

Ted Kaczynski, Conspiracy Theory, and the Application for Intellectuals

by Jacob Friedman

Conspiracy theories often strike hard at institutions to which many of us belong, identify with, or consider important. But that doesn't mean one should immediately dismiss these theories. Instead, one should take the opportunity to examine what it is about those institutions that, fairly or not, makes them a target. In *Industrial Society and its Future*, Ted Kaczynski takes aim at the world of academia and the intellectuals it is made up of, declaring this institution to be the enemy of all free and dignified individuals. The question one should ask about *Industrial Society and its Future* is not how Kaczynski was wrong, but rather in what ways is he right. What is it about our society in general, and the world of academia specifically, that so disillusioned Kaczynski who was an intellectual himself? The answer to this question lies in understanding Kaczynski's perception of an intellectual life as constricting freedom rather than expanding it. Kaczynski saw intellectuals as the products of a system which shows more concern for its own perpetuation than for individual human beings.

As *Industrial Society and its Future* begins, Ted Kaczynski wastes no time identifying his enemy. He writes that Leftism is at the root of our society's troubles. Who is a leftist? "Leftists...tend to be intellectuals or members of the upper-middle

class. Notice that university intellectuals constitute the most highly socialized segments of our society and also the most left wing” (par 27). In two quick sentences Kaczynski has defined the enemy through socio-economic class, educational level, and political preference. Is this definition correct? That is not easily answered. Are there “university intellectuals” who are members of the upper-middle class and lean left politically? Of course there are. But is this the case for every intellectual? It certainly is not. This should be kept in mind as Kaczynski’s ideas are examined. It should be noted as well that Ted Kaczynski is quick to offer up other surface level reasons for despising intellectuals. These include everything from using politically correct language to never being satisfied with the world as it is. It is almost as if Kaczynski gives as many reasons as possible so that should one be turned down by the reader, another promptly takes its place. In any case, it is not enough to just recognize the reasons Kaczynski lists for hating intellectuals. Instead, it is more important to discover why he feels this way.

A quick consideration of Kaczynski’s definition of leftists leads to the easy conclusion that Kaczynski harbors a large amount of resentment of the leftists. His definition of the enemy appears to breakdown along the classic lines of working-man versus elite. It is possible that Kaczynski is picking on the intellectual class because he resents the fact that they have power and prestige and he does not. There is one monstrous flaw with this theory, however. Ted Kaczynski himself was an intellectual and one who, at least in his younger days, aspired to be a member of academia. So if resentment is not the answer to why intellectuals are the enemy, what is?

Although Kaczynski certainly shared a lot of background with the “leftists” (he graduated from Harvard, earned a PhD, and even did some teaching) there are certain

striking differences between them when the arena is one of ideas. Perhaps the most important of these ideas is the definition of the word freedom. While U.S. politicians and policy makers talk of civil liberties and freedom-from-want, Kaczynski uses a much more strict definition. For him, “freedom means having power; not the power to control other people but the power to control the circumstances of one’s own life... It is important not to confuse freedom with mere permissiveness” (par 94). Clearly, Kaczynski is persuaded that to experience true freedom an individual must achieve complete autonomy. This provides evidence that Kaczynski is experiencing a classic case of what conspiracy theory analyst Timothy Melley calls “Agency-Panic”. In *Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy*, Melley defines agency-panic as, “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been “constructed” by powerful external agents” (pg 62). Melley goes on to talk about how this is a common anxiety in our current culture. Kaczynski is not a minority in how he feels, but in whom he chooses to lash out at. Ted would probably argue that the “powerful external agents” are various technologies, but in fact it seems that his writing points more toward intellectuals. According to Kaczynski, intellectuals are the most socialized class in society. They are the epitome of the system.

Indeed, Ted Kaczynski believes that, whether they know it or not, intellectuals are working to perpetuate the system. While many may scoff at this, Kaczynski is backed up to an extent by Michael Kelly in *The Road to Paranoia*. Kelly writes, “There is a governing elite. Its interests and values differ from those of the ordinary citizens, and this elite does indeed work to advance those interests and values in antidemocratic fashion” (pg 63). It should be noted that while Kelly does not equate his “governing elite”

with intellectuals, his statements do lend a measure of credibility to Kaczynski's ideas. Kelly's theory that the elite disregard the ordinary citizens parallels Kaczynski's view that intellectuals disregard the individual. One cannot simply dismiss Kaczynski or *The Manifesto*, especially when portions of it are backed up by mainstream scholars such as Michael Kelly.

This does not mean, however, that Kaczynski is absolutely correct in asserting that it is the intellectuals who run the system for their own benefit. There is plenty of room for debate. Are intellectuals, or leftists as Kaczynski defines them, really in charge? What about "big business" or other special interest groups? In addition, there are times when it seems that intellectuals are some of society's biggest critics. Echoing this contradiction of Kaczynski is Alston Chase in *Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber*. He writes, "[The Manifesto's] pessimism over the direction of civilization and its rejection of the modern world are shared especially with the country's highest educated" (pg 47). So according to Chase, the very intellectuals who Kaczynski is trying to blame are actually the biggest supporters of his ideas.

In order to shore-up his claim that intellectuals are the over-socialized governing elite, Kaczynski offers a haunting contrast between them and the least socialized classes: "welfare leeches, youth-gang members, cultists, anti-government rebels, radical environmentalist saboteurs, dropouts and resisters of various kinds." These are classes of people who, "because of the constant pressure that the system exerts to modify human behavior" are steadily increasing in number (par 116). Kaczynski never says that these people are somehow the "noble ones" or that they are the true form of humanity. According to his definition, none of these people are free because their resistance, while

looked down upon, is permitted to some degree. Instead, he simply points out that just as intellectuals are a product of the system so are these rebels. Kaczynski's point is that while our society may only define the leeches, gang members, and dropouts as failures, the truth is that we are all failures. We have failed to be the autonomous individuals that Kaczynski says is our nature. Although this concept should be considered carefully it doesn't have to be accepted outright. There is nothing that says that Kaczynski's definitions of success and failure are correct while society's are wrong. In fact, Kaczynski may not even be correct about society's ideas of success or failure. However, the way something is perceived is important even if it is not factually correct.

This is especially true when dealing with conspiracy theories. In *Mainstreaming Conspiracism*, Robert Alan Goldberg states that conspiracy thinking "factors into the deep discontent men and women feel about their leaders and the direction they have set for the Republic" (pg 260). Even when the thinking behind a conspiracy theory is fallible, there are still sobering consequences to deal with. Goldberg mentions the mistrust the American people feel for the government. A similar mistrust is also often expressed towards the intellectuals of society. Ingrid Walker Fields explains this in more depth: "Conspiracy has become a metaphor representing feelings of disenfranchisement, signifying a sense of betrayal. More important, the metaphor asserts a desire for direct causality and accountability, suggesting that we wish to believe that someone, some group, is responsible for the way things are" (pg 158). Kaczynski, along with others, holds intellectuals solely responsible for the state of the world.

As Fields said, Kaczynski sees it this way in order to make life simpler and less complex. A single enemy can be focused upon and defeated, but a myriad of problems is

much tougher to both comprehend and defeat. In his writing, Alasdair Spark goes so far as to say that all of us engage in this type of thinking: “This is something that most people will explore not in membership or intense devotion, but in visits to conspiracy webpages, the viewing of conspiracy-aligned movies and television series, or just—perhaps most—in situations such as water-cooler conversations about events in the news” (pg 59). According to Spark, one’s participation in conspiratorial thinking does not have to be on the same level of intensity as that of Ted Kaczynski. Nevertheless, it still counts as believing in conspiracy theories. It can be argued that this takes the application of conspiracy thinking analysis too far. Perhaps many people just view conspiracy-related media for its entertainment value. And maybe people talk about conspiracies because they are intriguing or provocative. Spark abstracts the concept of conspiracy to such a level that almost every search for an answer falls under the label of “conspiracy thinking”. Yet Spark does provide us with a reason to carefully consider Kaczynski: at some base level we all start off thinking like Ted Kaczynski. Sure most of us never carry the line of thought to the extreme that men like Kaczynski do, but we still have that base connection.

So as wrong as Kaczynski may be, society, and intellectuals in particular, are forced to consider and respond to his ideas. To completely ignore him only adds credibility to his accusations. Additionally, we run the risk of missing a chance to understand a part of ourselves due to willful ignorance. How should intellectuals respond? First and foremost, they should be aware of how their actions and attitudes are perceived by others and why this can be a problem. People will always be looking for one group that can be singled out as a scapegoat for every problem. It would be smart to

give them as little ammunition with which to do this as possible. Of course, while one can hope to prevent the opportunity for a crime, the actual deed is not the fault of the victim but of the criminal. There will always be men like Ted Kaczynski, because everyone attempts to find meaning and order in life. Perhaps simply being aware of this fact is the most prudent thing an intellectual can do.

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Jacob Friedman, declare that I am the sole and original author of this work. This assignment was completed in compliance with the requirements of the course and The George Washington University's Code of Academic Integrity.