

Waiting for the End of the World

On the Unabomber, the Dark Mountain Project, and the
back-to-nature movement.

Ron Hogan

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EARLY IN THE *Manhunt: Unabomber* miniseries, which first aired on the Discovery Channel in the summer of 2017, there's a scene where Jim Fitzgerald (played by Sam Worthington) expresses his sympathy for the argument against modern civilization that Theodore Kaczynski outlined in "Industrial Society and Its Future," more popularly known as the "Unabomber Manifesto." Two years after Kaczynski's arrest, the FBI profiler still has the manifesto kicking around in his brain, still sees the rest of society as "sleepwalking" through life: "Watching TV, eating trash, working to become something for someone else," he says. "And nobody does anything about it. Nobody even tries. Nobody except for Ted." "Yeah, but Fitz," his colleague reminds him, "he's the Unabomber."

Obviously, you don't get Discovery to commit to an eight-hour docudrama by glorifying terrorism, and the miniseries is careful to present Kaczynski as a very bad man whose bombings maimed and killed several victims, and who was brought down by the indefatigable efforts of a massive FBI task force — or, more specifically, one FBI profiler who refused to play along while his superiors chased one false lead after another and was ultimately able to convince everyone that applying "forensic linguistics" to the manifesto was the key to uncovering the identity Kaczynski had hidden for 17 years.

At the same time, however, the show heavily romanticizes Kaczynski, most noticeably in the relationship it creates between him and Fitzgerald. (For clarity's sake, let's call the characters, as the show does, "Ted" and "Fitz.") In real life, the two men never met, were only ever in the same room once, during Kaczynski's sentencing in 1998. *Manhunt: Unabomber*, though, thrusts them together in a series of prison encounters straight from the Hannibal Lecter playbook. As noted earlier, Fitz's prolonged examination of the manifesto has led him to identify deeply with the Unabomber's message, so when he tells Ted, "I want you to change the world; I want you to start a revolution," it's not entirely clear whether he's just following his bosses' instructions to convince a terrorist to plead guilty so he won't be able to use the trial as a platform to continue attacking the American way of life.

Yet because Kaczynski is a real-life evil genius, we can't be allowed to admire him, not even in the ironic way audiences are allowed to admire Hannibal Lecter. Instead, the miniseries does everything it can to make us *feel sorry* for Ted. "There's something so tragic about him, isn't there?" Fitz's love interest says shortly after reading the manifesto for the first time. "A guy who could write like that, think like that [...] so much insight and passion. And yet his life turned out in such a way he thinks the only way he can get people to hear what he has to say is by blowing people up."

The sixth episode of the miniseries is fully dedicated to this sympathetic approach. Set shortly after the publication of the manifesto in the *Washington Post*, it spends the day with Ted (played by Paul Bettany) as he bicycles from his remote cabin into nearby Lincoln, Montana, to see if the local library has gotten the paper yet. They have, but there's already a waiting list, and the town librarian gushes about how the

Unabomber is “obviously very well-educated, very intelligent. [...] A lot of what he says makes sense to me.”

Ted is also writing a letter to his brother, David, which prompts him to reflect on his life. It starts with the anger and frustration he felt when his best friend in middle school discovered girls, to which he reacts by sending the boy a particularly volatile piece of homemade flash paper, a clear prototype of the bombs he would build as an adult. From there, Ted gains early admission to Harvard at the age of 16, and in his sophomore year is selected as a test subject in an experiment conducted by the prestigious psychologist Henry Murray. The process begins harmlessly enough, with a series of interviews in which Murray draws out young Ted’s political and philosophical beliefs, which already show hints of the anti-industrial ethos of the manifesto. But then Ted is invited into a lab room where he’s strapped to a chair in front of a movie screen, unable even to turn his head away as he’s forced to watch films of those conversations and is subjected to humiliation and abuse.

In voice-over, Ted tells his brother about all this, suggesting the experiments were part of the infamous Project MKUltra, a CIA research program designed to develop “mind control” techniques to extract information from interrogation subjects by breaking them down psychologically. (Murray’s Harvard experiments are real, and MKUltra is real; the link between the two, which has been asserted by others, remains inconclusive — although Murray definitely worked with the CIA’s forerunners in the OSS.) “Murray spent a year seducing me and then spent two years breaking me, two years,” Ted’s narration continues, as he prepares to make his way back to his cabin after a heartfelt conversation with the librarian’s teenage son about how being different from other kids is a *good* thing. “Why’d I keep going back? To prove to them that they can strap me into an electric chair, but I will never give in. They will never break me. And they didn’t. I didn’t break. They did not break me.”

The show’s creators, however, seem at least partially convinced he was broken. Now that his demands to have “Industrial Society and Its Future” published have been met, Ted could fulfill his end of the bargain — to stop the bombings. “But every time my mind drifts,” he writes later that night, “it goes back to that room in Harvard. Whenever I close my eyes, I’m there, strapped to that chair, helpless, impotent, stripped of all respect. And I feel so much anger. I’ve been living on anger my whole life.”

Sorting through his feelings, Ted wonders if the things he’s done are rooted in his frustration at having been betrayed by the parents who sent him to Harvard ill-equipped to deal with the pressures of adult life, at being a 53-year-old virgin, at never being able to fall in love and start a normal family like everybody else. “My life wasn’t supposed to go like this,” he laments. “My God, David, [...] it wasn’t supposed to go like this.” The criminal mastermind is revealed to be a scared, confused man-child — one who will eventually accept a guilty plea only because the alternative is to be branded by his own defense attorney as mentally unstable.

In his 2013 essay “Dark Ecology,” reprinted in the collection *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays*, English environmental activist and philoso-

pher Paul Kingsnorth describes his initial encounter with Kaczynski's "sparse" prose, the manifesto's "logical and unsentimental" arguments, and his hope that the text wouldn't prove too persuasive. "If I do end up agreeing with him," Kingsnorth confesses, "and with other such critics I have been exploring recently, such as Jacques Ellul and D. H. Lawrence and C. S. Lewis and Ivan Illich, I am going to have to change my life in quite profound ways." Even though Kingsnorth had already begun to simplify his life radically, moving his family to the Irish countryside, "to grow our own food and compost our own shit and educate our own children and make our own jam and take responsibility for our own actions" (as he writes in another essay), he was still deeply embedded in the modern world — he was writing these essays, for example, on a laptop computer with a broadband connection. As much as he wants to make a clean break, he admits, "I can't work out where to jump, or what to land on, or whether you can ever get away by jumping."

Kingsnorth discusses the motivations for his partial break from society throughout *Confessions*, the experiences and realizations that prompted him to describe himself as a "recovering environmentalist." Though he first got involved with environmental activism because of his profound feeling for the natural world, he is repelled by the contemporary movement's emphasis on sustainability. "What does this curious, plastic word mean?" he asks.

It does not mean defending the non-human world from the ever-expanding empire of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, though some of its adherents like to pretend it does, even to themselves. It means sustaining human civilization at the comfort level that the world's rich people — us — feel is their right, without destroying the "natural capital" or the "resource base" that is needed to do so.

Sustainability-based environmentalism tells us that we don't need to radically change our way of life, and we certainly don't need to reduce our consumption. We just need to tweak the means of production a little bit, exploit the resources of the natural world a bit more responsibly, and we should be able to handle a world population that grows to eight or nine or even 10 billion, no problem.

Kingsnorth briefly considers the connections between this "neo-environmentalist" mindset and the rise of neoliberalism, an economic relationship at the heart of Canadian environmentalist and political scientist Peter Dauvergne's new book *Environmentalism of the Rich* (2017). Dauvergne examines the ways large businesses do just enough to be able to tout themselves as environmentally responsible, while "efficiency gains and savings from corporate sustainability are going straight back into churning out more nondurable and disposable products, building more big-box stores and producing more billionaires." As he sees it, "A politics of global sustainability will not be possible without a world economy of less waste, less resource exploitation, and less biological disruption — and thus less greenhouse gases, deforestation, overfishing, biodiversity loss, desertification, and pollution."

But Dauvergne doesn't offer practical advice on how to kick-start that idealized world economy, just a hopeful wish for "a spirit of outrage at the world order" that will lead us to spurn our culture of conspicuous consumption. So how are we supposed to move from the neo-environmentalist world where we just get more efficient at maintaining our current standard of living and destroy the planet a little less rapidly to a world where we're not only consuming fewer natural resources but are actually happy doing so?

For Kaczynski, the solution was logical and unsentimental. "Technology has gotten the human race into a fix from which there is not likely to be any easy escape," he wrote. "To relieve the pressure on nature it is not necessary to create a special kind of social system, it is only necessary to get rid of industrial society." Not to improve it, but to "dump the whole stinking system" and start over with no social structure more complex than small villages. Only then, he argued, could the humans who survived the collapse of the modern world find true freedom, rather than slaving away their entire lives to prop up the system. Mind you, Kaczynski's vision of freedom was essentially limited to "the power to control the circumstances of one's own life" by coming up with our own means of food, shelter, and self-defense.

Popular memory tends to focus on the "technology bad"/"nature good" aspects of Kaczynski's message, making it easy to imagine him as a misguided (or even misunderstood, if you're feeling particularly sympathetic) social critic. Nearly a quarter-century after the manifesto's publication, you can still get a quick laugh whenever news breaks of some fresh technological development, like the release of the iPhone X, by declaring, "The Unabomber had a point." Even *Manhunt: Unabomber* goes out of its way to reinforce that point of view with Fitz's internalization of the manifesto. "I know you're not insane," he assures Ted. "Every time I stop at a red light, or I follow the arrows at IKEA, or I sit and I wait and listen for the modem to dial up, I can see the systems that control our lives and I feel my freedom being hemmed in and I hate it."

When you actually read "Industrial Society and Its Future," though, it becomes harder to embrace Kaczynski. You can't count on him as a champion of racial equality or social justice, because he explicitly tells you he doesn't care about these things — in fact, working to achieve them only gets in the way of the real goal of smashing industrial society to ruins. He hates conservatives, who "whine about the decay of traditional values, yet [...] enthusiastically support technological progress and economic growth," but he really, really hates "leftists," whom he sees as more interested in reconfiguring the system to their advantage rather than creating a genuine alternative to society. This is especially true, he claims, of academics, "who have secure employment with comfortable salaries, and the majority of whom are heterosexual white males from middle to upper-class families" — though this claim might just be the former math professor's own bugaboos coming to the surface.

The vision Kaczynski hammered out at his typewriter, alone in the wilderness of Montana, is, ultimately, an apocalyptic one. From the vantage point of the early 1990s, he looked to the future and predicted that "the industrial-technological system will be

undergoing severe stresses due to economic and environmental problems,” coupled with a rise in “alienation, rebellion, [and] hostility” throughout the world’s population. “We hope that the stresses through which the system is likely to pass will cause it to break down,” he wrote, “or at least will weaken it sufficiently so that a revolution against it becomes possible.” A revolution that could accelerate the process would definitely be preferable, as far as Kaczynski was concerned, but this wasn’t about, as the mid-20th-century philosopher Eric Voegelin famously put it, “immanentizing the Eschaton” — i.e., deliberately embracing the end of the world to bring about the kingdom of heaven (or even just a really good facsimile) on earth. “We have no illusions about the feasibility of creating a new, ideal form of society,” Kaczynski reminded his readers. “Our goal is only to destroy the existing form of society.”

Roughly 20 years later, Paul Kingsnorth’s prognosis seems to deliberately echo Kaczynski’s. “Our civilization is starting to break down,” he writes.

We are at the start of an unfolding economic and social collapse that may take decades or centuries to play out — and which is playing out against the background of a planetary ecocide which nobody seems able to prevent. We are not gods, and our machines will not get us off this hook, however clever they are and however much we would like to believe it.

So, where do we go from there? “Is it possible to read the words of someone like Theodore Kaczynski and be convinced by the case he makes, even as you reject what he did with the knowledge?” Kingsnorth asks.

Is it possible to observe the unfolding human attack on nature with horror, be determined to do whatever you can to stop it, and at the same time know that much of it cannot be stopped, whatever you do? Is it possible to see the future as dark and darkening further, to reject false hope and desperate pseudo-optimism without collapsing into despair?

What, specifically, should we do if we’re not prepared, as Kaczynski was, to kick the industrial system when it’s down and destroy it before it can destroy us?

For Kingsnorth, the immediate answer was, as we’ve seen, to “escape from the urban consumer machine” and make a new home for his family in Ireland, fulfilling “a personal duty to live as simply and with as little impact on the rest of nature as I possibly can.” Kingsnorth has also grappled with these questions in his two novels, *The Wake* (2014) and *Beast* (2016), presenting a pair of case studies of what it’s like to live in beleaguered retreat from society.

Yet *The Wake* is not about a man who chooses to withdraw peacefully from a society he has come to despise — although there’s plenty about life in an English village in 1066 that antagonizes Buccmaster of Holland, the novel’s narrator, starting with the stupidity of his neighbors and the sanctimonious control the Catholic Church holds

over the territory. Something worse is coming, though, and the omens pile atop one another, from the giant black bird with eyes of fire that appears over Buccmaster's land to the arrival of Halley's Comet. Buccmaster's resentment of authority is so well established that, when his two teenage sons are drafted into a defense force that goes out to meet an attempted invasion by the Norwegian king Harald the Landwaster when they should be home, bringing in the harvest, his fury is already entirely predictable.

His rage grows stronger when they defy him a few weeks later to volunteer for a second campaign, this time against the armies of Guillaume of Normandy, which results in the death of England's monarch, Harold Godwinson, on the battlefield at Hastings. In Kingsnorth's imitation of Old English, Buccmaster describes the despair of the days that follow:

there is no one lifan in angland now has not seen all they cnawan tacan from them. there is no man in angland in any part from mierce to northanhymbre to efen us the free socmen of holland has not seen efry thing they cnawan tacan and none of this in their grip. lic the wind what brings down the waet before haerfest there was naht we colde do to stand in the way of such a slege naht but to go out after with sicols and loc at our broc felds and tac what straw and seed we colde ...

The Norman conquerors seize his land, and that of the other local socmen (free tenant farmers), by royal decree. When he and some of his neighbors refuse to pay the new, higher tributes, the Normans attack the village, destroying Buccmaster's farmhouse and murdering his wife. For some time, Buccmaster has been convinced that he was chosen by the ancient hero Wayland the Smith, "the deorc ealdor of all anglisc folc," who has been speaking to him along these lines:

*i is the eald one
dweller in the beorgs
i walcs the high lands
i macs the hwit hors and the hwit man
i is forger of wyrd and waepen
cweller of cyngs
i walcs through deop water to cum to thu*

But it's the destruction of his land that sends Buccmaster fleeing into the wilderness, to the sacred spot where his grandfather took him as a child, the home to England's pre-Christian gods. There, he begs for their intervention: "[A]ngland is beornan in ingenga fyr thy folcs is bledan their crist has left them lic we saed lic we always saed he wolde." There is no miraculous sign, of course, but Wayland assures him that the power of the gods is in him: "*thine is the bodig thu ceoses the time.*" And so, like the Unabomber, Buccmaster decides to live at the margins of the civilized world, dedicating himself —

and, eventually, a small band of comrades — to its harassment and, with any luck, its destruction.

The withdrawal of Edward Buckmaster, the protagonist of *Beast*, to the moors of west England is equally hostile, but not as directly confrontational. “I came here to measure myself against the great emptiness,” he declares, explicitly comparing himself at the outset to St. Cuthbert, the seventh-century monk who retired to an island off the Northumbrian coast to take up a life of solitude:

We head out because the emptiness negates us. We leave the cities and we go to the wild high places to be dissolved and to be small. We live and die at once, the topsoil is washed away, and the rock is exposed and it is not possible to play the games anymore. Now, I am exposed rock. Like Cuthbert, I have been washed clean.

What happens, though, when we strip away the veneer of civilization? For Buckmaster, it brings a foreboding awareness of some dark creature stalking him, and the harder he tries to pin the feeling down, the more disoriented he becomes. Alone with his own thoughts, he begins to reassess humanity’s place in the natural order, our relationship to “the beetles the bacteria the earthworms the centipedes the viruses the mycelium the seeds lying dormant in the soil waiting for us to burn ourselves out.” At first, it is a terrifying vision:

I was a stranger here I could see it now I was a foreigner an invader an immigrant and they were turning on me. [...] This was their world and they would take it back they would take it back from me soon there would be no lane here no church no paths I could see the future and in it was nothing but trees nothing but the things living in the trees and in the soil a great silent green orchestra spread across the whole of the world. I had walked out too far. I had walked to this lonely place and now I was surrounded and they would eat me.

Instead of encountering a folkloric hero urging him to lash out at his oppressors, Buckmaster must face a “huge black cat with yellow eyes” that goads him down a path to a more hallucinatory existential confrontation. We soon come to realize that, just as Ted describes in *Manhunt: Unabomber*, Buckmaster has been living on anger his whole life. Yet because he chooses to remove himself from a world that infuriates him, channeling all his rage into a solitary conflict, Edward Buckmaster is able to move beyond that anger in a way Buckmaster of Holland, so eager to lash out at anyone he sees as an enemy of “*trieve angland*,” cannot — the same way that Theodore Kaczynski, fixated on ideologically symbolic and physically real revenge against the industrial developers encroaching upon his Montana retreat, could not.

Facing a world that seemed equally stacked against him, the prophet Elijah also fled into the wilderness, where the Lord soon tracked him down, demanding, “What doest

thou here, Elijah?” Elijah complained about how hard his life had become now that “the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” Unimpressed, God subjected Elijah to a massive display of wind, earthquake, and fire, then spoke to him in “a still, small voice,” repeating: “What doest thou here?” Failing to take the hint, Elijah offered the exact same excuses, at which point the Lord lost patience and gave Elijah a specific set of instructions about who he should meet with and what he should tell them. In other words, just when Elijah thinks he’s done with activism, God tells him to get up off his ass and *start organizing*.

Maybe Kingsnorth felt a similar call in 2009, when, along with Dougald Hine, he co-wrote the “Uncivilization” manifesto, in which they announced the formation of the Dark Mountain Project. Looking out at the world, the two men saw “an empire corroding from within [...] a people who believed, for a long time, that their actions did not have consequences,” and they wondered “how that people will cope with the crumbling of their own myth.” As they put it:

If we are indeed teetering on the edge of a massive change in how we live, in how human society itself is constructed, and in how we relate to the rest of the world, then we were led to this point by the stories we have told ourselves — above all, by the story of civilization.

The goal, then, would be “to challenge the stories that underpin our civilization” by giving serious creative consideration to a world where human civilization is no longer the central fixture but, as in Edward Buckmaster’s vision, simply one part of a larger ecosystem. Kingsnorth and Hine soon found other writers and artists eager to explore the ramifications of an “Uncivilized” worldview — enough to support an ongoing series of *Dark Mountain* anthologies, featuring personal essays, short stories, interviews, and photography.

Some of the selections in *Walking on Lava* (2017), a “greatest hits” compilation recently published by Chelsea Green, have an overtly apocalyptic tone, invoking mythological models like the Kali Yuga or the descent of the Sumerian goddess Inanna into the underworld. Survivalist Dmitry Orlov offers his perspective on the modern world’s imminent collapse:

[T]he best case scenario is it happens quickly. There’s a fast die-off, and the ecosystem is saved. [...] The worst case scenario is business as usual until the planet can no longer support life.

Other contributors, however, are still able to look at the world around them — and its future — with optimism. Florence Caplow writes about visiting the site of the former Japanese-American internment camp at Manzanar, California, and encountering the remnants of a contemplative garden that had been designed and built by one of the

prisoners, an illustration of “the power of the human heart rising up in the middle of darkness.” Vinay Gupta, describing himself as akin to the Kapalika ascetics who carried a skull to remind others of the inevitability of death, similarly invokes “the green shoots of a new culture which ache to climb the wreckage” of industrial capitalism.

“The end of the world as we know it,” Kingsnorth and Hine remind readers at the end of their manifesto, “is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we shall find the hope beyond hope, the paths that lead to the unknown world ahead of us.” Community is crucial to that vision — and here it may be worth remembering that Theodore Kaczynski also used the first-person plural in “Industrial Society and Its Future.” But the “we” of the so-called “Freedom Club” was a lie — there was never anyone other than Kaczynski involved in his campaign of terror. Though, like any well-known incarcerated killer, Kaczynski has his fans and pen pals, few seem willing to continue the war against modern civilization in his name. Meanwhile, in addition to publishing the *Dark Mountain* anthologies, Kingsnorth and his allies have been coming together at three-day “Uncivilization Festivals,” recently rebranded as “Base Camps,” along with other smaller gatherings across Britain. It’s possible to see a future in the Dark Mountain movement, though what others will make of Kingsnorth’s legacy — or, for that matter, how Kingsnorth will continue to define it — remains to be seen.

But there is a precedent to which we can look. For Elijah overcame his crisis of faith, resuming his life of prophetic activism until the Lord summoned him to heaven. Before he left, though, Elijah passed his mantle on to his protégé, Elisha — whose first miracle upon returning to his comrades in Jericho was to heal the polluted waters of a local spring. Call it a small act of environmental reclamation, perhaps; helpful to the members of the local community but nowhere near enough to save the world. Then again, as Kingsnorth warns us, “there is no saving the world,” not anymore, “and the ones who say there is are the ones you need to save it from.”



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The Ted K Archive

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