

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY AND ITS FUTURE

(THEODORE JOHN KACZYNSKI)

October 22, 2021

What role should technology—the complex of machines and computers that undergirds our world—play in our future? This is a crucial question, and among thinking people today there exists a distinct split. Some, such as James Poulos in his soon-to-be-released *Human, Forever*, call for fully accepting that technology exists and is not going away, while refusing to surrender our humanity. Others, such as Paul Kingsnorth, entirely reject what he calls the “Machine,” and intimate that our technology-dictated future is an anti-human grotesquerie, followed by inevitable total collapse. Theodore Kaczynski falls squarely into this latter category, and this, his famous Manifesto, outlines what should be done—goals he notably took to heart.

Kaczynski’s book is not especially polished; it is, after all, the work of a man living alone and stewing in his own thoughts for many years (even though he purports to write for a group, the nonexistent “Freedom Club”). It is written as what it is—a manifesto, a list of bullet points that state his conclusions, along with the reasoning behind them, in a staccato fashion. It does not purport to offer, and in fact explicitly disclaims, complete coverage of the matters with which it concerns itself, nor does it try to refute every objection. Still, Kaczynski offers what amounts to a total philosophical worldview.

Industrial Society and Its Future contains one primary theme and one secondary theme. The primary theme is that industrial-technological civilization, that is, what we live in today and have since the Industrial Revolution, is very bad for mankind and therefore must be ended. That’s no surprise if you know any of Kaczynski’s story. But the secondary theme is that leftism is the biggest obstacle to accomplishing this goal, and to human flourishing generally. That is a surprise. I must admit that before I read this book, I had no idea that Kaczynski regarded leftism as the driver of evil. (It’s amusing that a thinker as different as René Girard came to the same conclusion through a totally unrelated chain of reasoning.) This largely ignored fact no doubt explains much of the animosity of the regime against him—after all, the very many leftist bombers of the 1970s were lionized then and rarely, if ever punished,

and after were in fact often rewarded, most notably the execrable Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn. Kaczynski got life in the Supermax, where he is today.

Thus, after a brief Introduction, in which Kaczynski states his purpose of destroying the fruits of the Industrial Revolution, which he tells us has massively contributed to human suffering, he immediately turns to an analysis of "The Psychology of Modern Leftism," which he describes as "one of the most widespread manifestations of the craziness of our world." This thread then runs through every chapter in the book. He admits some lack of precision in how he uses "leftist," but in general a leftist is someone who is both characterized by a feeling of inferiority and is willingly "oversocialized." Kaczynski places emphasis on the objective "inferiority" part, not the subjective "feeling" part. These are people who are objectively inferior, because they know they are not "strong, good, and successful." Leftists include many, though not all, who are "socialists, collectivists, 'politically correct' types, feminists, gay and disability activists, animal rights activists and the like." Leftists "hate America and the West because they are strong and successful." "The leftist is antagonistic to the concept of competition because, deep inside, he feels like a loser." Compassion, which the leftist delusorily believes to be his motivation, is fake and merely a cover for his "hostility and frustrated need for power." In a similar manner, one who is "oversocialized" is one who is tightly bound by society, giving him "a sense of constraint and powerlessness." Although he does not mention either, what Kaczynski seems to mean is social pressure from and upon leftists to absorb and then rebroadcast fatal debilities such as safetyism and the hyper-feminization of society.

Leftists, who "tend to be intellectuals or members of the upper-middle class," are not at all rebels, as they would have us believe. Rather, they want to integrate everyone else into the "system" and force everyone to accept its values. The claim on which they base this demand is that they are "experts," so we must obey them without question and without them having to offer, you know, facts or reasoning. Given that this book, as a manifesto published at Kaczynski's demand in major newspapers, was released in 1995, when the cult of the expert was, comparatively, just a little cloud far away on the horizon, it's a little eerie to hear this precisely on-point, concise analysis of the atmosphere of 2021. And

while Kaczynski's definition of leftism isn't mine (I focus on demands for emancipation and equality), our definitions both end up covering essentially the same set of people—perhaps because one can map feelings of inferiority to demands for equality, and oversocialization to demands for emancipation.

This attack on leftists is warmup to defining what human life should be—the opposite of this life of the leftist. In its natural form, human life follows the “power process,” which in short is life lived by achieving goals through effort. “One must have goals toward which to exercise one's power.” These goals can be artificial, “surrogate” goals, however, but such are a very weak substitute for goals that are tied to more existential matters, and surrogate goals (paper pushing makework, sportsball fandom, and so forth) are ultimately completely inadequate to support a society's flourishing. Most of all, for the majority of people (Kaczynski constantly notes that he is putting forth general, not absolute, rules) work toward the goal must be autonomous, meaning either individual effort or effort within a small group. Through the power process, an individual acquires “self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of power.” He can feel fulfilled. This is freedom. “Freedom means having power; not the power to control other people but the power to control the circumstances of one's own life.” (Kaczynski here again parallels a very different set of thinkers, notably Matthew B. Crawford and Sebastian Junger, and he channels what until the Enlightenment was the universal conception of freedom, that it is the opposite of doing exactly as one wants, which he says is “mere permissiveness.”) Freedom is not being granted some rights by bourgeois society, limited to those that promote supposed growth and progress.

If he, on the other hand, a person is not able, for whatever reason, to go through the power process, including as he progresses through the natural stages of life, he suffers a range of psychological damage, from a feeling of inferiority to eating disorders to abnormal sexual behavior. In short, no power process means the psychological health of the individual is ruined, and he most definitely feels unfulfilled and lacking meaning. He may try to find a substitute, such as a mass political movement, or some other organization in which he can subsume his own goals. But this is not a solution (and if it were, Kaczynski explicitly says, he would not accept it, for it is “demeaning” to achieve one's own goals through

the actions of others). And a society made up of such people, as ours is, is a very defective society. No surprise, it is leftists who are the least able to undergo the power process today, or they choose not to, which explains their psychological problems.

So far, Kaczynski sounds like a combination of Oswald Spengler and Bronze Age Pervert (he even refers to the symptoms of modernity as “similar to those shown by caged animals,” echoing BAP’s famous remark about chimpanzees in captivity, and his concept of the power process has much in common with BAP’s “owned space”). I certainly see little to disagree with in his analysis. Kaczynski isn’t a self-help guru, though, helping us through our eating disorders and balancing our qi. His point is that industrial society, technological society, obviates the power process for nearly everyone. For him, “technology” means not digital technology, even less digital communications technology, but any large-scale industrial functions made possible by machines, and the social organization that derives from society being built around industrial functions, whether driven by steam or by Intel. This is what he calls the “system,” which manifests its will through our ruling class, which benefits the most from it. The system must control human beings in order to function. The goal is to oversocialize everyone and thereby weaken bonds existing outside the system, and this goal is the focus, explicit or implicit, of nearly all social efforts of the system, from breaking family ties to forcing women into the workforce.

Industrial society demands that each person’s primary loyalty be first to the system, because this is necessary for the system to operate at all. If everyone opted out, as Kaczynski himself did, the system would crash. As he notes, primitive peoples rarely, if ever, suffered the disorders resulting from being shut out from the power process, because their lives revolved around the power process. The various indicia of modernity blamed for modernity’s problems, such as atomization of man, his isolation from nature, and the breakdown of family life, are downstream from this problem. Thus, “conservatives are fools,” because they complain of these problems, while at the same time they “enthusiastically support technological progress and economic growth.” This is Kaczynski’s only direct criticism in the entire book of conservatives, although any support of industrial/corporate dominance, which when he wrote was considered a conservative position, is very bad in

Kaczynski's eyes, which means much of the book is indirectly critical of a type of conservative. (Of course, he wrote before today's interlocking government and corporate tyranny, and the revelation that those in favor of corporate power are actually either leftists or their tools, such that no real conservative can support industrial/corporate dominance.) Leftists, however, are totally consumed by the psychological manifestations of exclusion from the power process, because they reject it on principle, not by accident.

Seeing the resulting problems, mass dissatisfaction with life, the system has tried to set up alternatives to the power process, such as creating artificial needs through advertising that can be satisfied by consumer consumption. But this is a very poor substitute, mostly because autonomy cannot be part of this equation. "Today people live more by virtue of what the system does FOR them or TO them than by virtue of what they do for themselves." It is not only that we lack autonomy—we are afraid all the time, yet unlike primitive man we are unable to act to combat our fears, from war to increasing taxes, and worse yet, these threats are man-made and imposed from outside, not natural occurrences we can stoically bear as part of the eternal natural order. The system prevents us from doing anything important at all in response; it regulates all behavior, in its very nature.

Kaczynski's point about fear and constrained response is very important, very insightful, and very prescient. Every nation in the world, it seems, is today organized around fear—most obviously of the Wuhan Plague, but of much else as well. When the Plague is gone, it will be something else, and that immediately. Governments both propagate fear as a means of control and try to alleviate fear in order to please the populace, which itself willingly bathes in fear. Why this should be is somewhat of a mystery to me. Part of it, of course, is mass feminization, allowing the concerns of one type of woman, what would in the past have been accurately called a weak or hysterical woman (and what Kaczynski would call a leftist woman), to dominate education and public discourse, and raising such women to elective office. Perhaps, for example, the frustrated maternal instincts of the childless Angela Merkel explain many of her insane policy prescriptions, from inviting millions of crocodile-tear-crying aliens, her substitute babies, into the German nation, to her "hush, little darling, don't you cry, I'll keep you

safe from harm” reaction to the Plague. Certainly the majority of the most extreme Plague fanatics are women, who derive meaning from their prescriptions that narrowly focus on supposed safety while ignoring all other matters, most of all the costs of this approach. Another part of universal fear is the collapse of religious belief, and even more of the shared healthy social-mental approach to life that comes when much of the population is religious. (A recent video by Bishop Irenei, a Russian Orthodox bishop, excellently states what the Christian position on the Plague should be, which is not the position commonly found in Christian churches in today’s world.) No doubt there is more to it, perhaps tied to deliberate manipulation in the service of control; maybe I’ll come back to this topic another day (and I have already discussed irrational crowd behavior in the context of the Plague). Regardless, Kaczynski’s core point, that fear destroys the psychological health of a society, is doubtless correct.

That’s analytics. Next we turn to solutions, after a side note that “we’ve had to kill people” in order to “make a lasting impression,” with the complaint that it’s hard to be noticed nowadays (and this was before the torrent of information poured over us by the internet). Given the complexity of human society, large changes necessarily produce unpredictable results. But small changes ultimately change nothing; society reverts to whatever was its original path. Thus, industrial-technological society cannot be reformed and we must accept the uncertainty of wholesale change.

Nor can we “rescue freedom without sacrificing the supposed benefits of technology.” Why should we sacrifice those benefits? Because industrial society inevitably massively restricts freedom. The system requires everyone become a cog, that nobody be permitted to undergo the power process. Expanded local autonomy is a chimera and no solution. The system modifies human behavior to fit its needs, rather than satisfying human needs. Yes, it seems to be, and it is, hard to give up modern medicine. But the system is intertwined; we cannot keep only part of it (and moreover, modern medicine tends to the degradation of man, because government will ultimately engage in forced eugenics as the genome deteriorates because natural selection no longer acts). Worse yet, when given the choice, most people will choose technology over freedom, in large part because each individual compromise, such as

changing to motorized transport, seems to have only upside. Yet what has been wrought, all-together, by industrial-technological society is enormously destructive of human flourishing. Technology is a one-way ratchet; it cannot be contained or reformed. It must be destroyed.

True, industrial-technological society is suffering from self-inflicted maladies, both economic and environmental. This is not an indication it may reform itself; rather, its weakness is a golden opportunity to strangle it entirely. Efforts to reform or restrain the system are useless; lasting social reform on even minor matters not integral to the system (unlike the system's need to deny autonomy, which is integral) has always largely proved impossible. "The only way out is to dispense with the industrial-technological system altogether." This means revolution—a Gordian Knot solution that has the side benefit of being inspirational to those who must take the action.

What Kaczynski fears the most is what the system will do to actually change mankind permanently in the future, in the name of our own good but really to perpetuate the system, making revolution impossible. He fears improved psychological techniques that control, and therefore, strip the humanity from, people. He fears genetic engineering to eliminate undesirable traits. (He's wrong that this will ever be possible; as I have noted elsewhere, all major scientific advancements we are told are coming are simply fantasy, especially those related to reengineering humans, or creating machines with the characteristics of man.) Most of all, he fears the closing window to do anything about these problems; he thinks forty to one hundred years. If the system is allowed to gain "complete control over everything on Earth, including human beings and all other important organizations," whether the system is one organization or coordinated smaller organizations, we will never escape. The system will be aided by those who participate in advancing the system as a surrogate activity, with "unabated enthusiasm," in particular scientists. At that point, "[h]uman freedom mostly will have vanished, because individuals and small groups will be impotent vis-a-vis large organizations armed with supertechnology and an arsenal of advanced psychological and biological tools for manipulating human beings, besides instruments of surveillance and physical coercion."

As seen by this, scientists, as a broad category meaning those who claim to derive solutions to benefit mankind from the scientific method,

are Kaczynski's prime target of obloquy. He says they are not actually seeking to benefit mankind, as they will tell you if you ask about their motives. Nor are they doing something neither beneficial nor harmful, such as satisfying their curiosity. They are instead pursuing the power process in a way that benefits, enlarges, and enhances the system, although their goals are mostly inadequate surrogate activities, not stated larger goals, so they are not even getting satisfaction out of pursuing the power process. Moreover, scientists are very susceptible to the desire to be part of a mass movement, for which they eagerly abandon all objectivity and slavishly serve, and worship, the system (an accurate summation, given what we have seen of most scientists' behavior in the Wuhan Plague).

At first glance, Kaczynski's dystopia seems pretty much like the dystopia of 2021, in particular, but not limited to, the tyranny surrounding the Plague. True, biological tools for directly manipulating human beings are not extant, but isn't forcing an experimental "vaccine" on most of the globe's population just as much the type of biological tool Kaczynski feared? Yet the tyranny isn't nearly as complete as the one Kaczynski fears. Nonetheless, what he would call the "trend" is pretty clear.

Kaczynski says the system could collapse from stress—in fact, revolutionary attack has no chance without a large increase in internal stress. Therefore, our goal should be to heighten those stresses and to offer an opposing ideology that can gain traction as the system weakens (and can be used to keep the system from reforming if destroyed, such as by requiring physical destruction of all factories and technical books). Then successful revolution may be possible—as he points out, the French and Russian revolutions were "quite successful in destroying the old society." (Although, I note, he ignores that total destruction of modern industrial society is a whole other level of change. History is not really Kaczynski's strong point, or at least little history appears in this book.) To be successful, this new ideology must offer something, and what Kaczynski suggests is a restoration of "wild nature," both human and non-human. (He is very much what the FBI calls an environmental extremist, or did, before they dropped caring about that in favor of investigating parents for contradicting radical school boards.) Nature is the opposite of technology. It is self-executing; it has great

appeal to most people (even if the revolutionaries will necessarily be a minority until they succeed). “As for the negative consequences of eliminating industrial society—well, you can’t eat your cake and have it too. To gain one thing you have to sacrifice another.”

The revolutionaries should be strategic in their approach. For example, they should not attack the average American for being an obese over-consumer, as true as that is. Rather, they should attack the ruling classes for making the average American “a victim of the advertising and marketing industry.” More broadly, the target is “the power-holding elite of industrial society (politicians, scientists, upper-level business executives, government officials, etc.).” The revolution must be international, not confined to one country (and economic interdependence, such as NAFTA, is good because it makes this more feasible). The sooner we destroy the system, the better, because the fall will be shorter, reducing human suffering.

It is a myth, Kaczynski says, that technology only progresses, and cannot regress in the way he desires. True, very small-scale, local technology rarely regresses, but civilization-scale technology does. The only example Kaczynski gives, however, is Rome, which isn’t all that convincing. Regardless, his claim is that once we, like Samson, have pulled down industrial-technological society on our heads, it will be very hard for it to rebuild, since every piece is dependent on many other pieces. One might think that the obvious response is that hard is not the same as impossible, and many people would have an incentive to rebuild technology—for, as he himself points out earlier in his book, individual applications of technology are typically alluring and useful. He ignores this, and simply says “[T]here is no reason to believe that anyone would be interested in rebuilding industrial society,” because “enthusiasm for ‘progress’ is a phenomenon peculiar to the modern form of society.” Yes, technological development might recur in “500 or 1,000” years, but that’s a problem for those future societies.

I think fifty years is a lot more likely. In a way, technology is for mankind like the apple in the Garden, so whatever the accuracy of his analysis, or the realism of Kaczynski’s solution, it’d be much more temporary than he thinks. This is the fatal flaw in his thinking. On the other hand, if I am being honest, I have to admit this approach, of try it and see, has a lot in common with my own. Burn everything, as I

say lately, because reform of our stupid and evil society isn't going to happen otherwise.

Kaczynski ends by returning to his earliest theme—with an extended attack on leftism. Leftism is bad, among many other reasons, because it cannot accept nature. Leftists reject human freedom and endorse collectivism, and seek a unified world, which requires management of both nature and mankind. Leftists adore power over others, seeking it, getting it, and using it, and technology grants them that power, so they will never give it up. To the extent any given leftist opposes technology, it is only because he does not control it, and so cannot use it to impose his will on others. “[Leftists] will use [technology] to oppress everyone else if they ever get it under their own control.” Leftism is a totalitarian ideology that fulfils the same needs as religion. As they say—where's the lie?

Thus, in the framework I have repeatedly used for analyzing technology in the context of our future, that of Charles Mann's *The Wizard and the Prophet*, Kaczynski is most definitely a Prophet. He rejects that the system can find solutions to the crisis it brings, and if it did, in any case that would not solve the spiritual crisis. Moreover, new, unforeseeable problems would arise even were we to fix the ones we face. For example, he says, artificial intelligence, if it comes, will either destroy humanity directly, or make human lives even more meaningless and psychologically damaged. Any technological fix is a Band-Aid, and a poisoned, defective one at that.

This manifesto is a powerful attack on techno-optimism. Given that techno-optimism is one of the twelve pillars of Foundationalism, it is therefore a challenge to me. We look around, and we see Kaczynski's complaints both reified and multiplied many-fold. He is not wrong about the problems of modernity; I might place different emphasis and add various thoughts, but his core complaint about modernity is largely correct.

My basic response, and defense, is that Kaczynski errs in ascribing the faults of modernity to the Industrial Revolution. They are instead the fruits of the fantasies of the Enlightenment, a purely political movement centered on supposed emancipation from supposed oppressions. What Kaczynski identifies is much more the spiritual failure of a society caused by a philosophical rot, not by our machines. The Enlightenment's only

connection with technological progress is that it happened at roughly the same time as technological advancement exploded in the West, as a result of the unique characteristics of the West, so forever after proponents of Enlightenment values have claimed causation.

It is true that technological advancement tends to undermine the certainties of a society; any change leads to a certain degree of corrosion. Moreover, it is an open question whether wealth can be prevented from accelerating a society's decay. And digital communications technology bids to be uniquely corrosive (a topic I will cover when I review Poulos's book). But change is unavoidable, and stasis does not lead to human flourishing either. Kaczynski's approach ignores that human nature is to work to improve one's estate, and the estate of one's children, which the Industrial Revolution did. Thus God instructed Adam in the Garden. Mankind will not willingly live a primitive lifestyle, knowing what else is possible, nor will men forget what was once possible. Rather, they will reach for it again.

The answer is to make man the master of technology, not technology the master of man, and to deprecate technology that delivers autonomic individualism. We choose atomization; it is not forced on us. When technology appeals to the worse angels of our nature, societal strictures are the solution, not pretending we can return the genie to the bottle, or kill the genie and return to the forest. Not Failed Perfectionism, but Heroic Realism.

We have forgotten, because we have been made to forget, what a virtuous society looks like and can do. Such a society would alleviate the problems of modernity that Kaczynski correctly identifies—in part by restoring autonomy to individuals, but even more by restoring a sense of purpose, of meaning, of transcendence. There is no necessary reason that technology cannot aid, rather than retard, those goals. Kaczynski is probably right that we won't get there without a civilizational collapse, which won't come about through revolution, but simply because most of the West has become stinking pile of vice and fatal contradictions. That's going to be unpleasant. But there's no need for us all to be picking nuts and grasses forever afterwards to be happy, and to accomplish what men can do, and should do.