

Kaczynski, Ellul, and the Future of Anti-Tech Radicalism with Sean Fleming

Sean Fleming & James Ellis

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Introduction

James: This episode I'm joined by Sean Fleming who is a research fellow in political theory at Cambridge. He has recently published an article called "The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-Tech Radicalism" which uses newly discovered archival material to uncover the ideas that inspired Ted Kaczynski.

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So Sean Fleming thanks very much for joining us on Hermitix podcast.

Sean: Thank you very much for the invitation.

James: So we're going to be discussing a paper of yours entitled "The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-Tech Radicalism" which you sort of emailed me about and had come across the podcast via Skrbina and this paper is as you'd imagine about once again the work of Ted Kaczynski the Unabomber but it's focusing unfortunately as a as I mentioned in the Skrbina interview the focus on Ted Kaczynski is usually unfortunately just on the media fanfare surrounding uh the man himself or the crimes as we're all aware and very rarely uh does the actual work which really for Kaczynski himself was the basis and the almost was the foundation of the reasons as to why, the work doesn't really get a look in and even if it does it's taken it as a bit of a meme and rarely do people focus on it in a serious philosophical context which I personally believe uh it's due as people could imagine because I've done two episodes on Kaczynski so before we jump in, Sean, just tell us a little bit about yourself and how this this paper came about.

Sean: Okay so for background I am a political theorist, I'm currently a research fellow at Cambridge and when I started working on this project it was back in late 2018. At the time I was working on more mundane issues related to technology I was interested in questions like who's responsible for damage when a self-driving car runs amok or who should be responsible when an autonomous weapon goes rogue and kills a civilian and so I was reading a lot about the answers lawyers had developed to these questions and I came across this reading list for a law and technology discussion group in the law faculty at Cambridge and for some reason on this reading list was "Industrial Society and its Future" by Theodore Kaczynski.

So I made a note of it and I put it aside for some weekend reading and when I got around to reading it I was pretty floored by it I had never read the Unabomber manifesto you know I'm from a remote part of Canada where the Unabomber doesn't

loom quite as large in the culture as he does in the US and what I was struck by was that the argument wasn't at all conspiratorial I expected it to be a sort of conspiratorial rant like you'd get from the likes of Charles Manson and it was anything but the whole logic of the argument is evolutionary so Kaczynski understands human beings and technology and corporations and states and everything in between as a product of an evolutionary process he's a kind of universal Darwinist he doesn't think there's an evil cabal of technocrats plotting to oppress us he thinks that technology is evolving and that we're sleepwalking into a kind of technological nightmare.

So what I did was a simple library search to see what had been written about the manifesto and I discovered that academics had written hardly anything about it appalled me that political theorists had written almost nothing about one of the most famous political manifestos of the past hundred years at least in the US, so that's where the project started.

James: So and you we were just discussing before that you did have you did have access to uh the full archives of Kaczynski's materials for this?

Sean: Yes so after reading Kaczynski's published material I decided to go deeper and go to this archive in in Michigan there's this archive at the university of Michigan the Laverty (?) collection which has copies of most of the material that the FBI confiscated from Kaczynski's cabin when they arrested him in 1996 and it also has copies of most of his outgoing and incoming correspondence since his arrest so what I was trying to do is figure out where Kaczynski's ideas came from this was the big puzzle I was trying to answer so Kaczynski cites lots of sources in the manifesto it comes with a full slate of footnotes but these are mostly citations for marginal points he doesn't tell you where his main ideas came from and the reason for that is that he had sent letters in his own name to several authors he admired and he feared that if he cited them it would leave a trail for the FBI so if he had cited some of these people we'll talk about them in a minute people like Jacques Ellul or Martin Seligman the FBI would have gone to these people and shown them the manifesto and said have you ever seen anything like this before and they probably would have turned up letters with Kaczynski's name on them that looked a lot like drafts of the manifesto so this is why Kaczynski conceals its sources.

So what I did is I dug through dozens of file boxes of material in the archive and tried to find out what he was reading when he wrote the manifesto so I looked at his handwritten drafts his notes on academic articles and books his library requests and so on and we can discuss what I found, but it's pretty amazing.

How Ellul & Gandhi would challenge Kaczynski

James: Well yeah we'll jump into that I did realize I haven't put the question on here but I do have to ask you the Hermitix question before we jump in; you can place three thinkers living or dead into a room and listen in on the conversation we could already uh have Ted Kaczynski in there and then add three more uh who would you pick do you have do you have sort of a you know specific interests which might draw some people into that room

Sean: Well let's just assume that Kaczynski is a room because he's the one we're talking about right now the second one would be Jacques Ellul for reasons that will become clear I think what's interesting about the relationship between Kaczynski and Ellul is not just that Ellul influenced Kaczynski but also that Ellul anticipated a lot of Kaczynski's arguments and tried to pre-empt them he anticipated that someone much like Kaczynski would eventually come along and try to use his arguments to justify a violent revolution against technology he tried to head that off in advance so it would be interesting to see Ellul's response to Kaczynski because of course Ellul died just before the manifesto was published third one is a toss-up I think I would pick let me I think I would actually pick Gandhi because I think he's an underrated and interesting critic of technology in his own right so he's often thought of as an anti-imperial thinker but the crux of his argument in *Hind Swaraj* which is his most important political work is that modern technology is really the problem it's not just the root of imperialism but it's the thing that an anti-imperial movement should try to reject and overcome so I think Gandhi anticipates a lot of critiques of technology that show up in western political thought later and he'd be an interesting person to have in the room

James: I mean the interest really for me there would be between alolan Kaczynski I think I mean no disrespect to Gandhi but there this the when I spoke to uh I did two episodes on the work of Ellul and I did too specifically because a Ellul's work people primarily focus on the books technological society and propaganda and people rarely look outside of these or if they do they still remain in the vein of thought which is related to that side of Ellul's work and I say side because there's a whole other side to Ellul work which is to do with uh Christianity and uh religion and the scholar that I spoke to basically said people don't realize that Ellul made it clear that you really can't take one side of his work without the other and if you are to take one side of the work without the other that's how you end up with people such as Kaczynski who don't have that thing which can allow you to sort of understand a formal way to

understand how to deal with that technological world so I wonder if the you know the discussion between those two might just end up in it is in heated from the side of Ellul because he predicted this and it happened.

Sean: Yeah I think that's absolutely right the fundamental difference between Kaczynski and Ellul is that Kaczynski is a fundamentally analytic thinker he still has the habits of mind of mathematician if you look at the way he writes it's very straightforward even mechanical his approach is analytical for lack of a better word [Ellul] is a very French continental thinker his approach is dialectical every argument he makes has an antithesis somewhere and so what Kaczynski has done is he's latched on to the thesis that Ellul sets out in his technological works the technological society the technological bluff the technological system and he ignores or jettisons the theological antithesis that you find in Ellul's books such as the ethics of freedom and so the thesis in the technological society is that we are hammed in on all sides by technique the possibility of freedom is gone and this would send you to despair if you took it seriously which Kaczynski does but then there's also the much more hopeful theological antithesis which is that despite the fact that we are determined on all sides by technology we can still find some sort of freedom in Christ because Christ stands outside the deterministic forces of both technology and nature so you can think of Kaczynski as a sort of analytical elulian analogous to analytical Marxism so just as analytical Marxists retain the substance of much of Marx's thought but reject the Hegelian dialectical part Kaczynski does the same with Ellul

James: Do you mind if I ask you are you a religious man?

Sean: No I'm not.

James: So how do you personally understand that that view of Ellul's then? Do you see it as helpful or do you see it as perhaps a hindrance in a way to criticisms of technique.

Sean: That's a really good question and I just to go back to Gandhi I think Gandhi and Ellul have a lot in common in this regard which is that their critiques of technology are inherent spiritual in some way and I'm not sure that you can mount a serious critique of technology without some something resembling theology or metaphysics and I think maybe this is the greatest flaw in Kaczynski's work that he tries to lop off that part and develop a sort of analytic or scientific Luddism and I don't think it works in the end.

James: I would agree because I believe that that form of thinking is based on the thing that he's trying to get rid of, so you're always almost like chasing your own tail, the thing which holds up that view is the thing which you're trying to critique, so it just doesn't really work.

Sean: Well I think there are two ways of reading it there's a more sympathetic way as well so you could read it as self-defeating or as a form of hypocrisy to use the sort of discourse of techno science to criticize technology and he's been charged with that many times but there's also a more sympathetic way of reading it or a more charitable way which is to say that it's a kind of internal critique because if it succeeds it's really

damning if Kaczynski can show that even if you accept the premises of the techno scientific worldview technology is a bad thing or that it's destined to collapse then he's defeated the scientists and technicians on their own terms that seems like a pretty powerful critique if it works the problem is that I don't think it works okay well I think I would ask that question right away then why don't you think it works well the problem is that he has to step outside the scientific worldview that he starts with in order to explain what's wrong with modern technology so he starts with this argument that goes something like this human beings have evolved in a stone age hunter-gatherer environment where biologically and psychologically maladapted to modern technology and this he argues is why we suffer from so much anxiety and depression and eating disorders and self-harm and so on so he says we're miserable because we're in an environment that's radically different from the one in which we evolved well the techno scientist comes along with an easy answer and says okay well why don't we modify human nature to fit technology? What what's wrong with that?

So Kaczynski needs to answer this argument, it's not self-evident based on the mismatch he identifies that the way of closing to get the gap is to destroy technology rather than to modify human beings to fit so he needs an answer and he says something like this well he says; 'it would be incompatible with freedom to modify human beings to fit it would deprive us of freedom'. But this merely pushes the matter back a step, you know why retain freedom if it's making us so miserable and so eventually he needs some metaphysical conception of nature or wildness to understand or to explain why it would be wrong to modify human beings to fit the technological system and he gestures at something like this and in some of his unpublished essays he sketches it out but he never commits to it precisely because it's incompatible with his scientific worldview, he needs some metaphysics of nature, but he can never commit to it, and that I think is the fundamental flaw in his worldview.

James: He can't subscribe to a sort of a metaphysics of nature because he doesn't want to fundamentally hone in nature and define it because that would undermine his own understanding of nature

Sean: Well I think he does define nature, so he says that nature is that which is outside of the control of organized society, so nature is that which is uncontrolled by human beings more or less, but what he needs to explain is not just what nature is, but why it's valuable? Why is untrammelled evolution, which is essentially what his conception of nature is, valuable? Why is it good to allow biological evolution to take its course? Why is it a bad thing to interfere with that? That's what he needs to explain and that's what he can't explain without some sort of metaphysics that goes beyond just a definition of what nature is

James: But of course to ascribe a value to nature is, I would argue, immediately entering into, like, the same discussion of modern economics right? [When one asks] 'What's the value of this' you're entering into the language of the modern world, so you're immediately caught in that problem again of not— of finding a way to try and avoid the language of the modern world.

Sean: I think that's right and even if we come up with some synonym or some other term to signal the normative element that we're looking for here you know the good of nature maybe it doesn't solve the problem he still has to make that leap from is to ought and he's really uncomfortable with making it.

Desmond Morris

James: That sort of touches on Ellul the problem with Ellul but as the other two thinkers I think are even more rarely drawn on the you know you outline Ellul Morris and Seligman so if we could begin with Morris as you know Morris and Seligman has these two other clear influences which you found I believe in the footnotes this sort of hidden document of footnotes of the manifesto why Morris? What was he for Kaczynski?

Sean: Okay so let me briefly explain who Morris is, so Desmond Morris is a British zoologist who is best known for his 1967 bestseller “the naked ape” and it’s one of the early works of socio-biology and the work that most influenced Kaczynski was the sequel to this book that his 1969 book “The Human Zoo” is that modern society is not an urban jungle as it’s often described it’s more like a zoo, we get everything we want in exchange for obedience.

So what Kaczynski takes from Morris is essentially three ideas.

The first is evolutionary mismatch, so the idea that we’re maladapted to a modern technological society is in some sense already there in Ellul but it’s not a biological form of maladaptation it’s a social or cultural form of maladaptation in Ellul and so under the influence of Morris, Kaczynski makes this biological so he gives an evolutionary gloss to the idea of maladaptation that that he found originally in Ellul.

The second idea he takes from Morris is the idea of the power process or at least the core of it this is one of Kaczynski’s signature concepts in the manifesto and the basic idea he takes from Morris here is that human beings need some degree of purposeful stimulating work they need to be occupied with the pursuit of biological needs and if they’re not they quickly become demoralized, bored, otherwise deranged and so Morris drew on his experience of being curator of mammals at the London Zoo to explain what was going on here so he observed that when you keep certain curious omnivores in in a zoo they exhibit all sorts of strange behaviors so they pull their fur out, they fling excrement at spectators, they throw their food in the water just to go find it again, they climb the cage, they do all sorts of pointless things, kind of like the hamster in the wheel and Morris called these survival substitute activities, since these animals have a sort of biologically rooted meta-need for purposeful activity, they’ll do all sorts of strange things to satisfy that need, even when their needs for food, clothing and shelter, or food and shelter in the case of animals are satisfied.

So Kaczynski took this idea of substitute activity or survival substitute activity and transformed it into another of his signature ideas which is surrogate activity in the manifesto so just as the animals you know do all sorts of strange things to entertain

themselves so do we, talk about philosophy, we rearrange our furniture, we collect stamps, we engage in scientific pursuits and artistic pursuits, and all of these as well Morris and Kaczynski argue are substitutes for real biological survival related activity, so this in a nutshell is what he takes from Morris.

James: But of course this whole logic sort of it rides on a chain of as you sort of said an analytical steps which if you don't agree to the first one you know then it's very difficult to come to the conclusions that Kaczynski does so this idea of surrogate activities that one might let's say for instance enjoy collecting stamps Kaczynski would say that that's only a an activity you enjoy because you've got no other meaningful activities you know all your (as I understand) surrogate activities is because from this Morris perspective, food, shelter, warmth, water, all the basic survival needs which you would we would usually be somewhat struggling for as our primary meaning in life in a primitive state are completely taken care of in the uh in the in the you know the zoo of the world and so from that we then scramble to find meaning. But of course then Kaczynski's arguing that to get back to a real meaning we would then have to revert back to a state where our basic survival needs would once again be a struggle and would be our purpose in life.

Sean: That's right.

James: But of course you have to take the step and say well perhaps you know these days I lean Ellul bit more you know I used to be very sympathetic towards Kaczynski's outlook but these days I actually lean a bit more towards well actually what's wrong with the comfort that we've got and I wonder if Kaczynski's arguments regarding freedom aren't exactly coherent because we now have these things as options this life as an option and that itself is a freedom to choose that now.

So it's something that I brought up with Zerzan as well is that is that at times I actually find the primitivist outlook very authoritarian because they're saying we should you know they're speaking for everyone and saying we should go back to this way of living we should all do it and I see that somewhat as anathema to freedom because perhaps people genuinely would wish to choose the modern world perhaps not in every single facet of it but they may wish to choose it especially over primitive a primitive you know hut dwelling way of living I don't know what you'd make of that.

Sean: Okay let me try to imagine that I'm Kaczynski give the Kaczynski in response if I can so and not that I agree with this mind you but let me just try to articulate it okay well the first thing Kaczynski would say is that the sort of freedom you have in modern society is basically meaningless you can choose anything as long as it's unimportant you can choose all sorts of frivolous forms of entertainment and pastimes but you don't have any real control over your own life and death existence so his idea of freedom is more like independence than like choice he doesn't think you really need much choice to be free you just need to be independent not dependent on some larger social system and he would say further that well maybe we would choose the modern world okay well we've never had a choice we don't have the modern world because we chose it we have the modern world because it evolved so he would say we shouldn't

overestimate the role of human will in creating the modern world technology evolves like an organism there's a sort of invisible hand of technology you have millions of different scientists and engineers and technicians and economists and so on all working in their own little spheres and the modern world is the sum total of that but it's not a deliberate plan we've never had a choice we've sleepwalked into this world he would say so I think that's the crux of his response to your claim that we have more freedom in this world than in the kind of primitive society that he desires.

Anti-Industrialism vs. Primitivism

James: Okay as I understand it though he doesn't desire the same form of primitive society as say someone such as Zerzan as I understand it Kaczynski you know is okay with actually a certain amount of what would be considered technology.

Sean: Well yes that's right so the big difference between Zerzan and Kaczynski is that Zerzan wants to go back to a period before agriculture so he thinks that the fall occurred when we started domesticating animals and plants and eventually ourselves so Zerzan tracks it back to domestication and Zerzan is also against any sort of symbolism so he he's clearly read Lewis Mumford's uh the myth of the machine where Mumford argues that the most important technology was not any sort of tool, it was symbolism itself, abstract representations of things, language, drawings and so on.

So Zerzan aspires to go back much further than Kaczynski and Kaczynski also has well I think fewer illusions about the possibility of going back, so Kaczynski says I can't predict anything about what the post-collapse society would look like, he resigns himself to the fact that it's going to include some degree of agriculture, he doesn't really say whether he thinks that's a good thing or a bad thing, but he thinks it's minimally acceptable.

And also Kaczynski is under fewer illusions about what a primitive society actually looks like so Kaczynski wrote this long essay called the truth about primitive life the critique of anarcho-primitivism, this is a thinly veiled broadside against Zerzan and there he argues that if you read the anthropological literature primitive societies don't look like the little gardens of Eden that Zerzan portrays them as so they weren't necessarily gender equal there was a significant amount of violence and xenophobia and all sorts of things that with our civilized values we now condemn. So he accuses Zerzan of projecting civilized leftist values back onto primitive societies.

James: Out of interest I'm always interested in what the guest thinks themselves, where do you stand? Are you critical of the modern world? Is there a certain point that you'd like to get back to?

Sean: I am not a reactionary or a radical critic of the modern world I think I'm a pretty tepid critic of technology, I'm interested in critiques of technology from a personal perspective, but I don't subscribe to the sort of radicalism you find in Zerzan or Kaczynski.

James: Okay, who out of interest I mean is there a critic of technology who you find yourself agreeing with? You know perhaps a bit more closely than Zerzan or Kaczynski.

Sean: That's a good question, I pick and choose from all over you know I've learned a lot from books by Neil Postman you know "amusing ourselves to death" is a great

classic and I think I've learned a lot from Ellul as well I think I identify much more with the Ellul than I do with any of his more radical offshoots. I think Ellul tells you more about what to do in your own life than many of these other critics of technology do. Ellul says, to sum up his idea of what a revolution is, it's when we all decide to replace frantic activity with contemplation, to deliberately slow down, you don't need a movement to do that, you can decide to slow down in your own life.

James: Well some yeah someone else who I've done an episode on in the past was uh Bernard Charbonneau who was obviously Ellul sort of right-hand man in a way and then their work is if you look deep enough it's clearly tied up together and Charbonneau is out in the out in the countryside you know living that quite literally living that life and I always respected that more than a sort of purely theoretical, 'well here's the theory but I don't know you know I don't know what he should actually go and do'. This problem is evident in Heidegger as well for instance but just to just to keep on this trail of influences we also have Seligman so who is Seligman to Kaczynski what does he bring to the table

Seligman: Helplessness

Sean: So Martin Seligman is one of the most famous American psychologists of the 20th century and his most famous concept is the one that most influenced Kaczenski is learned helplessness. Seligman did these famous experiments where he put dogs in these boxes and repeatedly gave them shocks that they couldn't escape from and then he opened a gap in the box where the dogs could escape and he found that even when they could escape many of these dogs that had already been shocked repeatedly didn't even try to escape they just lay down and quietly whined so he called this learned helplessness if you're subject to uncontrollable stimuli often enough you become demoralized you lose the sense of control of your own fate.

So Kaczenski took this concept and used it to mass diagnose the problems that he saw in modern society so Kaczenski thinks we all have some degree of learned helplessness we're all pushed around by social and economic forces we can't control and large organizations we can't possibly influence and this is why we're so depressed and anxious he thinks the modern world deprives us of any agency.

James: Out of interest I don't know if you happen to know did any of the dogs who had been you know given these shocks leave when they could?

Sean: Yes

James: Well exactly, right, so there's the hope.

Sean: So and Kaczenski is well aware of this as well so about two-thirds of the dogs lay down and wind [Music] I think I recall that from Seligman's book titled helplessness and so Kaczenski uh thinks that the potential revolutionaries are the ones who are resistant enough to helplessness to learn helplessness to fight back and the leftists are the two-thirds who lay down in wine this is essentially what he thinks.

James: So this is this is one of the parts of specifically the manifesto, on leftism is a big part of the manifesto which is often overlooked because you think well critique of technology you're thinking something more like Heidegger or Illich where it doesn't exactly have this specific uh political direction but it is it's a key part to the manifesto. So in terms of using this learned helplessness metaphor, Kaczenski would see that these two-thirds of people who are lying down and sort of whining about their political outlook is entirely caught up for Kaczenski in the problem in the thing which is making them have a problem. So for instance they're spouting all this political stuff but not realizing that the language they're using and the let's say the outlook that they have is entirely caught up with the thing which is causing the problem in the first case, would I be right in saying that that's what Kaczenski sees leftism as?

Sean: Yeah I think that's one dimension of it for sure and I think you're right that this is the part of the manifesto that's most often overlooked and the one that has puzzled most readers a lot of people open the manifesto and they read the intro about all the things the industrial revolution is done to us and then they see the first section on leftism and think it's a huge digression they don't see the point of it, but the point is essentially what you just said, that he sees leftism as a kind of benign outlet for hostility and aggression. Social justice and its predecessors have co-opted the revolutionary impulse that would otherwise be directed against the technological system, so in one of his essays Kaczynski calls leftism the fire extinguisher of the technological society.

James: What does he mean by that?

Sean: Well whenever there is a significant amount of discontent in a society it gets channeled into a social movement where it becomes perfectly harmless to the system you know instead of you know instead of destroying the system attacking the electric grid what have you instead of doing any real damage we organize a green political movement and you know recycle and cleanse our conscience well I this is the function of leftism things.

James: Well I think if Kaczynski were to re-write it today I think he would have to rephrase it as 'on leftism and conservatism' because the it's probably my favorite piece of Kaczynski's writing 'the system's neatest trick' you know that that subsuming the rebellious and so-called radical attitudes back into the system but people sort of feel as if they are doing something radical really it's all completely controlled and I would say now I was somewhat actually sympathetic to him when he began I thought he had a voice but now I would say that Jordan Peterson falls entirely into this category in fact it made me laugh because he recently criticized leftists for attacking cars which he saw which he then said was the absolute uh symbol of freedom and I remember thinking this is so perfect because not only is it the system's neat strict trick encapsulate but also at certain point Kaczynski comments on the fact that cars are actually and the absolute opposite of freedom right in the in the modern world and I thought it was so perfect but I feel that they've fallen into the exact same trap in that from that Kaczynski view.

Sean: I think you're absolutely right and it's worth noting here that Kaczynski is also pretty hard on the right, so in the manifesto he says something like it's only a brief remark he says the conservatives are fools they whine about the decay of traditional values yet they enthusiastically promote economic progress and technological growth apparently it never occurs that you can't have you know a developed technological society with traditional values so if the left is pseudo-revolutionary in Kaczynski's view the right is pseudo-reactionary they're not really challenging the fundamentals of the system and the only reason that Kaczynski is harder on the left than he is on the right in the manifesto is that he doesn't think the right will be attracted to his anti-tech politics, he anticipates that it will be the left that will try to hijack his anti-tech

movement and transform it into yet another faction of the social justice movement, so he emphasizes his hostility to the left simply for strategic reasons.

He saw what happened to earth first in the 80s you know it started as you know this for lack of a better phrase eco-redneck movement, it was a bunch of rough-and-tumble guys from the southwest who loved wilderness and sabotage bulldozers and as the group became more and more successful, it attracted a more college-educated leftist group of followers mainly from the coasts and they eventually swamped the movement and in Kaczynski's view contaminated it with all these other concerns and so this is what he has in mind.

James: Well it seems to me I mean the right certainly has sort of somewhat taken on Kaczynski but it seems to me that the people who are taking up Kaczynski are what we could consider in the phrase I can't remember who but our sovereign individuals, seems to be the people who've primarily sort of a third position of I don't know if you've read it but Ernst Junger's concept of 'the anarchy'. the person who is entirely sort of just completely removed and these sort of people are taking up Kaczynski because I as you say I don't think it I mean it's almost Kaczynski's made it un-cooptable by political systems because they will uh dilute it and then once again like a first it's just lost in the in the you know the nothingness of ecological debate right like you know they debate year and year and year after year but at the same time they still as you mentioned previously it always makes me laugh that in all the debates surrounding what is good right and just for things the justification that is primarily used is the economy is doing well the numbers going up, we saw this with uh with coronavirus for instance it's like oh we have to do this to save the economy well it's like well why don't we do something for the wellness of people, why don't we do something people's health or good you know well-being or goodness or beauty no the number that's the uh the primary problem is it's everything and that almost justifies you know the ends justify the means in that sense is if we do this the economy will be saved as if that matters in any respective sense.

What's the Solution?

Sean: Our value system is so hollowed out that we can't muster any sensible response anymore no?

James: Well what would be the sensible response well I guess we can't well you know that's all been so as you said it's been hollowed out there's nothing we don't really have anything to use well and this gets back to our previous critique of Kaczynski here he doesn't really have a well-developed value system either I don't think so.

James: Can we blame him for that though because I think he's being honest with himself in that much like Zerzan actually that at least they're honest in the sense that they admit you know we've been born in this and I think you know for instance to take texts such as the bicameral mind or this idea of when you go back like when you go far enough back in time it's almost like a consciousness which is so different that we couldn't we now just can't really even think or perceive the world as they did for instance and as ted's Kaczynski is saying you're born into this so you just you're almost born into a cage of sorts.

Sean: Well I think Ellul is relevant here unlike Kaczynski and Zerzan does not try to imagine what the primitive man, so to speak, thought or wanted or desired, he says I couldn't possibly know that and it doesn't really matter I'm not trying to recreate the past, that's not the goal here, it's to try to recover some condition of freedom in the future there's no question of recreating some past condition of freedom because there was never a past condition of freedom a primitive man was hemmed in by all sorts of rights and rituals and the forces of nature which are still deterministic they're not quite as tight as the forces of technology they don't constrain us quite as tightly but nature too is a set of chains there's no freedom to be found in going back. So Ellul says the only way of finding any sort of freedom is to recognize whatever the current constraints are and try to transcend them whether they're natural or technological or something else entirely. Freedom is relative to the set of constraints that we find in front of us and I think that's the right way to think about it and so this is why I'm not a primitivist.

James: Do you feel free?

Sean: Well let me cite something else Ellul says in response to that he says something like well we are most enslaved when we're when we think we're comfortably settled in a condition of freedom. So as soon as we think we have found freedom and we can rest on our laurels that's exactly when we're enslaved. You have to fight for it every moment freedom to me is recognizing the urge to check your phone and refusing to do it, hearing the phone ring, refusing to answer it, you know being perturbed by

something and refusing to bow down to it, that's freedom in Ellul's sense and I think that's a much better conception of freedom.

James: I would agree because it begins from the constraints that you that you have and it's not uh idealistic in a sense that you're wishing to go back or forward it's like what can you do now right where can you go what can you do now and what can you use now.

Sean: And one of the odd implications of this conception of freedom is that if there are no constraints you can't possibly be free.

James: Well you're always a slave to something.

Sean: And even if even if you could do anything even if you were a sort of god you couldn't possibly be free because you wouldn't have any constraints to overcome that's the straightforward implication of Ellul's view of freedom

James: So you need you need limitation for freedom?

Sean: That's right it's exactly right and resigning yourself to your limitations is not at all what he means it's much more radical than that he thinks that limitations rules laws whatever else he is a sort of Christian anarchist he thinks that finding the strength from Christ to overcome these things in your own life even in your own mind if that's all you can do is what freedom means.

James: But I guess I would argue that the first task really is to make people even realize the majority of limitations that have been put on them.

Sean: And of course here Ellul refers to Hegel and he says the first act of freedom is a recognition of necessity the first step to being free is to recognize the constraints that you face you can't transcend constraints if you don't recognize them in the first place you're doomed to be constrained.

James: If you don't go to prison unless you know you're in prison.

Sean: Well I suppose there are examples where you know maybe you could dream up some hypothetical where you could but it's unlikely to work you know you could be whisked away by a helicopter in your sleep.

What influence has Kaczynski had

James: So where do you think this this Kaczynskian form of anti-tech radicalism which I would say is actually getting fairly popular you know people are making lots of podcasts about it why do you think this is this is leading people I think really specifically the younger generations I think of the western world 40 downwards are really starting to find Kaczynski again I mean he's becoming a bit of a mainstay I think in the in the culture of the fringe culture.

Sean: I think he's going to gain a lot of followers and ground over the next decade or so, I predict and at the end of this article I've written that he will be the marks of anti-tech that as concerns grow about genetic engineering and climate change and nanotechnology and nuclear weapons and so on, automation, artificial intelligence, we can add a bunch of others as these sorts of concerns grow so will anti-tech sentiments, people who are on the losing end of innovation will increasingly latch onto anti-tech ideas. And I think pro-tech and anti-tech pro-tech versus anti-tech is likely to be one of the major fault lines in the politics of the next century and I think Kaczynski stands a good chance of being the Marx of this anti-tech movement for two reasons, one is that he is already the best-known anti-tech radical and also the one with the most detailed blueprint for an anti-tech revolution the second reason is that unlike many other prominent anti-tech thinkers you know Ellul Heidegger Markus Spengler and so on he's much more readable.

James: Yeah he's immensely readable.

Sean: He appeals to people who have a rationalistic or scientific worldview and for whom you know the esotericism of someone like Heidegger is just repulsive or impenetrable so I think Kaczynski has a potentially much broader appeal than Ellul or Heidegger or whoever else precisely because he writes and thinks in this analytic way

James: So you know if he's going to be big in the next 10 years and I'm sure someone in the writing somewhere has used the term Kaczynskian before but how would you define this next Kaczynskian decade?

Sean: Yeah I'm sure I'm not the first one to use his name as an adjective but here's what I mean by it a Kaczynskian critique of technology is one with a scientific gloss as we discussed before you know Kaczynski speaks the language of cognitive and behavioral psychology you know he has a fundamentally Darwinian worldview so a Kaczynskian critique is one that is scientific rather than humanistic that's the way I use the term.

James: Okay is there anything you'd like to add about Kaczynski or your paper that we haven't touched on?

Sean: Well this will eventually be a book, hopefully over the next year or so, so stay tuned for the much longer version of this.

James: Will that be sort of you know uh more deeply expanding on Ellul Morrison Seligman.

Sean: And a lot more than that so Ellul Morris and Seligman are Kaczynski's three main influences, but they're by no means his only influences and certainly not his only important influences. So there's a lot more in the secret footnotes to the manifesto, there's a lot more in the archive and there's also a lot more to say about the reception of Kaczynski's ideas.

So maybe this is a good place to end, you know the reception of Kaczynski has exploded since about you know 2010, 2011, with the publication of his first version of his technological slavery collection and I think there's a an interesting story to be written about how his ideas have been appropriated and misappropriated since the manifesto came out. As I said before it's one of the most famous manifestos in the past hundred years and there's hardly anything written about not just Kaczynski's influences but his influence as well. So there's going to be a lot in the book about the people who've been influenced and inspired by Kaczynski.

James: Okay is there any is there anyone now who you can see who's even made perhaps Ellul bit more well-known who you see as being directly influenced by Kaczynski.

Sean: Well let me just pick out a few people so let's go from people on the far right first and more mainstream thinkers, so the most famous far right figure who appropriated Kaczynski's ideas was the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik and he plagiarized the section on leftism in the manifesto in his own manifesto after his attack and that I think was what introduced the broader far right to Kaczynski's manifesto, so the Greek neo-fascist party golden dawn published a translation of "industrial society and its future" a few years ago, one of the headline speakers at the unite the right rally in Charlottesville recently published an audiobook of the manifesto. Various far-right figures have since latched on to him, many of whom have green pretensions, so the same people who are reading Pentti Linkola are often reading Ted Kaczynski.

So that's one part of his reception, I think another really interesting part of his reception is among people who are radically optimistic about technology, so Ray Kurzweil said a bit about the manifesto in some of his works and he says well I read it and it was strange, but there was a lot of it I agreed with, Kurzweil thinks Kaczynski is right that technology is an autonomous self-organizing system that it's beyond rational human control that it is in some sense out of control, he simply disagrees about whether it's a good thing or a bad thing for humanity. So there are prominent figures like Kurzweil I think who have adopted some of Kaczynski's ideas. I won't give away too much on the techno-optimist side because this is something I'm currently working on and it'll

be part of the book but you know I'll leave it at that there are lots of people who are ideologically on the opposite end of the spectrum who are influenced by Kaczynski.

Then there are lots of figures in the radical environmentalist and anarchist movements who have taken quite a few things from Kaczynski so we discussed Zerzan already but another prominent one is Derek Jensen he's one of the co-founders of deep green resistance I'm not sure if you're familiar with it yeah so he's yet another and if you read some of his work it's straight out of Kaczynski's essay hit where it hurts you know his prescriptions for what to do about civilization are Kaczynski's prescriptions for what to do about the technological system.

So I could go on and on here. There's also lots of journalists and other such figures who have said sympathetic words about Kaczynski over the past five or six years, so you know Tucker Carlson not too long ago. The whole Unabomber is right meme has shown up in mainstream media as well.

James: So any word on when this book will be out?

Sean: I'm hoping it'll be within a year so there's another round of archival research to go and it's well underway, so stay tuned.

The Ted K Archive

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