The Strange, Post-Partisan Popularity of the Unabomber

When Ted Kaczynski's manifesto appeared 30 years ago, the internet was brand-new. Now his dark vision is finding fans who don't remember life before the iPhone.

Charles Homans

March 22, 2025

Several years ago, James R. Fitzgerald, a retired F.B.I. agent, found himself rereading an abstruse tract of political philosophy called "Industrial Society and Its Future," written by a former University of California mathematics professor named Theodore John Kaczynski.

Fitzgerald first encountered Kaczynski's treatise in July 1995, shortly after Kaczynski anonymously mailed the typewritten manuscript to The Times and The Washington Post, demanding its publication in exchange for his promise to stop killing people with package bombs. Fitzgerald's photocopy of the original was dog-eared and marked up with color-coded annotations he made while trying to discern clues to the identity of the author, then known only as the Unabomber.

To this day he has no particular sympathy for the author. But there had always been passages in Kaczynski's indictment of technological civilization that gave him pause. "Boy, I don't really disagree with *this* comment," he recalled thinking, "and I don't really disagree with *this* statement — but damn it, he's a killer, and we've got to catch him!"

When we spoke recently, Fitzgerald recited one of Kaczynski's numbered paragraphs, 173, which had been on his mind in light of artificial intelligence's rapid advance: "If the machines are permitted to make all their own decisions, we can't make any conjectures as to the results, because it is impossible to guess how such machines might behave."

And there was Paragraph 92, which Fitzgerald remembered, and reconsidered, amid the Covid-19 vaccine mandates of which he was personally skeptical. "Thus science marches on blindly," Kaczynski wrote, "without regard to the real welfare of the human race or to any other standard, obedient only to the psychological needs of the scientists and of the government officials and corporation executives who provide the funds for research."

"You know what?" Fitzgerald said to himself. "Old Ted was maybe onto something here."

Online, there is a name for this experience: Tedpilling. To be Tedpilled means to read Paragraph 1 of Kaczynski's manifesto, its assertion that the mad dash of technological advancement since the Industrial Revolution has "made life unfulfilling," "led to widespread psychological suffering" and "inflicted severe damage on the natural world," and think, Well, sure. To encounter Paragraph 156 ("new technology tends to change society in such a way that it becomes difficult or impossible for an individual to function without using that technology") after asking Alexa to order new socks and think, That's not so crazy. To read Paragraph 174's warning of a near future in which "human work will no longer be necessary" and "the masses will be superfluous," while waiting for the A.I. assistant to whip up the PowerPoint for your afternoon meeting, and think, Maybe an off-grid cabin in Montana wouldn't be such a bad investment.

Most of the Tedpilled stop well short of Luigi Mangione, the accused killer of the UnitedHealthcare chief executive Brian Thompson, who gave "Industrial Society and Its Future" a four-star review on Goodreads — "it's simply impossible to ignore how prescient many of his predictions about modern society turned out" — some months

before the assassination. The more judiciously Tedpilled treat Kaczynski's ideas with a wink and more than a few caveats. *Of course* it's true, they begin, that Kaczynski was an irredeemable criminal who, his own voluminous diaries suggest, murdered at least as much out of misplaced revenge and spite as he did out of ideological commitment. *Of course* his victims did not deserve to die, as three did, or to live with permanent disfigurement or other lasting wounds, as 23 more did.

And yet: "The Unabomber: bad person, but a smart analysis," Tucker Carlson said on his show in 2021.

"I'll probably get in trouble for saying this," Blake Masters, running for Senate in 2022, said in response to an interviewer's request to name an underrated "subversive" thinker who would "influence people in a good direction," but "how about Theodore Kaczynski?"

It has been hard not to notice, in the years since Kaczynski's 2023 death by suicide in a federal prison in North Carolina, the taboo's weakening, the caveats' growing fewer and further between. This is especially true on the right, where pessimism and paranoia about technology, not long ago largely the province of the left, have spread on the heels of the pandemic and efforts to police speech on social media platforms.

When Kaczynski died, Joe Allen, a contributor to the website of Stephen K. Bannon's "War Room" podcast, argued that "it's worth reflecting on Ted's dark vision." Even Elon Musk, a man whose company Neuralink has raised hundreds of millions of dollars to implant computers in people's brains, has dabbled. Considering the first sentence of "Industrial Society and Its Future" — "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race" — Musk wrote on X, "He might not be wrong."

Carlson, Masters and Musk all inhabit the ever-blurrier borderlands between the right wing of the Republican Party and more extreme or at least esoteric political territories, whose residents delight in theories about racial and societal determinism, in romanticizing past life ways and interrogating the value of our soft, entertainment-addled society. It's not so surprising that Kaczynski has found a home there.

But Kaczynski has also become a kind of crossover figure — and a remarkably post-partisan one, capable of drawing nods from everyone from vaccine-skeptical Republicans to Musk-skeptical Democrats to internet-native teenagers. How many other domestic terrorists have been name-checked in conservatives' complaints about the erosive effects of social media and also in TikTokers' videos from a bucolic weekend at the lake? His manifesto, dismissed in the 1990s as impenetrable, is now the subject of YouTube videos drawing millions of views apiece.

It's not so hard to understand why. Kaczynski mailed off his manifesto two months before Netscape's I.P.O., in what were, for many Americans, the last days of the pre-internet era. Thirty years later, we occupy a disorienting moment when the visions of techno-optimists and techno-pessimists alike seem on the verge of realization, when a miraculous future and a dystopian one seem at once within our reach and beyond our control.

'A Bit of the Unabomber in Most of Us'

"Industrial Society and Its Future" was published by The Times and The Post 30 years ago in September, at the urging of F.B.I. investigators, who wagered that giving in to the bomber's demand to distribute his manifesto would be worth it if one reader in a million recognized the writing. One did: David Kaczynski, whose tip led federal agents to his brother's small cabin in the woods outside Lincoln, Mont.

Ted Kaczynski was arrested on April 3, 1996, almost a year after the far-right anti-government extremist Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Conservatives had chafed at Democrats' attempts to link McVeigh's views to the rhetoric of right-wing talk radio, and as the details of Kaczynski's life and crimes emerged — Harvard education; a late-1960s teaching stint at the University of California, Berkeley; bombing targets borrowed from an Earth First! publication — they were quick to brand him as the liberals' McVeigh. Rush Limbaugh proclaimed him "a left-wing nut." Where were liberals' "cries against radical extremism," the conservative columnist Cal Thomas wanted to know, "now that one of their own has been implicated in the horrid deed of bombs by mail?"

But Kaczynski was not one of their own. His manifesto spent nearly as many words denouncing "leftism" as it did attacking technology. Although environmental degradation infuriated him, it was a distant secondary concern to the loss of personal liberty, which he defined in terms a libertarian would recognize.

Still, Thomas's whataboutism was not totally misplaced. Kaczynski did undeniably stir something among the segment of the liberal intelligentsia that looked ambivalently upon the social and environmental consequences of the ascendant neoliberalism and globalization of the 1990s. "One thing I've noticed among the intellectual elite at this place," Doug Horngrad, a liberal criminal-defense lawyer in San Francisco, told a reporter, "is that this guy is actually kind of admired privately."

Some read Kaczynski's writings, sympathetically, as a sort of culture-critic indictment of a country amusing itself to death at the end of history, where yuppies dozed off alone in McMansion rec rooms as the Waco standoff and the O.J. Simpson car chase unfolded live across their home-theater screens. "There's a bit of the Unabomber in most of us," the journalist Robert Wright wrote in Time in 1995, after the first excerpts from the manifesto were released. "VCRs and microwave ovens have their virtues, but in the everyday course of our highly efficient lives, there are times when something seems deeply amiss."

But when it was published in full, the manifesto offered little support for this interpretation either. Kaczynski didn't believe modern society had gone wrong. He believed it *was* wrong.

Sean Fleming, a research fellow at the University of Nottingham who is at work on a book about Kaczynski, describes Kaczynski's writing as "Nietzsche-like" in its defiance of easy categorization — a quality that explains the attraction of the Unabomber to "radicals of all stripes."

Most of the ideas in "Industrial Society and Its Future," Fleming writes, were borrowed from a small handful of Cold War-era writers — most prominently Jacques Ellul, the French sociologist whose most influential work, "The Technological Society," appeared in English translation in 1964, when Kaczynski was a graduate student. Ellul argued that modern civilization, in its pursuit of rational efficiency, had in effect acquired a mind of its own. The system "has become autonomous," Ellul wrote.

Kaczynski, drawing from popular books on evolutionary psychology, argued that this technological system was an inevitable consequence of the Darwinian pursuit of advantage, in which the survival of individual and society alike required innovation to outcompete one's neighbors. This meant that the system could not be reformed. "You can't get rid of the 'bad' parts of technology and retain only the 'good' parts," Kaczynski wrote. He concluded, "It would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences."

The notion that humanity, in building the technological society, had built its own prison was hardly original in 1995. What distinguished Kaczynski, obviously enough, was his conviction that technological society needed to be demolished, as quickly as possible, with violence. This earned him a trickle of would-be acolytes during his long incarceration: radical environmentalists and anarcho-primitivists at first, and later eco-fascists, the faction of white nationalists who built on Hitler's view that race war was necessary for survival in a world of finite resources. (Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian neo-Nazi mass murderer, plagiarized Kaczynski in his manifesto.)

Image

The Unabomber cabin site, Lincoln, Mont., 1998.Credit...Richard Barnes for The New York Times

Beyond the far fringes, though, Kaczynski was more or less forgotten about in the post-Sept. 11 decade, as Americans obsessed over a very different kind of anti-modern radicalism. With the man himself locked away in a Colorado supermax prison, the world seemed happy to disengage from the ideological component of his crimes, the troubling way they directed a familiar uneasiness toward ghastly conclusions.

A Lorax for the Doomers

Besides the anarchists and neo-Nazis, practically the only people who took Kaczynski's ideas seriously for years after his incarceration were his most direct ideological nemeses: technologists.

"I was surprised how much of Kaczynski's manifesto I agreed with," Ray Kurzweil, the computer scientist and futurist, wrote in his 1999 book, "The Age of Spiritual Machines." When Kurzweil showed Bill Joy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, a passage from the manifesto on the future of artificial intelligence, Joy found himself troubled. He later wrote, "As difficult as it is for me to acknowledge, I saw some merit in the reasoning in this single passage."

The techno-optimists shared Kaczynski's view that technology was not a series of innovations but, as the futurist Kevin Kelly wrote in a chapter dedicated to the manifesto in his 2010 book, "What Technology Wants," a "holistic, self-perpetuating

machine." They also agreed that the near future would be one in which human existence was ruled by a system that humans did not control. Where Kelly and Kurzweil differed from Kaczynski was in viewing this future as navigable, even profoundly exciting — and inevitable, no matter how many bombs you built.

It's not surprising that broader interest in Kaczynski began to tick upward in the early 2010s, as the average person's daily experience of technology shifted from discrete tools and entertainment devices to near-constant participation in powerful and inescapable networks — when the system that both Kaczynski and the futurists described went from abstract to concrete. Lamenting Facebook and Twitter and "the ease with which technology taps the ego and drains the soul," the Fox News contributor Keith Ablow argued in 2013 that Kazcynski was "precisely correct in many of his ideas."

Since then, fights over misinformation and hate speech have made those networks a polarized battleground, while evidence of their psychological and social harm becomes stark. And over the past several years of increasingly rapid A.I. advance, technologists have come to sound as much like Kaczynski as Kurzweil. Moguls like Sam Altman of OpenAI have brazenly redefined Silicon Valley's higher purpose, from expanding human opportunity to forestalling an apocalypse that they insist only they, conveniently enough, are capable of avoiding.

Kaczynski's vision of a species-wide rebellion against our own creations was farfetched in 1995, but in 2025, even his personal retreat from technological society seems practically impossible. The robots will be everywhere soon enough, and only the people who build them can afford to buy land in Montana these days.

The sense that there is no escape from technology and its consequences has fostered the very loose, very online ethos known as Doomerism, an irony-mediated marriage of nihilism and utopianism in which apocalypse is inescapable but the possibilities on the other side of it are vast, unencumbered by the constraints and cramped imaginations of politics as we've known them. It is perhaps no surprise that Kaczynski is ubiquitous in this milieu, quoted and memed and venerated on social media and message boards as Uncle Ted.

In this context, Kaczynski's manifesto is less the blueprint for resistance he hoped it would be than a theoretical framework for understanding the dystopia we now must figure out how to live in and how we got here. In the goofier corners of Tedpilled social media, he is invoked, tongue mostly but not entirely in cheek, as a kind of Lorax figure: a weird, feral creature to whom humanity should have listened when we had the chance. On X, his glowering image is superimposed over headlines about Japanese men marrying virtual-reality brides. On TikTok, his manifesto is quoted, "Live Laugh Love"-style, in posts about wilderness hiking vacations.

Scroll through enough of it, and the lines between jokey provocation and unironic aspiration become difficult to discern. You remember that these are often people too young to remember a time before the iPhone, for whom Kaczynski's alarms come from a world not much less distant and unthinkable than Rousseau's. And you notice the

phrase that accompanies many of the posts, the way it sounds more like a rueful shrug than a call to arms: *Uncle Ted was right.*

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