicable violence of psychologically aberrant individuals. While Kaczynski was certainly disturbed, repeated popular attempts to "understand" his individual problems (there have been four feature-length films and two Netflix series since his capture, not to mention innumerable plot arcs organized around similar characters) seem more like anxious efforts to ignore something else.

Like all manifestos, "The Industrial Society" is extreme, unspecific, and problematic, but it contains remarkable moments of cogency. Its popularity with anarchists, radical environmentalists, and other black-bloc types makes sense. Its opening lines are not out of place 27 years on:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in "advanced" countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. The continued development of technology will worsen the situation.

In 2018, we learned that a company called Cambridge Analytica had partnered with Facebook to collect data and build profiles of non-consenting users. This had been going on for the better part of a decade. Governments launched inquiries; the cofounder of WhatsApp announced support for a boycott of its parent company. The public at large performed shock appropriate to the scale of the scandal, but the collective indignation was perfunctory. Despite these damning revelations, the suggestion that technological progress has its own internal logic, that surveillance is an internal tendency rather than an externality, is typically met with accusations of Luddism or dismissed as mere moral panic. The drumbeat on the left, at least since Lenin praised Frederick Winslow Taylor for his scientific management, has been that it is capitalism,

not technology, that is the problem. This is certainly true to some extent, but the corollary—that the technology of capitalism can and will be used differently under socialism or whatever other alternatives may come into being—obstructs vital critical approaches to an apparatus that increasingly incorporates and organizes all aspects of our lives. Talking about Kaczynski may be a way to obliquely address our ambivalence, or even anger, toward a social reality at odds with vaunted American ideals of freedom and independence. Talking about Kaczynski—unambiguously bad, maladjusted, and safely in prison—may also be a way to repress this ambivalence. More than likely, it is both.

The Ted K Archive

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