

One Man's War against Technology, Humanity, and Himself

by [Jeff Plude](#) (July 2022)



Mailboxes, Kenneth Callahan, 1935

Charles Epstein, a geneticist who did groundbreaking work on Down syndrome, was seventy-seven when he died of cancer in

2010. But back in 1993, when he was fifty-nine, he almost succumbed to a different kind of pathological source: the Unabomber. Ted Kaczynski, near the end of his seventeen-year guerilla campaign against modern science and technology, sent him one of his meticulously crafted homemade bombs. Thankfully, Dr. Epstein's wife and his eighteen-year-old daughter, who brought in the bomb from the mailbox, weren't in the room with him when it exploded. He lost part of his hearing and three fingers, and had to endure shrapnel in his body for the rest of his life.

Twenty-three people in all, including Dr. Epstein, suffered wounds from a package courtesy of the Unabomber. Three other recipients weren't nearly as fortunate—they were blown to bits.

In April 1996 Kaczynski was finally apprehended by the FBI and has been in jail ever since, serving a life sentence without possibility of parole. But he hasn't been idle, despite his advanced age; in late May the genius math professor, who quit academia in his late twenties to become a homicidal hermit, turned eighty. In a methodically hand-printed letter in response to a former neighbor, dated December 1, 2018, he laments his busy schedule behind bars:

It's always interesting to receive letters from people I've known in the past, but I can't correspond with you much, because I'm burdened with more work than I can handle. However, I think you'll find it interesting to read my books Technological Slavery and Anti-Tech Revolution, both of which are available from amazon.com.

The apparent irony wasn't lost on Jamie Gehring, whose memoir includes a photo of the letter: the vengeful arch-Luddite peddling his books on the internet. But she fails to note, as Kaczynski did in his manifesto, that using the enemy's tools is just a counterintuitive tactic in his master plan:

It would be hopeless for revolutionaries to attack the system without using SOME modern technology. If nothing else they must use the communications media to spread their message. But they should use modern technology for only ONE purpose: to attack the technological system.

Publication of the manifesto in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*—all 35,000 words of it, along with several thousand words of footnotes—was the only reason the FBI was able to catch up with Kaczynski at all. It was September 1995, still the early days of the internet, and ubiquitous digital cameras and smartphones were a few years down the dystopian road. The difficult decision to give into the Unabomber's ultimatum—that either his lengthy essay be published or else more would perish—paid off. David Kaczynski and his wife recognized the linguistic style and the radical ideas of his older brother, Ted, and informed the FBI of their suspicions. I remember reading afterward that David and Ted both shared a passion for Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, a novel in which a radical cell plants a bomb made by the Professor, one of their group who hates humanity, in a plot to turn the public against science. Like Conrad, the Kaczynskis' parents were also Polish immigrants.

A quarter century later the Unabomber has become a cottage industry in the media-entertainment complex. Kaczynski's ten-by-twelve-foot wood cabin, which he lived in for twenty-five years in the backwoods of western Montana without indoor plumbing or electricity, was on display at the Newseum until it closed a few years ago. There have been books, a TV movie and series, a play, a Netflix documentary. Last year there was a new feature film, *Ted K*, and now Gehring's memoir in April, *Madman in the Woods: Life Next Door to the Unabomber*.

She and her parents lived only a quarter mile away from the target of the FBI's longest manhunt. Gehring's father, Butch, owned a sawmill and ran it with his two successive wives, the first of whom was Jamie's mother. In her book she does a lot

of handwringing and wondering about what if she and her family had known that "Teddy," as she called him when she was a young girl, who they thought was nothing more than a wild-looking, wild-smelling, humorless but harmless crank, was really a serial killer who poisoned their dog, sabotaged their equipment, and made bombs in his shack? This has engaged her for most of her life, understandably to a point, since she was only a teenager when he was arrested. But a little of this goes a long way, I think, for the general reader.

One of the more interesting parts of her memoir, which is unfortunately as badly crafted as its tacky title, details how Gehring's father greatly aided the FBI when they closed in on their suspect.

The most eloquent and moving pages in the book were written not by Gehring, but by the wife of Thomas Mosser, an advertising executive whom the Unabomber apparently targeted because his firm was believed to have consulted with Exxon on the Valdez oil spill. In her lengthy impact statement before Kaczynski's sentencing, which Gehring quotes at length, Susan Mosser goes into graphic but compelling detail about what exactly his bomb did to her beloved husband a couple of weeks before Christmas in 1994, with the two youngest of their four children home. She describes how the press sanitizes the attack with words like *shrapnel* and *fragments* when they were actually cut-up razor blades and nails that ripped open his stomach, he was lying in blood on the kitchen floor when she ran in amid the white mist and dust and found him on his back, his face blackened and distorted, the fingers of his right hand hanging by strands of skin, he was moaning lowly as she knelt next to him and held his left hand in the final moments of his life.

At his trial in Sacramento in January 1998, Kaczynski pleaded guilty to avoid the death penalty. My wife and I had recently moved to San Francisco, and I probably was following it all in the *Chronicle*. So one night I stayed up into the wee hours

reading the manifesto, or jeremiad is more like it. I hadn't seen it when it was originally published in the papers.

Now I don't mean any disrespect to the victims of the Unabomber's horrendous brutality, or to their families. But I was curious after more than two decades to take another look at the so-called manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," with a title as staid as an old-fashioned white paper. I say *so-called* manifesto because I think it's clear from all that we now know about Kaczynski, from his biography, diaries, etc., that he wasn't really concerned about society at all, much less its future. He was and is only concerned about himself. All his carefully marshaled words are, in the end, I think, nothing more than a bonfire of a smoke screen for his visceral hatred of humanity, and deep down, perhaps even of himself.

Also relevant along these lines, I think, is that what happened to Kaczynski when he went off to Harvard at only sixteen. He became, strangely enough, a subject in what can only be described as an MK Ultra mind-control study, which lasted from his sophomore to his senior year. They were informally called "humiliation experiments" on students whom personality tests had found were "alienated." Students wrote essays describing their principles, philosophies, and ideals, and then a confederate of the researcher interviewed the subjects and argued against their beliefs and made demeaning comments. The director of the study was Henry Murray, a former psychologist in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, the precursor to the CIA.

After the muted title, what strikes me at first glance about the manifesto is its structure. It's divided into two hundred thirty-two numbered paragraphs that are grouped into twenty-five sections with subheadings, the second of which (after a brief introduction) has to do with liberals ("The Psychology of Modern Leftism"), and the last of which has to do with liberals ("The Danger of Leftism"). Liberals, of course, in

these decivilized times like to speciously associate conservatives with sociopaths like the Unabomber (as a [Slate hack](#) recently did). But Kaczynski attacks conservatives too. After all it's people of any kind who are the Unabomber's real enemy.

The central thesis of "Industrial Society and Its Future" is what Kaczynski refers to as the "power process." He attempts to demonstrate, I think with some validity, that technology usurps that process, which is nothing more, according to his description, than a person having goals and having to exert effort to attain them and achieving at least some of them in order to feel fulfilled. He breaks down goals into three categories: things that are necessary; things that are desirable; and things that are optional and very hard to achieve.

Man used to have to work to provide for his necessities, giving himself a feeling of self-sufficiency. Only the second group, things like love and sex and status, are moderately difficult to obtain (except for Kaczynski, who is a virgin but longed for a wife and children). And the third, like very high status or positions, are out of most people's reach.

In today's social system food and clothing are easily obtainable, and technology does almost everything for everyone. To compensate for the loss of real goals people engage in "surrogate activities"—simulacra like bodybuilding, golf, coin collecting.

Man can't live the way he wants, he can't be independent. The system subsumes everything. And you have no choice but to go along with it, even if you live out in the woods. You can't escape it. You still are subject to regulations, and especially to noise, which Kaczynski despises (as do I and many others, though not to his extreme). The film *Ted K*, which is capably done, starts with the antihero destroying a vacation house and the owners' snowmobiles that have raced

past his cabin and disturbed his solitude on a wintry day that was otherwise muffled by the snow and ponderosas. He also rants in his diaries about jets roaring overhead regularly, even in Big Sky Country.

He explains how each piece of technology, even a refrigerator, ends up changing the entire system not just for whoever wants it but even, or especially, for those who don't. Building a refrigerator requires factory-made standard parts, a machine shop, etc., precision work that can't be done by local craftsmen. This leads to what he calls "organization-dependent" technology as opposed to "small-scale" technology. Technology is also a more powerful force than freedom, he argues, using the motor vehicle as a prominent example. Though that didn't stop the Unabomber from accepting rides to the town of Lincoln, which was only four miles away from his Shangri-La in the bush.

So Kaczynski develops this thesis and draws many historical examples and analogies, some more apt than others. And in his professorial, scholarly way he frequently qualifies his statements and answers potential objections.

In the last part of the manifesto he lays out his battle plan, in which he tries to solicit the likeminded to join him in bringing down the whole system. This is where he turns not only diabolical but delusional. His logic fails him and starts to backfire on him. He tries throughout to portray himself as not spiteful for being a social outcast but with the precision of the scientists and engineers—the "nerds"—he detests.

Kaczynski is a Rousseau in extremis, but with a lot less style and charm. David Kaczynski has said his brother's guiding intellectual light is Jacques Ellul's book *The Technological Society*. Ellul is a self-proclaimed Christian "anarchist" and an admirer of Marx; politics makes strange offspring. But Ellul's fight is a war of words and ideas. The Unabomber's is a war of words and blood.

What about those who thrive in the industrial-technological complex? Kaczynski dismisses them as “oversocialized.” He defines this as being docile enough to accept what is a contrary condition for a normal human being or fulfilling a lust for power and control over others.

In the same vein he opposes forcing children and adolescents to study science and math, betraying a rare personal note. I think he also correctly and shrewdly dissects the true motives of many scientists, who are not so much altruistic but merely fulfilling their own power process. They enjoy the work, are well paid, and enjoy wide acclaim, so ethics take a backseat while duly given proper lip service. But science marches on, despite the damage it often leaves in its wake.

Kaczynski argues, unsuccessfully I think, that the “good” parts of technology can’t be preserved and the “bad” parts removed. The system is too intricately connected and can’t be untangled. It’s all or nothing, and it all has to go.

I agree with some of his antitechnology stance, particularly when it comes to the internet and especially social media. But I believe you can partially drop out from cyber society. I’m not on Facebook or Twitter (perhaps a commercial sacrilege for the obscure), but I am on LinkedIn. I hope to build a website for myself soon. My wife and I have no [television](#)—haven’t had one for nearly two decades now—though we do watch movies on DVD and occasionally on YouTube. We also like to grow vegetables, as many others do, and buy organic non-GMO food when we can.

One of the refrains in the manifesto, of course, is freedom. Kaczynski refers to himself as “Freedom Club,” or “FC,” his pseudonym to throw off the G-men and make them think they were dealing with a terrorist group instead of a lone wolf (*The Secret Agent* also features “F.P.,” or “The Future of the Proletariat,” the cell’s title on pamphlets it publishes). A hungry wolf, it turns out, devoid of love, not only for a wife

but even for nature, which he had no qualms about littering, according to his personal writings. Though he is right that we have given up privacy (which now sounds incredibly quaint) for connectivity.

At the end of his belabored lecture, FC seems to realize his intellectual pretensions, or perhaps it's just false modesty, or perhaps it's the last gasp of the straight A student:

Throughout the article we've made imprecise statements and statements that ought to have had all sorts of qualifications and reservations attached to them; and some of our statements may be flatly false. Lack of sufficient information and the need for brevity made it impossible for us to formulate our assertions more precisely or add all the necessary qualifications. And of course in a discussion of this kind one must rely heavily on intuitive judgment, and that can sometimes be wrong. So we don't claim that this article expresses more than a crude approximation to the truth.

Crude, indeed, and concocted by a murderer. As far as truth goes, it's true that we live in a world system dominated by technology and evil. And I believe it will get even worse, until one day "the truth" returns to earth in the flesh to set things right. However, one sinner can do much damage, as the Bible says and as Ted Kaczynski has undoubtedly shown.

[Table of Contents](#)

Jeff Plude is a Contributing Editor to *New English Review*. He was a daily newspaper reporter and editor for the better part of a decade before he became a freelance writer. He has an MA in English literature from the University of Virginia. An evangelical Christian, he also writes fiction and is a

freelance editor of novels and nonfiction books.

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