

Quick Thoughts: The Unabomber's Manifesto

Victor Hogue

Oct 10, 2019

Contents

Industrial Society and Its Future	4
Introduction	5
The Psychology of Leftism	6
First Critique	8
The Power Process	9
Second Critique	10
Third Critique	12
Industrial-Technological Society	15
The Revolution	17
Conclusion	18

Disclaimer: The following is a brief reaction to a piece of writing, not an in-depth analysis or thesis defending any particular claim. Unfortunately, I will need to point out that the actions or political views within the manifesto are not condoned in any way. This should go without saying.

Ted Kaczynski, a Harvard graduate and the youngest-ever assistant math professor at Berkeley, would have seemed on paper to possess all of the qualities necessary for success and financial stability, and even to rise to some measure of prominence in his field. Instead, he chose to remove himself from society, to live in a secluded cabin in the remote wilderness of Montana, without electricity, or plumbing, or the benefits of digital watches. This by itself may seem a little eccentric, but nothing too abnormal. There are, after all, many such hermits who elect to escape the stresses of modern life and retreat into nature, building log cabins all over Alaska and the Yukon in pursuit of the simple life.

Unfortunately, Kaczynski was not satisfied with such romantic notions, and decided to devote himself to the destruction of industrial society. He constructed crude bombs in his cabin, and mailed them out to universities, airlines, offices and homes, killing three people and injuring over 20 others. All of this, apparently, to launch his cultural revolution against the ever encroaching progress of technology. He then used the attention gained by these bombings to have his manifesto published in the New York Times and Washington Post; a move that would lead to his eventual arrest.

The story of the Unabomber may be considered a story of wasted human potential. The manifesto is not the ravings and ramblings of a mad man, but rather an academically rigorous, unique and brilliant critique of modern society, that raises many concerns even more topical today than when it was published in 1995. It is, in my mind, one of the most extraordinary documents of recent decades, and should be more widely studied. Sadly, the violent actions of Kaczynski cast a shadow upon his philosophy that deters the public and deprives the world of this contribution to human thought and understanding.

Luckily, I don't care about shadows or deterrents, so let's jump right into it.

Industrial Society and Its Future

The manifesto is comprised of roughly six parts:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) The Psychology of Leftism
- 3) The “Power Process” and modern society
- 4) Industrial-Technological Society’s erosion of Freedom
- 5) The Revolution
- 6) Conclusion

In my opinion, the sections of note are 2), 3) and 4), while Kaczynski’s thoughts on “the Revolution” are less academically interesting. This section is also the least morally or practically consistent, with several gaping holes and big questions left unanswered.

Introduction

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.

In the introduction, Kaczynski lays out the main problem: modern society is miserable. High levels of stress and anxiety, depression, etc., have led to general discontent, violence, and other aberrations. Further, technology is encroaching more and more on our ability to be free and autonomous. The “System” is repressing our natural inclinations, and forces us to live lives of obedience, and labor for the benefit of others. Only the constant propaganda of TV, radio, advertisement and the news media is keeping us in line, all the while adding to our frustration with modern life.

The Psychology of Leftism

In this rather political section, Kaczynski relates his understanding of leftism, and its main features. He argues that there are two principles governing leftist psychology: feelings of inferiority, and over-socialization.

It is less interesting to go into these in detail, than to point out how well Kaczynski describes modern-day leftists and “politically correct” types from his vantage point in the 1990s. In fact, the accuracy is astonishing, suggesting that the current social justice phenomenon has existed in universities for much longer than it has been in the public eye. Kaczynski was undoubtedly exposed to many such people and ideologies during his education and academic career. Here are a few passages that could easily be mistaken for Jordan Peterson or Douglas Murray quotes:

12. Those who are most sensitive about “politically incorrect” terminology are not the average black ghetto-dweller, Asian immigrant, abused woman or disabled person, but a minority of activists, many of whom do not even belong to any “oppressed” group but come from privileged strata of society.

16. Words like “self-confidence”, “self-reliance”, “initiative”, “enterprise”, “optimism”, etc., play little role in the liberal and leftist vocabulary. The leftist is anti-individualistic, pro-collectivist. He wants society to solve every one’s problems for them, satisfy everyone’s needs for them, take care of them. He is not the sort of person who has an inner sense of confidence in his ability to solve his own problems and satisfy his own needs. The leftist is antagonistic to the concept of competition because, deep inside, he feels like a loser.

229. ... He [the leftist] tends to be against competition and against violence, but he often finds excuses for those leftists who do commit violence. He is fond of using the common catch-phrases of the left, like “racism,” “sexism,” “homophobia,” “capitalism,” “imperialism,” “neocolonialism,” “genocide,” “social change,” “social justice,” “social responsibility.”

Excusing violence on the part of other leftists is unfortunately a phenomenon of the current age, as well as during Kaczynski’s time of writing. He brings up how there were massive protests over the Vietnam war, but virtual silence when the USSR invaded Afghanistan. Fidel Castro’s brutal regime in Cuba was only ever praised for its supposedly great healthcare, etc. In more recent times, we see often violent groups like Antifa routinely ignored or mischaracterized by the media as peaceful protestors.

Since our collective political memory seems to have been reduced to a couple of months now that there is a new scandal, whistleblower, impeachment inquiry, trade war, or corruption allegation almost every day, it is good to remember that the 1990's may have not been so different from today, except that everyone now has the megaphone of social media at their disposal. What was confined to university campuses back then has made its way into the mainstream, probably because the students of the day now wield a considerable chunk of purchasing power, and it is therefore profitable for companies and media conglomerates to market towards these demographics, and for politicians to earn their votes.

First Critique

Aside from being a bit ahead of his time, the connection between the psychology of leftism and the other parts of his manifesto are not entirely clear. Why does he go into this in-depth analysis of a certain part of the population, when the following sections of the manifesto apply to society in general? He does make some effort to connect the two, but these hardly seem sufficient. Whether or not he is correct about leftism, it has little to do with his main argument relating to the disruption of the power process and the role industrial society plays in it. See below.

The Power Process

Critiques of leftism aside, the truly interesting part of the manifesto lies within the concept of the power process. Kaczynski seeks to answer the essential question of why people in industrial society are so miserable and depressed, and I believe he comes up with a rather good answer in this section.

The need for power is a well-established idea that goes back to Freud and Nietzsche, but in Kaczynski's eyes it is an incomplete picture. It is not enough to have power (whatever that means), but rather one must satisfy the power process in its entirety in order to live a fulfilling life. It is comprised of the goal, effort, attainment of the goal, and autonomy. The power process cannot be fulfilled without all four of these elements being present.

In other words, attainment of the goal without effort is meaningless, effort without autonomy is slavery, a goal without attainment leads to powerlessness and depression, and autonomy without goal creates boredom and the dangers that come with it.

37. Thus, in order to avoid serious psychological problems, a human being needs goals whose attainment requires effort, and he must have a reasonable rate of success in attaining his goals.

Kaczynski goes on to argue that there are roughly three groups of human drives:

- 1) Those that can be satisfied with minimal effort.
- 2) Those that can be satisfied only at the cost of serious effort.
- 3) Those that can never be satisfied no matter the effort.

In primitive society, most natural human drives fall into the second category. Almost every basic human need is attainable, but comes at the cost of considerable effort. Hunting and scavenging for food, constructing sufficient shelter to survive, fighting off the elements and other people who seek to steal what little resources are available, etc.

The power process is easily satisfied by simply living in the environment for which human beings have evolved. This makes sense from the perspective of evolutionary-psychology, ignoring for a moment the problems that come with that field of 'science'.

Second Critique

Kaczynski seems to have a romantic notion of “primitive society”. While his ideas make sense theoretically, it is also important to keep in mind the many downsides of primitive, tribal societies. As Steven Pinker shows in his book “The better angels of our nature”, these types of societies have had, and still have (where they exist), extreme rates of violence, low life expectancy, and the common practice of bridal kidnapping where women are treated as a resource to be stolen from other tribes.

Not to mention the complete lack of medial knowledge and technology, and the adherence to often brutal traditions, and dangerous superstitions that require human sacrifice, cannibalism, etc. In fairness it should be noted that the majority medical problems are of course a symptom of agricultural and urban society and diet, not of tribal peoples, but the low life-expectancy due to violence, disease, or infected wounds cannot be ignored.

While Kaczynski might argue that even given all these downsides, primitives societies were better off since they were properly psychologically attune to their lifestyle, and therefore lived happier, more fulfilling lives, I am tempted to side with Sam Harris’ assertion that the moral landscape can have many hills and valleys, and that we can surely find other lifestyles which produce similar amounts of happiness, without the features of child sacrifice, etc.

It seems that even in our modern age, in developing countries, the rates of depression are much lower than in the west, even though these developing countries are by no means tribal, or pre-industrial.

In fairness to Kaczynski, he never actually states that we ought to return to the stone age, but merely to a pre-industrial time. It is likely that the old order Amish people provide a good baseline for what he had in mind. The reason why this manifesto should be taken seriously is because almost every point of critique is already preempted by Kaczynski himself, making it an academically honest and rigorous attempt at explaining his key point. He has this to say about primitive societies:

45. ... It is true that not all was sweetness and light in primitive societies. Abuse of women was common among the Australian aborigines, transexuality was fairly common among some of the American Indian tribes. But it does appear that **GENERALLY SPEAKING** the kinds of problems that we have listed in the preceding paragraph were far less common among primitive peoples than they are in modern society.

Transsexuality he regards as a problem, which is of course part of his cultural context, and would no longer be thought of as necessarily problematic, in much the same way as homosexuality was considered a mental disorder until fairly recently.

Third Critique

The general tone and content of his manifesto is entirely male-centered. He admits this himself in a side note:

75. ... A young man goes through the power process by becoming a hunter, hunting not for sport or for fulfillment but to get meat that is necessary for food. (In young women the process is more complex, with greater emphasis on social power; we won't discuss that here.)

While we may excuse this one-sided perspective by appealing to simplicity, it does weaken his narrative about human nature if he explains everything only in terms of one half of the population. Any complete theory of human psychology, or philosophical account of human society cannot just ignore the differences in male and female psychology and behaviour.

In modern society, the power process is disrupted due to the fact that most human drives have moved from the second category, to the first and third. That is, most subsistence-level desires, like food and shelter are satisfied with almost no effort, while many other drives are completely unattainable or outside of our control.

Kaczynski does not consider holding a job that will allow a person to survive in modern society as a particular effort. In one of the best, most memorable passages of the manifesto he states:

40. In modern industrial society only minimal effort is necessary to satisfy one's physical needs. It is enough to go through a training program to acquire some petty technical skill, then come to work on time and exert the very modest effort needed to hold a job. The only requirements are a moderate amount of intelligence and, most of all, simple OBEDIENCE. If one has those, society takes care of one from cradle to grave.

We will return to the idea of obedience later on, which is a central tenant of his philosophy. It has the uncomfortable ring of truth to it, which characterizes almost the entire paper. He does, once again, qualify his assertion by stating:

40. ... (Yes, there is an underclass that cannot take the physical necessities for granted, but we are speaking here of mainstream society.).

Because we are generally deprived in industrial society of drives of the second kind, we devote ourselves to “Surrogate activities”. That is, we invent artificial needs and desires of the second kind in order to seek fulfillment. For instance, some devote themselves to long-distance running, others study the sciences, still others put all their effort into climbing the corporate ladder, etc. Any goal or activity we can invent which requires real effort to fulfill can be a surrogate activity.

Kaczynski is insistent that science, for example, is not driven by an innate curiosity, but is itself one of the main surrogate activities we have devised:

87. As for “curiosity,” that notion is simply absurd. Most scientists work on highly specialized problems that are not the object of any normal curiosity. For example, is an astronomer, a mathematician or an entomologist curious about the properties of isopropyltrimethylmethane? Of course not. [...] If the chemist [...] had to exert [himself] seriously to obtain the physical necessities, and if that effort exercised [his] abilities in an interesting way but in some non-scientific pursuit, then [he] wouldn't give a damn about isopropyltrimethylmethane [...].

Surrogate activities cannot fully satisfy the power process, as evidenced by the fact that the long-distance runner will always challenge himself to run even further, and the scientists will pursue the next question as soon as the previous one has been answered. There is never a point of complete satisfaction, but only the idea of progression and improvement (This is an interesting parallel with the Philosophy of Svend Brinkmann. See my upcoming discussion).

Drives of the third kind, those that cannot be satisfied no matter the effort, are another source of distress. One of the principle examples of this is the need for security in a broad sense. Our lives are, more or less, influenced by people and circumstances outside our control. In a world in which very few people make most of the important decisions, the consequences of which are often unknown or not fully understood, we can see that the lack security can be an impossible hurdle to overcome. Slight changes in environmental safety standards in chemical plants, wars with other countries, radiation from accidents and bomb tests, poisoned water reserves, the general stability of the economy and the job market, inflation, car accidents, medical mistakes or malpractice, climate change, and simply bad luck are all factors outside of our direct control that can have devastating effects on our lives, and may hit us at any moment.

There is an interesting parallel here between the psychological effects stemming from frustrations of this third kind, and the phenomenon of the psychological effects of modern warfare on soldiers. The fact that one may be randomly killed by an exploding shell, or stray bullet at any moment for months at a time exerts extreme pressures on the individual which could be interpreted as a heightened form of what people experiences in industrial society. Thus, anxiety and depression follow from this lack of control in much the same way, albeit to a lesser extent than is experienced by combatants.

Thus, Kaczynski argues that we are miserable largely because of the disruption of the power process due to our drives being either too easy or too hard to fully satisfy, and that even our focus on surrogate activities cannot entirely fulfill us.

Industrial-Technological Society

Another central tenant of the manifesto is that modern industrial society erodes freedom, and does so necessarily. Autonomy, which is a central component of the power process is minimized by our reliance on technology. Even though technology typically is seen to give us more freedom, in reality Kaczynski argues, it enslaves us and forces us to operate only within the narrowing confines of the system that results.

Whenever a new technology is introduced, it is hailed as a great achievement that can make life better, easier, and more free. An example is the automobile, which was a revolutionary achievement of engineering and allowed people to travel more freely, faster and autonomously, without relying on horses or trains. This is a purely positive change, clearly; something that we would almost universally call progress.

In the beginning, the use of cars was entirely voluntary, and optional. However, as time passed, the automobile has completely changed the layout of cities, where people live and work, and has imposed a huge cannon of rules and regulations regarding freedom of movement on people. In other words, automobile technology has forced us to limit our personal autonomy, and to operate only within the confines of the system that this technology has consequently created. Further, owning a car is largely not optional anymore, but necessary. The system has changed in a way that forces us to own a car. What was true for cars when Kaczynski was writing, is even more true for cell-phones, the internet, etc.

Kaczynski argues that, unfortunately, industrial society necessarily limits freedom and autonomy. There is no compromise, nor a way in which we can take only the good parts of technology and reform the bad aspects.

115. The system HAS TO force people to behave in ways that are increasingly remote from the natural pattern of human behavior. For example, the system needs scientists, mathematicians and engineers. It can't function without them. So heavy pressure is put on children to excel in these fields. It isn't natural for an adolescent human being to spend the bulk of his time sitting at a desk absorbed in study. A normal adolescent wants to spend his time in active contact with the real world.

116. Because of the constant pressure that the system exerts to modify human behavior, there is a gradual increase in the number of people who cannot or will not adjust to society's requirements: welfare leeches, youth gang members, cultists, anti-government rebels, radical environmentalist saboteurs, dropouts and resisters of various kinds.

117. In any technologically advanced society the individual's fate MUST depend on decisions that he personally cannot influence to any great extent. A technological society cannot be broken down into small, autonomous communities, because production depends on the cooperation of very large numbers of people and machines.

The issue is that on a game-theoretic level, technology is a much more powerful social force than our desire to retain freedom.

125. It is not possible to make a LASTING compromise between technology and freedom, because technology is by far the more powerful social force and continually encroaches on freedom through REPEATED compromises.

If, for example, we imagine ourselves in competition with another person, or another society, which will either kill or take advantage of us if it can, then we are usually willing to accept a small reduction in our personal freedom or autonomy, in order to prevent a negative outcome. That other person or society is, of course, in the same position, and will also try to gain any advantage possible. Thus we find ourselves in an arms race of technology in which the payoffs for being the stronger player are much greater than the risks of being left behind but retaining personal autonomy. Therefore, technology places us on an unavoidable, slippery slope towards slavery to the system.

The Revolution

Since industrial society cannot be reformed, and since it necessarily erodes our freedom and makes us miserable, Kaczynski's conclusion is that it needs to be overthrown. In this section, he discusses various ways in which this might happen, but remains rather pessimistic. For example, he notes that the world's population can only be maintained because of industrial society. Thus, an overthrow of the system would lead to the potential starvation of billions. He also notes that electing to not have children is a bad idea, since the revolutionaries need to be plenty in number. However, this is in conflict with the world's population being too large.

As he mentioned earlier, choosing technology over freedom is a more dominant strategy, so it is very difficult to see how this revolution would ever start, especially given that it would need to be a worldwide revolution. It seems that any country or society not participating in the revolution would have a huge advantage over any society that does, which naturally results in no society taking the first step.

Kaczynski does not seem to have a good idea of what should happen after the revolution, since he is, in his own words, only interested in overthrowing industrial society, and not particularly interested in what kind of society should replace it. However, his own secluded lifestyle, and mentions of primate society gives us some hints as to what he would prefer.

There is a tone of defeatism in this section, as he admits that even if the revolution succeeded, 500 or 1000 years into the future, humanity would likely face the exact same problem again. In other words, even he himself does not believe that the progress of technology can ever be stopped, only that it can potentially be interrupted.

In many ways, Kaczynski's revolution reminds me of two other accounts of revolution against technology which I've encountered in fiction. That of the "Butlerian Jihad" from Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, and the case of the Bird-People of Brontitall, in Douglas Adam's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Both of these accounts share commonalities with Kaczynski's ideas that technology increasingly controls us, and may be a danger to our existence.

Conclusion

The Unabomber's manifesto provides an interesting critique of modern society, technology, and progress itself, which is typically hailed universally. While ultimately he does not provide a practical solution, and many of his thoughts are perhaps not fully developed, his writings highlight some of the dangers that have already manifested themselves in our civilization, and will likely continue to do so.

Perhaps it is possible to find a compromise, or to solve these societal problems with yet more, and previously unimagined technology and innovation. For example, it may be the case that human nature is fundamentally incompatible with industrial society, but this can mean that we must change either industrial society, or human nature. Kaczynski only considers the former, but the latter is likely the only way to cope with the ever-changing world without falling victim to it.

The Ted K Archive

Victor Hogrefe
Quick Thoughts: The Unabomber's Manifesto
Oct 10, 2019

Victor Hogrefe's Medium

www.thetedkarchive.com