Gen Z's worship of the Unabomber

He was the violent prophet of our tech-dystopia

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September 12, 2022

"The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." Writing those words as the introduction to his 1995 anti-technology manifesto *Industrial Society and its Future*, Ted Kaczynski couldn't have known that they would someday spawn an entire genre of memes. But so they have.

Eighty years old and serving eight consecutive life sentences in federal prison for his career as the Unabomber, Kaczynski has been revived as an online folk hero. Spend enough time online and you'll stumble across the 'Ted-pilled' community, where "Uncle Ted" is a prophet who predicted the Silicon Valley-created dystopia we live in.

Kaczynski's online popularity has coincided with a flurry of Unabomber-related content in recent years, including three separate TV or film projects: a four-part Netflix documentary, a dramatised *Manhunt* series on the FBI's investigation, and *Ted K*, a feature-length biopic set on location near the infamous Lincoln, Montana cabin where Kaczynski built the bombs he used to kill three people and injure 23 more.

This spring saw the publication of a book by Kaczynski's neighbour in Montana, and this summer Apple TV released a podcast on the case. He's also been name-checked by Right-wing influencers clearly trying to keep up with the zeitgeist, like Fox News host Tucker Carlson and Arizona Senate candidate Blake Masters. Carlson last year praised Kaczynski's "smart analysis" of systems and large organisations, while Masters recommended Kaczynski's manifesto in a podcast interview in March, saying "there's a lot of insight there." Over 25 years after he was arrested, there is no end to our interest in the Unabomber. Why do we still find him so compelling? And why is Kaczynski cool now with very online types, from Right-wingers on 4chan to "anti-woke" leftists on Reddit?

While the recent Unabomber retrospectives mostly rehash his life and the facts of his case, the current zeitgeist revolves more around his ideology. Kaczynski's manifesto argued that technological progress — the "Industrial Revolution and its consequences" — posed an existential threat to humankind by turning people into "engineered products and mere cogs in the social machine". Stripped of their autonomy by a faceless, unaccountable system, humans endured psychological suffering as they were forced into "over-socialization", Kaczynski's term for a state of being in which the industrial society's codes and mores have replaced a person's innate selfhood.

Zombified in this way, people blindly applauded technological advances which spelt societal and environmental doom. There was no hope of fixing the current system. The only option remaining, in Kaczynski's view, was to overthrow it completely through revolution — by any means necessary. Though Kaczynski repeatedly emphasises the non-political nature of his revolution, he has a lot to say about political movements, particularly Leftist ones, which he saw as cadres of over-socialised do-gooders preoccupied with irrelevant identity concerns. Conservatives weren't much better: they were "fools" who failed to understand that technology was destroying the traditionalism they prized.

Gen Z and younger millennials see the truth in Kaczynski's central critique of technology, and its deleterious effects on society. Surrounded by screens from early

childhood, addicted to near-constant media consumption, often lacking basic in-person social skills, many sense a broader problem in their own individual capture by the tech borg. They've grown up in an era marked by mounting terror about climate change, and in which conventional politics seems woefully insufficient to solve any problems. So Kaczynski's manifesto resonates.

Though he could never have imagined such horrors as TikTok in the Nineties, the society he describes — atomised and materialistic, one that has forfeited freedom in favour of technological progress we've been tricked into wanting — chillingly resembles our own. Sure, he cribbed a lot from French philosopher Jacques Ellul, whose book *The Technological Society* deeply influenced Kaczynski. But there's a disquieting reason why Kaczynski is a household name and Ellul, outside of academic circles, is not. Fans tend to either be defiant about the terrorism itself — what better way to offend normies? — or they view it as an unfortunate side plot, perhaps not realising it's the only reason Kaczynski's ideas ever attracted notice. "I honestly wish Uncle Teddy wasn't a terrorist and instead just published the manifesto and let it get popular decades later," wrote Reddit poster "nabberstonguemyanus" earlier this year. "Then we could openly endorse it and not be called incel psychos."

Kaczynski's recent popularity also corresponds with an epidemic of isolated, socially unskilled young men, many of whom appear to be living mostly online. The term "NEET" — not in education, employment or training — has spilled out from the realm of economics research into common usage. The proportion of NEETs who are young men has been increasing in both the US and the UK. Despite sterling credentials and a promising academic career, Kaczynski chose the lifestyle of what would now be called a "NEET". In doing so, he became free to enact his revenge on a system he hated and from which he'd felt alienated even as a child. Few of today's NEETs could, or would want to, deploy Kaczynski's methods. But they admire his refusal to be judged by society's standards and relate to his inability to fit in. Few have the wherewithal to leave society entirely, but many may dream of it.

Kaczynski grew up in a working-class Chicago suburb, one of two boys. He was a gifted student and enrolled at Harvard at age 16. Lonely, awkward Ted struggled socially and participated in a cruel series of experiments run by a psychology professor with ties to the CIA. Kaczynski and the other participants were subjected to degrading interrogations disguised as intellectual debates and aimed at breaking their confidence. Kaczynski later called it the worst experience he'd ever had. Traumatised and increasingly paranoid, Kaczynski went on to obtain his Ph.D from the University of Michigan, then to a prestigious professorship at the University of California-Berkeley. Kaczynski's disillusionment with society hardened at Berkeley, where he decided he could no longer countenance studying or teaching mathematics since it contributed to scientific and technological progress. He left Berkeley in 1969 and floated around for much of the Seventies, sometimes living with his parents and holding down temporary blue-collar jobs, before moving permanently into his 10×12 cabin in Montana.

Beginning in 1978, he planted or mailed 16 bombs mostly to universities and airlines, killing three people and injuring 23. He sent his manifesto to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (and *Penthouse*, though that always seems to get left out) promising to end the violence if they published it. With encouragement from the government, who thought publishing the document could help crack the case, the *Post* did so. Kaczynski's brother David and his wife Linda recognised Ted's writing and alerted the FBI, who arrested him at his cabin in April 1996. Cue the iconic mugshot: Kaczynski in an orange jumpsuit, bearded and grizzled, a far cry from the handsome, clean-cut young professor photographed on the Berkeley campus. He spent 25 years in ADX Florence, a federal supermax prison in Colorado known for housing high-profile or particularly dangerous inmates, before being moved to a medical facility late last year.

There's a strange thrill to the story. How many of us believe so deeply in our philosophical principles that we would give up all our modern comforts? American culture is strongly influenced by the myth of the frontier loner, fiercely independent and living on his own terms. We fear this type, but we also respect him. What makes Kaczynski unique is that he had it both ways, finding freedom in seclusion while also fulfilling that other very American compulsion: to be noticed. Unlike other wilderness hermits such as Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Kaczynski influenced society even more by dropping out of it than he would have otherwise. McCandless' Kerouackian journey ended grimly in a broken down bus in the Alaskan woods where he died of malnutrition. Kaczynski made himself world-famous and forced the public to reckon with his ideas. He hasn't even seemed to mind prison, from where he has exchanged letters with supporters and even fallen in love with a female pen pal. He's continued to influence politics; a 2018 story in *New York Magazine* described his dealings with a faction of radical environmentalists.

That view — of the Unabomber as a John Brown-esque maverick driven by a higher ideal — is one way to look at it. Another way is to consider Kaczynski as a deeply lonely man driven to violence as much by personal grievance as by principle. He was unable to form relationships with women, an incel in other words. Kaczynski's bonds with his family were strained and he eventually cut his parents out of his life entirely, blaming them for pushing him to attend Harvard before he was mature enough to handle it. His brother David's 2015 memoir is an often gut-wrenching read.

It's hard not to feel for young Ted, so unprepared and unformed. "His confidence in his intellect was not matched by any visceral confidence in his worth as a person, and over time the divide would only grow larger," David writes, describing Ted on his way off to Harvard. "His self-confidence became infected with doubt, recoiled, and then redoubled toward arrogance and grandiosity." It's poignant to read, in a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation Kaczynski underwent in 1998, that as late as age 45 he still held out hope of meeting a partner and even contacted a local psychologist in Montana to help him learn to build a relationship. Apparently the bombing campaign wasn't enough to fill a deep emotional vacuum.

Knowing this history gives a new dimension to the Ted trend. In valorising him, fans get to feel edgy and subversive for portraying him as a freedom fighter. But they can also relate to the bitter, friendless individual Kaczynski really was. Some are aware of this. "Ted Kaczynski AKA The Unabomber was one of our brethren," wrote poster "Redpill Robert" on a large incel forum in 2020.

It's difficult to empathise with Kaczynski as a person, even if one were willing to set aside his murders to do so. David Kaczynski writes of Ted's cruelty towards their parents, of hateful letters written over a period of years as he minimised contact. He didn't attend his father's funeral after the elder Kaczynski killed himself. Wanda Kaczynski coped by concluding that Ted had been warped by trauma stemming from a hospitalisation as an infant. Ted refused to reconcile with her even as she lay on her deathbed. His resentment towards his parents is an obvious subtext to his manifesto, in sections where he deplores modern child-rearing and schooling. "It isn't natural for an adolescent human being to spend the bulk of his time sitting at a desk absorbed in study," Kaczynski complains.

Even in his journals, Kaczynski acknowledged the personal nature of his plans. "My motive for doing what I am going to do is simply personal revenge," he wrote in 1971. " I do not expect to accomplish anything by it." He considered the possibility that his crimes would "stimulate public interest in the technology question", but equally mused that they would "repel" most people and cause a backlash. In the end, of course, they did both. Kaczynski came across as morally repugnant and arrogant, but he succeeded in forcing his ideas into the mainstream.

There's a mini-Ted inside all of us. Fumbling at an automated self-checkout kiosk while a computerised voice chirps at you; clicking impotently to make a YouTube ad go away; receiving an email about one's information being compromised in a widespread data breach; being served a targeted Instagram ad moments after googling something related: we all know the kind of helpless rage these moments inspire. For members of the younger generations, whose development and social lives have been shaped to a degree unprecedented in human history by technology, Kaczynski represents a lost alternative. Most of them will never commit a violent act; Tedposting will have to do for now.

More and more, it's becoming conventional wisdom that our constant exposure to screens and digital stimuli is bad. Efforts to do something about it crop here and there: some Silicon Valley parents forbid their children from using the very same devices that industry sells to others, and the Chinese government announced last year that it would limit children to three hours of online gaming per week. Among adults, phone addiction is so commonplace that people have begun to lock their phones in boxes to get even a small respite from them — the necessity of this an example of the kind of technological servitude Kaczynski feared. There's an increasing sense of having lost touch with nature, a sense of the world and its societies being diseased. The Unabomber nostalgia wave is a symptom.

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