

The Philosophy of the Unabomber

Sisyphus 55

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Introduction

The last few years have seen great advances in terms of environmental thought and anarchical sentiment. The increasingly apparent impact of industrial society on the climate, as well as the elitist and incompetent process of liberal democracy, has left many in a state of despair frustration and rage.

The solutions, either too drastic or too naive, rarely catch on. What are we to do as we face a world of increasing hopelessness.

For one man, the answer was clear, send bombs through the mail from your cabin in Montana.

This is the philosophy of the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski.

Ted's Life

Ted was born on May 22nd 1942, in Chicago, born to loving parents, he was nonetheless separated from them for a short period due to a hives outbreak, after his isolation in the hospital, Ted would show little emotion, however he would also express extreme sympathy for animals who were caged.

In high school, Ted demonstrated a profound intellect, especially in the area of mathematics, as one classmate remembers, "he was never really seen as a person, as an individual personality, he was always regarded as a walking brain, so to speak"

This would eventually lead him to Harvard, at the age of 16, where he earned a degree in mathematics and finished with a GPA of 3.12, however at the same time, Ted was constructing a specific worldview that had become increasingly anti-technology.

To put his philosophy to the test, he signed up for a series of psychology studies done on Harvard undergrads. Conducted by the psychologist Henry Murray, these studies were used to research the effects of stress on human belief and generally used interrogation techniques that would appear unethical by today's standards. Subjects were told that they would debate personal philosophy and would submit essays on their beliefs and values, then individuals acting as other students would come in and verbally abuse the subject telling them that their ideas were ridiculous and illogical.

Some have suggested that these studies were part of the CIA's MKULTRA project. Nevertheless, and despite the possible abuse Ted suffered while in Harvard, he argues that the experiences there had no significant effect on the course of his life.

After Harvard, Ted enrolled in the University of Michigan, where he specialized in Geometric Function Theory. Unfortunately, this subfield was becoming increasingly less popular during the 60s, Ted then became the youngest assistant professor in the history of Berkeley. Still, his passion for mathematics as a career was waning, as evident by students reports that Ted was a terrible professor, who would never answer questions and simply teach straight from the textbook. Ted would resign in 1969.

While he was teaching, Ted had his first documented desire for violence, he began to experience intense sexual fantasies that involved him becoming a female. At one point in 1966 he decided to undergo gender transition, however while in the waiting room, Ted decided against it, and wrote in his journal that he had a deep passion to kill the psychiatrist and everyone else that hates him:

"I felt disgusted about what my uncontrolled sexual cravings had almost led me to do. And I felt humiliated, and I violently hated the psychiatrist. Just then there came a major turning point in my life. Like a Phoenix, I burst from the ashes of my despair to glorious new hope."

Feelings of inadequacy and loneliness appeared to confound at this stage of his life, resulting in a burning hatred for society itself. Ted built a remote cabin outside of Lincoln, Montana, while receiving money from his parents.

His initial goal was to become completely self-reliant and he spent much of his time studying wilderness survival. However, after discovering that a road had been built in an area of the forest he considered sacred, Ted changed his goal to dismantling industrial society.

“The fifth of August I began a hike to the east. I got to my hidden camp that I have in a gulch beyond what I call “Diagonal Gulch.” I stayed there through the following day, August 6. I felt the peace of the forest there. But there are few huckleberries there, and though there are deer, there is very little small game. Furthermore, it had been a long time since I had seen the beautiful and isolated plateau where the various branches of Trout Creek originate. So I decided to take off for that area on the 7th of August. A little after crossing the roads in the neighborhood of Crater Mountain I began to hear chain saws; the sound seemed to be coming from the upper reaches of Roaster Bill Creek. I assumed they were cutting trees; I didn’t like it but I thought I would be able to avoid such things when I got onto the plateau. Walking across the hillsides on my way there, I saw down below me a new road that had not been there previously, and that appeared to cross one of the ridges that close in Stemple Creek. This made me feel a little sick. Nevertheless, I went on to the plateau. What I found there broke my heart. The plateau was criss-crossed with new roads, broad and well-made for roads of that kind. The plateau is ruined forever. The only thing that could save it now would be the collapse of the technological society. I couldn’t bear it. That was the best and most beautiful and isolated place around here and I have wonderful memories of it.

One road passed within a couple of hundred feet of a lovely spot where I camped for a long time a few years ago and passed many happy hours. Full of grief and rage I went back and camped by South Fork Humbug Creek.

The next day I started for my home cabin. My route took me past a beautiful spot, a favorite place of mine where there was a spring of pure water that could safely be drunk without boiling. I stopped and said a kind of prayer to the spirit of the spring. It was a prayer in which I swore that I would take revenge for what was being done to the forest.”

From 1978 to 1995 Ted would go on to kill three people and injure 23 others through mailing a series of bombs. The bombs generally targeted those who he had felt aided the progress of industrial society, such as those who work in the timber industry, genetics, oil or computer science.

The idealism of his actions climaxed when he sent several letters to prominent newspapers giving them the ultimatum to either publish his manifesto or face further bombings. The newspapers obliged, publishing the more than thirty thousand word piece that discusses the evils of technology the complacency of leftism and the potential for a new future, fortunately the idiosyncratic writing led to his sister-in-law and

brother identifying the author as Ted, this led to his eventual capture and sentencing, where he is currently serving eight life sentences.

Ted's Ideas

One of Ted's primary influences is that of the christian anarchist philosopher Jacques Ellul. The main theme in Ellul's work is the idea that modern technology directly threatens human freedom and religion.

Ellul believed that movements that have fueled industrial society, such as materialism, scientism and economics are simply substitutes or false idols for god. He argues that these ideologies tend to use and abuse their followers in order to continue the necessity of efficiency. This is identified through Ellul's use of the word technique which he defines as the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."

Efficiency becomes the unquestionable goal of human existence and by default subordinates the natural world. Ellul's major concern is the capacity for this technique to shape the social and psychological makeup of individuals.

Firstly, it makes us adapt to technology, rather than it adapting to us.

Secondly, it shapes our desires around efficiency through a constant need for utility and categorization. This is aided by media and propaganda which is manipulated by special interest groups and creates "an inner control over the individual by a social force which means that it deprives him of himself."

Unlike Ted however, Ellul does not promote violence as an answer, as he argues a christian who chooses violence is sacrificing freedom for a necessity. In fact his definition of anarchy is "an absolute rejection of violence" as he sees the nation-state to be the primary source of violence.

Ellul advocates for the creation of grassroots institutions and suggests that a change in perception will help us avoid absolute subordination under technology, specifically through viewing technology as objects or tools rather than allowing them to shape our desire.

Ted's manifesto is similar to Ellul's message, but carries a far more radical solution with it, notably the manifesto is aware of its radical tone, accompanied by an annotation that explains that the manifesto contains imprecise and general sweeping statements, and that it should be taken as a crude approximation of reality.

It then opens with the unabomber's own theory of history, he believes that small changes to long-term trends are simply transitory and that changes large enough to permanently affect a trend can also change society as a whole, however he suggests the side effects unwelcome or not of any large-scale change is entirely unpredictable, likewise he argues that new societies cannot be designed and finally that people do not choose the form of their own society, a popular rejection of social contract theory.

The opening line “the industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race” conveys the sentiment of the entire piece. Ted specifically argues three instances in which technology has degraded humanity:

1. Erosion of Freedom

Firstly, it has destabilized society through the erosion of freedom. The system requires the regulation of human behavior in order for it to function.

But, what is freedom according to him? Freedom means being in control, either as an individual or as a member of a small group of the life and death issues of one’s existence, e.g. food, clothing, shelter and defense against whatever threats there may be in one’s environment. “Freedom means having. . . the power to control the circumstances of one’s own life.”

2. Life Is Unfulfilling

Secondly, industrial society has created an unfulfilling life for many. People spend their days engaged in what he calls surrogate activities, such as entertainment, consumption, political activism and science. These are all activities that are in the service of technology rather than humanity, according to Ted.

Here he also takes a clear aim at leftists which he defines as socialists, collectivists, feminists and gays, who he feels have fallen prey to over-socialization and inferiority. Specifically he defines over-socialization as the process by which people are trained to think and act as a society demands through the experience of guilt, leftists tend to take part in various activities to alleviate the guilt, such as small-scale reform, or advocating for minority groups, without ever considering the serious or drastic measures actually required to solve these issues. “The leftist is anti-individualistic, pro-collectivist, he wants society to solve everyone’s problems for them, satisfy everyone’s needs for them, take care of them.”

He also takes aim at conservatives who he feels hypocritically “whine about the decay of traditional values, yet ... enthusiastically support technological progress and economic growth,”

3. Increased Suffering

Finally, the manifesto argues that technology has increased psychological suffering. As he explains people have a basic need that he calls the power process, which has the four ingredients of goal, effort, attainment and autonomy. However, industrial

society disrupts this process by making things either too easy, such as accumulating tech and fashion to feel good, as encouraged by ads, or too difficult, such as making it impossible to control modern issues, such as pollution, or the invasion of privacy. “Consistent failure to attain goals throughout life results in defeatism, low self-esteem or depression.”

The Solution

Kaczynski’s solution is to create stress and instability within society, until the whole system collapses, he argues that tapping into sub-societies such as ghettos and criminal organizations are crucial in doing this, as they threaten the absolute control of the system.

He suggests that revolution should be preferred over reform, as reform is always restrained by the fear of painful consequences if changes go too far, but once a revolutionary fever has taken hold of a society, people are willing to undergo unlimited hardships for the sake of their revolution.

His idea of a successful revolution is one in which human society is taken to its pre-industrial state, with only small-scale technologies such as water wheels, factories and technological knowledge should be unilaterally destroyed. He believes that despite suffering caused by such a revolution, it is far more preferable than the other alternatives, either the collapse of the system under its own weight due to over-consumption and environmental disaster, or its continued advancement, “which simply involves living a long but empty and purposeless life.”

Conclusion

Some such as Cynthia Ozek likens Kaczynski to Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, "a philosophical criminal of exceptional intelligence and humanitarian purpose, driven to commit murder out of an uncompromising idealism."

Others suggest that the unabomber was consumed by the outdated notion of the noble savage, the idea that we can somehow return to the life of the frontier man and enjoy an idyllic natural existence while ignoring the downsides to such a life.

Specific critiques have also been launched against the manifesto, Kaczynski entirely avoids discussing the seemingly innocent positives of technology, such as reading glasses, music recordings and sewers, that appear to improve human existence and give some quality to life.

Likewise his argument that modern man has no ability to control pollution and other things outside of his control doesn't really hold up in comparison to the primitive man who would likewise have many things outside of his control, such as disease and basic security.

Ted counters this by stating that the primitive man can handle these issues stoically, but it is not entirely clear as to why the modern man can't also accept the problems out of their control stoically.

It appears that Ted has an absolutist and perfectionist position here, in which anything considered technological is evil and everything natural is good, likewise Ted believes that a coordinated universal shutdown of progress is the only solution, however this seems incredibly idealistic, especially in contrast to his pessimistic view of humanity. If one country decides to continue progressing in technology they could quickly dominate the world, Ted appears unwilling to accept the possibility that technological progress is a Pandora's box we simply cannot close.

Finally, if Ted truly values autonomy and the freedom of choice then modern society still allowed him to quit a comfortable academic position and live in the woods where industrial society allows varying lifestyles of comfort and freedom, a pre-industrial state may fail to offer a life of security if desired.

Perhaps the greatest critique however is found in the work of Jacques Ellul, one of Ted's greatest influences. Ted felt it absolutely necessary to kill for the efficiency of his message, but Ellul denounces violence in pursuit of the truth, as doing so simply falls into the same heartless utility that Ted had rejected so fervently.

Kaczynski's sadistic and sociopathic disregard for the lives of innocent people should make anyone wary of his idealism, despite his coherent and prophetic critique of late stage capitalism, we should not mistake his personal anger towards the system which

evidently destroyed his soul through isolation and experimentation as worthy philosophical discourse.

References

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The Ted K Archive

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