

KACZYNSKI: WHAT'S HE WORTH?

by Danica Brister

Like many conspiracy theories and their theorists, Theodore Kaczynski's Industrial Society and its Future is easy to dismiss as psychotic rambling that has no basis in fact or reality. But also like many conspiracy theories, somewhere in among apocalyptic predictions and unfounded slander there is some valid social commentary. Assessments of such conspiracy theories are made by various authors that help reveal that there are lessons to learn. However, despite there being some truth in his warnings, Kaczynski's reasoning is ultimately false.

The Unabomber's Manifesto develops, among other points, an ideal society that encompasses the author's definition of true freedom. It does so by dismantling the existing infrastructure of a culture of infinite dependence that prevents self-determination, which has resulted from the industrial revolution and its advances. In contrast, his primitive society relies on complete self-autonomy and a reality of social evolution. This reality could be explained by saying social structures are adapted to environments, and as these structures are constantly subjected to change there are natural and inevitable processes that shape the development of a society.

Kaczynski despises the technological system because it puts everyone on an equal standing, where he does not think we all belong. He believes that our differing

levels of ability should be exposed, as nature would assuredly do, and our constant denial of this range is unnatural and destructive. He values different abilities over others but does not necessarily adhere to the Darwinian convention of survival of the fittest. He actually rejects the image of apparent physical strength as an unnecessary surrogate activity [75] and his definition is based on the ability to recognize freedom, and its imitation, which is focused on by Timothy Melley as a common component of conspiracy narratives. This ability implies a high level of intelligence and a willing self-awareness. He also infers that those that do not meet these criteria are not naturally intended to the life they have been granted, and therefore are acceptable casualties. Like many other ideas from his manifesto, this is drawn from a larger, more widely known school of thought, in this case Social Darwinism.

Kaczynski accounts for this change in the natural order with the influence of technology and over-socialization. This condition occurs in individuals who have become too susceptible to the influence of the society around them. Social Darwinists, such as Kaczynski classify weak individuals by revealing psychological weakness, rather than a lack of physical capacity. Weakness would be defined as a high responsiveness to the outside pressure and a lack of will and support for one's self, "Thus the over socialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him," [Kaczynski 26]. Such individuals do not seek freedom from this imposition but act out their beliefs in the way theirs were imposed on them; by making others feel guilty and worthless in defiance of social norms [Kaczynski 155]. Enforcing the cyclic nature of socialization secures their position for Kaczynski as beyond hope of personal reform, because only those who are capable of following up

their ideas and rhetoric with achievement would qualify, and he essentially leaves them to be victims of his revolution.

These definitions of strength and inferiority play to the insecurities of many people, who fear being lost in the end game of the collective and his provocation causes them to question the importance of their own existence. A conspiracy theory like this “For many ...proves an anti-dote to powerlessness,”[Goldberg pg.240]. Conspiracy theories are comforting to believe in because they give an order and meaning to a world more or less dictated by chaos. Its is much easier to have a concrete reason for the injustices of one’s life rather than account for them with an abstract concept or face the truth of the probable insignificance of one’s life in terms of the universe. However, it is difficult to understand how Kaczynski could respect followers who were so easily manipulated by his rhetoric.

Timothy Melley coins the term “agency panic” to describe a main component of conspiracy narratives. It describes concern surrounding an apparent loss of control or independence [Melley pg62], which is the main theme of Kaczynski’s Manifesto. Melley continues by revealing that the significance of this concept lies in its view of the individual “as a rational motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires and memories,” [Melley pg 64]. This core is the defining characteristics of the individuals and what makes it unique, and is what is now being violated by the technological system. Once this has been lost or manipulated past recognition, the individual has lost its identity, and by social Darwinism, it’s worth for continuing generations. If this were formulated as an ethical theory it would classify people according strength of character and freedom from influence, which Kaczynski both outwardly supports and implicitly rejects. Though he agrees with the definition of

strength he does not believe there should be distinct categories of humans with varying degrees of rights and freedoms such as a caste system, but rather that there should be as little structure as possible involved in the process. Though he may deny some the right to live he does not see the need to institutionalize inferiority.

His cause for revolution represents a conspiracy theory whose premises are based on some truth of our modern world. Michael Kelly makes a similar point about political paranoia, that at its broadest level it is entirely rational [Kelly pg 63].

Technology does in fact allow individuals of diminished capacity in many respects to survive, prosper, and promote their ideas and capabilities to further generations, but it does not follow that this is a negative influence on either society or the species. Like political paranoia this theory goes further than rationality as it is built up by the imagination of the conspiracy theorist. The major assumption made by social Darwinists such as Kaczynski is that what occurs in nature is morally correct in terms of human action. This is characterized by Chase's conclusion on Kaczynski, "modern evil ... results from the corrosive powers of intellect itself and its arrogant tendency to put ideas above common humanity," [Chase pg64] In other words it is these things that distinguish us from beasts of nature; our compassion, innovation, or guilt. These qualities are not natural or instinctual but developed and refined by our social environment. It is the conscious abandonment or rejection of these that is what Chase calls evil. Kaczynski feels he is considering the common man, the individual but in fact he is pursuing an ideal primitive man who can never be perfectly defined let alone realized. He uses this to justify his destructive revolution and would consider himself apart from other theorists tainted by ignorance and racism, when this arrogance puts him much closer in reasoning to them than he would like to believe.

By applying scientific theory to social phenomena, Kaczynski is committing the folly revealed by Chase in his article, as he is depersonalizing his victims and allowing himself to be justified by an intangible and distant concept, of individuality [Chase pg64]. This entire concept of individuality he holds to such esteem is countered by Zygmunt Bauman who says that definitions of identity as a fixed set of abstractions are not accurate. "Identities do not rest in on the uniqueness of their traits but consist increasingly in distinct ways of selecting/ recycling/ rearranging the cultural matter which is common to all." Spark asserts that identities were never nor are ever permanent and inevitably change as their social context changes [Spark: 58]. They have always been part of a greater cultural identity and the relationship between the two is one of dynamic equilibrium of taking and adding to each other simultaneously. In a sense they are mutually exclusive, as one cannot really exist without the other.

Kaczynski's theories were rejected so violently at their debut because they play to our personal insecurities and remind us how dangerously close we are to such seemingly reasonable thinking, as Chase said, "the truly disturbing aspect of Kaczynski and his ideas is not that they are so foreign but that they are so familiar,"[Chase pg.47] This apparent rejection of "the end (ideal society, true freedom) may justify the method (social Darwinism)" means we, as a culture, are moving away from philosophies that are justified through simplicity and are accepting ones that account for more complicated detail. Philosophies could be called all- encompassing perspectives and survival is becoming the dominating factor. It is now more difficult to justify personal loss with an accomplishment of the whole or toward a greater ideal.

In addition, Kaczynski's interpretation of the theory leaves out the necessity of mutation: social mutation is inevitable and will always manifest itself in

technological advances. He rejects mutations that take the form of inter-societal cooperation where individuals must abandon some liberties or efforts in favor of the efforts made by the whole. For example, instead of one farmer growing every crop, each farmer grows one and conducts trade with others. This is a form of social evolution, as it would allow the farmer to be more productive and efficient but take away from his freedom of self-reliance. It would force him to be in some way dictated by the needs and desires of others, which Kaczynski finds so corrupting to the mind.

This new order described by Kaczynski using social Darwinism fits with Ingrid Fields description of the metaphor of conspiracy theories in our modern age. She states, “The metaphor asserts a desire for direct causality...some group [or structure] is responsible for the way things are,” [Fields pg.158]. The direct causality we wish to delegate to an outside source, such as the technological system, to give meaning and purpose to our lives is perhaps indicative that we are weak creatures whichever path we follow. If we ignore the hypocrisy of our society and the destruction we have wreaked on the world we are unworthy to change it or experience a change brought on by others. Even if it is recognized but we choose the easy path of blame and refuse to claim responsibility we will also be far from reaching our potential. We have also found we cannot sweep all of our feelings of dissatisfaction away under one all-encompassing rug of a single conspiracy theory or theology. Entering and becoming a strong member of society requires that we be capable and willing to investigate numerous possible philosophies rather than subscribe to absolute agendas.

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