Technological Anarchism: Reconsidering the Unabomber

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Abstract: In the following essay I examine the intersection between process theory, anarchism, and technology. The focus of this discussion will be on the arguments presented by Theodore Kaczynski, otherwise known as the Unabomber. On Kaczynski's view, the technological system is profoundly destructive, irredeemably corrupt, and thus must be eliminated. I will look at the merits of this argument.

Process philosophy and social theory meet in interesting and sometimes volatile ways. One of these ways is ***anarchism***—herein defined as the systematic attempt to undermine the presiding social or political order, with no preestablished plan for a substitute. Strictly speaking, of course, true anarchy (***an-archê***) is impossible, as humans could not exist without any social order at all. But more broadly conceived, anarchy is clearly a possible, perhaps even essential, socio-political alternative. In what follows, I will present an analysis of a very specific kind of anarchism—call it ***technological anarchism***—that derives from the work of one Theodore Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber.[2]

Anarchism is consistent with a process metaphysic, even if it is not a central theme. If the world is essentially dynamic, existing in a condition of continual becoming, then any attempts at sustaining a 'stable' social order are counterproductive, and ultimately futile. We see this idea emerging as far back as the ***Tao Te Ching***, which emphasizes the dynamism inherent in the universe, the virtue of acting in accord with nature, and the futility of rigid government.[3] Much later, Whitehead wrote about the contrast between the use of social force (an evil) and the power of persuasion. Civilization, he said, thrives "by its own inherent persuasiveness as embodying the nobler alternative. The recourse to force [...] is a disclosure of the failure of civilization [...]. Thus in a live civilization there is always an element of unrest" (AI: 83). Among the signs of a "reign of force" are "war, slavery, and governmental compulsion." Society, rightly understood, is in a constant state of dynamism, of striving toward a creative advance: "The foundation of all understanding of sociological theory...is that no static maintenance of perfection is possible" (p. 274). This fact is rooted in basic metaphysical principles, most centrally that "the very essence of real actuality—this is, of the completely real—is ***process***. Thus each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing."

Twentieth century western society is clearly in decay, Whitehead thought. We therefore face either a time of long, slow, and painful decline, or, if

fortunate, something else: "a quick period of transition," which "may or may not be accompanied by dislocations involving widespread unhappiness" (p. 278). "Let us hope that our present epoch is to be viewed as a period of change," he adds.

Such change, though, is inherently unpredictable. Social change, upheaval, revolution—these lead us into the unknown: "Adventure rarely reaches its predetermined end." But it is this unknown that we must face, because the alternative—an exhausted, undignified, dehumanized existence—is far worse.

> A race preserves its vigor so long as it harbors a real contrast between ***what has been*** and ***what may be***, and so long as it is nerved by the vigor to adventure beyond the safeties of the past. Without adventure civilization is in full decay. (p. 279; italics added)

Present civilization is marked by one primary characteristic, namely, ***advanced industrial technology***. As in Whitehead's day, and far more so now, we live in a technological civilization. It is not just that we constantly interact with tools—humans have done this for literally millions of years—but rather that we are surrounded by advanced, mass-produced, often inscrutable, often destructive tools. And even more problematic is the larger social network—the technological ***system***—that has emerged. 'Technology' means much more than tools; as Jacques Ellul recognized, it is rather the total ensemble of means used to attain any end whatsoever. It a composite entity, comprised of all technological artifacts, plus the human actors, plus the laws, rules, and procedures that govern them. As such, the system functions rather as an integrated whole; it is a unified emergent phenomena in a similar sense as the mind is an emergent of the vast network of brain cells. So technology is tools and machines, yes, but also a composite of social structures, organizations, laws, procedures, processes, governments, corporations—everything created to systematically achieve some end. And we furthermore must deal with all the byproducts of these things: bureaucracy, waste, pollution, electromagnetic radiation, physical and mental stress, and degraded ecosystems. These utterly dominate our day-to-day existence, and the life of the planet. Hence it is both the ***nature*** and ***pervasiveness*** of our technology that has changed, and this has made all the difference.

The social dynamism that Whitehead spoke of is indeed present today. And yet it is, paradoxically, a stagnant, even malignant kind of dynamism. Accelerating information flows, accelerating production and consumption, accelerating social stress, accelerating population growth, accelerating depletion of planetary resources—these are the dominant features of 21st century civilization. We are locked into a high-speed pattern of ***motion without progress***—progress, that is, in the truly human sense. Technology and the technological system advance, no doubt, but strictly at the expense of

nature and humanity. Perhaps most importantly, 'motion without progress' has profoundly adverse psychological effects; rare is the person who does not feel this, somewhere in the depths of his psyche.

Recent anarchist responses to technology and modern society have generally come from the eco-primitivist 'movement,' if one can speak of such a thing. The number of notable writers in this area is quite small; with one prominent exception, names like Jensen, Draffan, and Zerzan pretty well cover the field. The exception, of course, is Ted Kaczynski.

Let me take a moment to recap Kaczynski's story. Born in 1942, he proved to be an exceptional student. He raced through the American public school system, completing high school two years early, and heading off to Harvard at the age of 16. There he earned a primary degree in mathematics before transferring to the University of Michigan for graduate work in that field. By 1967 he had completed his PhD, and moved on to a teaching job at the prestigious University of California at Berkeley. Growing increasingly disaffected with modern society, he left there after only two years, eventually moving to a secluded cabin in western Montana.

In 1978, the first in a series of letter bombs began to appear, resulting in a string of minor or moderate injuries. The FBI took on the case in 1979. Since all initial packages were addressed to people connected with universities or airlines, the FBI deemed the case 'un-a-bomb'. The bombs grew in strength and sophistication, eventually becoming fatal. In 1985 a computer store owner was killed. There was another (non-fatal) bombing in 1987, but then things went quiet for six full years. In 1993 the attacks resumed, and by 1995 two more were dead. The FBI was in chaos. A 17-year bombing string was continuing, and despite 500 agents and a $1 million reward they had no tangible leads at all.

The Unabomber then contacted the FBI and offered a deal: find a major newspaper or journal to publish his lengthy anti-technology tract and he would agree to halt the bombings. Not wanting to yield to blackmail but having few alternatives, the FBI agreed. So on September 19, 1995, the ***New York Times*** and the ***Washington Post*** published, in full, a 35,000 word essay titled "Industrial Society and its Future"—ISAIF, for short. Soon afterward David Kaczynski, the bomber's brother, recognized the writing style and content and went to the FBI. On April 3, 1996, 53-year-old Ted was arrested at his Montana cabin. After a year of legal fits and starts, Kaczynski was finally sentenced to life in prison without parole. He now lives in the US 'supermax' prison in Florence, Colorado.

The ISAIF manifesto is a remarkable work.[4] The popular media view—that it is simply some patchwork of ideas based on obscure or irrelevant thinkers—is clearly wrong, as anyone who takes the time to read it will quickly discover. In painstaking detail, it lays out the case against industrial technology. Inspired by Ellul's 1954 masterpiece ***La Technique***, Kaczynski argues that

technology is a totalitarian force, consuming and degrading all aspects of society, and destroying the global environment. It is beyond our control, and progressively increasing in power and reach. In fact Whitehead anticipated this situation already in 1925. He wrote:

> It may be that civilization will never recover from the bad climate which enveloped the introduction of machinery [...]. At the present moment a discussion is raging as to the future of civilization in the novel circumstances of rapid scientific and technological progress. [...] The world is now faced with a self-evolving system, which it cannot stop. (SMW: 203-205)

Over the past 80 years, the climate (literally and figuratively) has gone from bad to worse. The key question is, can the system be controlled, or, if necessary, can it be stopped? Whitehead thought not, but Ellul held out some small hope. Only three things are capable of derailing the technological society: God, total nuclear war, or revolution.[5] Since no one can summon God, and no one can wish for nuclear war, we are left with a revolt against the system as our only alternative—however difficult that might be. This is clearly Kaczynski's conclusion as well.

In summary, his argument is as follows:

> —Humans evolved under primitive, low-tech conditions. Our bodies and minds are designed to live and thrive under precisely these conditions.
>
> —Present technological society is radically different than our natural state, and imposes unprecedented stresses upon us.
>
> —Technologically-induced stress will only continue to worsen. Humanity will either be utterly debilitated, or reconstructed and transformed to meet the demands of the system.
>
> —Such an outcome is undignified, abhorrent, and profoundly dehumanizing.
>
> —It is impossible to reform the system so as to avoid this nightmare future.

Therefore, Kaczynski concludes, we are justified—indeed, morally ***required***—to work to take the system down, by any means necessary.

With only a few minor exceptions, the public has heard virtually nothing from Kaczynski since his incarceration in 1997.[6] Curious about his thoughts since imprisonment, I began to correspond with him in 2003, as I was in the process of developing a new course on the Philosophy of Technology for my university (coincidentally, also the University of Michigan). His letters to me—more than 100 to date—included some half dozen unpublished essays, and many detailed responses to my challenges and queries. The material was

substantial, and I suggested that he publish it in book form. After much effort, the book ***Road to Revolution*** was finally published in 2008, by a small Swiss publisher, Éditions Xenia. I contributed the closing essay.[7]

The issues raised by Kaczynski are complex and manifold, but there are three fundamental questions that I would like to briefly address in the space remaining here: (1) Isn't technology 'neutral'?; (2) What is it about modern technology that is so objectionable?; and (3) Why can't we just fix the system, reform it, so as to avoid the bad outcomes? The logic here is sequential: if it is neutral, then technology is not inherently objectionable, and thus reform is eminently feasible. If not neutral, and if it involves intrinsically destructive characteristics, then attempts to repair the system are likely doomed to failure—in which case, more radical actions are warranted.[8]

Every technological device, every tool, acts as an interface between the human user and the object at hand. The object is, in turn, (usually) another element of technology that functions as an intermediary to yet another end, and so on. In forager societies, tools are simple and the chain is short; the process serves to realize direct human needs for food, shelter, clothing, and culture. In more evolved societies, the tools become more complex, the chains longer, and the ends more remote and indirect. But many of the end goals themselves remain unchanged. All people in all societies want similar things: long life with health and vigor, a satisfying family life, trusted friends and colleagues, and a proven ability to obtain the necessities of life in spite of the many challenges that the world throws at us. If we can no longer achieve these things, or achieve them only in degraded form, or only through the 'benevolence' of our social system, then life risks becoming deeply dissatisfying and perhaps ultimately meaningless.

Kaczynski argues, quite effectively I think, that we are already in the midst of just such a degraded situation. 'But it's not the technology,' some will say. 'Technology itself is neutral. Any problems are due solely to our manner of use, or misuse.' This is the most common reply, but it is flawed. If technology really were neutral, we should expect the following to obtain: (1) its use would be optional; (2) it would be fully under human control; (3) it would result in predictable and manageable consequences and risks; (4) the risks, or negative side effects, would be incidental to the technology, not systematic or inherent; (5) both the benefits and costs would be relatively equitably distributed among society; and (6) it would yield a clear net gain, after weighing all pros and cons, over a sufficiently long span of time.

I don't have the space to address all these in detail, but let me say that it is clear, I trust, that much of modern technology fails on many of these counts. We have complex, highly artificial, pervasive technologies that are virtually mandated if one wishes to maintain any degree of social existence. And the interactions with complex biological organisms (especially ourselves), or with the vastly more complex biosphere, are impossible to assess on any time

scale of less than one or two centuries. By any reasonable definition, modern technology is not neutral.

As a consequence, it has unforeseeable effects. In theory these effects can be positive, neutral, or negative; in reality they are, overall, ***always negative***. As we are painfully learning, the 4-billion-year evolution of the Earth has resulted in a very efficient, very finely-tuned planetary system. The Earth (prior to the advent of modern man) makes optimal use of every available resource. Every waste product is used or hidden away. Every tradeoff is balanced and accounted for. The global biosystem, as a whole, is at its peak 'productivity.' The total production of animal life, food, fruit, seeds and grains, is the highest that can be sustained over the long run. Any action by mankind outside of his aboriginal condition must therefore result in a net ***diminishment*** of the global system. Yes, we can clearly confiscate more of the planetary goods for ourselves, but this comes at a necessary cost to many other organisms; the overall system is degraded, and we must ultimately pay the price—if only through being condemned to live in a degraded world.

This, then, is the objection to modern technology: it must of necessity result in an overall degradation to our planet. We see the 'gains' only from a very narrow, very short-term parochial standpoint. And as technology advances, it takes in more and more of the planetary sphere—including ourselves. Very quickly, the degradation affects not simply those uncounted 'other species'; we too are caught up in the maelstrom. We pay the price, very directly, through a diminishment of human freedom, autonomy, and dignity. As with the planet, so with humanity.

So we become wage slaves, or corporate cogs, or narrow-minded hedonists. The system attempts to compensate us for our loss with material luxuries, clever amusements, drugs and stimulants, propaganda, and even psychical rewiring. For most people, this works. They become willing, or convinced, to overlook the degradation and indignities in exchange for the trinkets that the system rains down upon us. The complexity is such that the mass of people cannot make the connection between what they gain and what they lose. And they therefore cannot see that the loss is so much the greater.

The end result is an immobilized, passivized, and alienated society. First our bodies are physically immobilized, by sitting: in our cars, our school desks, offices, in front of computers, televisions, video games. This in itself leads to a host of ailments. Then our minds are immobilized through conformity in thinking, mass culture, value homogenization, political impotence, and general feelings of confusion, insignificance and helplessness.[9] We then run to the very technology that created this situation, to look for—***relief***. But we do not find it. Instead we find an increasingly mediated world, an artificial world, that inevitably isolates us from nature, from other humans, and even, amazingly, from the system itself. The complexity and inscrutability of the

system imposes a near-total sense of dependency, of awed mystery, and ultimately of subjugation.

Who, understanding the true situation that they faced, would willingly live in such a world? Who would not fight for a dignified life? Who would not work to defend the planet, and seek to restore things to their original evolutionary path? With modern man and his modern technology, evolution on this planet has become derailed. In the long run nature will right herself. But humanity may or may not survive to see that day.

The system, Kaczynski argues, is now facing unprecedented stresses on many fronts. Resources are being depleted, pollutants and toxins are accumulating, human population is booming, non-human species are vanishing. At the present moment the system is still completely dependent upon human beings. Unfortunately for it, we are quite frail. We are faltering. The system knows this, and is working to shore us up.[10] But the hazards are growing rapidly as well. Thus a kind of race is underway, between the advancing power of technology and the increasing stresses on humanity and nature.

As such, the technological system may well fit into the larger pattern of cosmic evolution. Higher order structures appear wherever excess energy becomes available to create and sustain them. Such is true for the emergence of life, multi-cellular organisms, complex life forms, social systems, and ecosystems. The unified social emergent of the human species requires some means for extracting and manipulating energy, and technology serves this function. On this point at least, Heidegger was right: technology is ***fundamentally*** about the conversion of man and nature into "standing energy reserve," to be placed ready-to-hand for use. But for those concerned about the threat from modern technology, this poses a serious problem. It suggests that technology is a manifestation of fundamental universal principles, which makes it exceedingly difficult—if not impossible—to alter. Perhaps the best we can hope is to defer it, slow it down, and push off its more pernicious effects into the future, at which time humanity may be more well-suited to deal with the situation. This is somewhat irresponsible, I agree, but we may simply have no choice.

As things stand, we cannot tell which will 'win': the growing stresses, leading to the collapse of the planetary ecosystem, and with it much of humanity; or the system, and its reworking of humanity and nature to serve its ends. If we wish to avoid the catastrophic alternative of a reengineered and ultimately obsolescent human race, we must hope for the former—that the system collapses first. But the race is very tight. It is 'too close to call,' as they say. In such a situation, even the smallest of actions may be sufficient to tip the balance. Chaos theory informs us that in highly dynamic systems, small changes can have large effects. So we have reason to hope. We should work,

then, to hasten that day when the system is brought to an end, as difficult and hazardous as that outcome may be.

But the reply comes: 'We have always had to deal with problems of technology. We will continue to solve them. We will eliminate the "bad" parts of the system, and save the "good".' Easier said than done, unfortunately. The present technological complex is extremely interconnected. Electronics, microprocessors, and synthetic chemicals, for example, are required for virtually every aspect of technology. Even the simplest tools, like a hammer, are manufactured with high-tech processes and materials. Furthermore, the 'good' and 'bad' parts are interconnected in a way that we find hard, if not impossible, to disentangle. The use of every fossil fuel necessarily entails ecological disruption, pollution, and human illness. The use of synthetic chemicals likewise alters and disrupts myriad biological processes. Nuclear technology for 'good' uses—power generation—cannot be isolated from 'bad'—weapons production. And even in those few cases where we solve a given technological problem, we more often than not introduce others.

The empirical evidence strongly suggests that any such attempts to reform the system will fail. Intrinsic factors in technology, human ignorance, human greed, bureaucratic inertia all conspire against us. Most problematically, efficacious reform requires social consensus. This in turn demands the development of a deep sensitivity—a kind of radically new 'common sense'—by which society will recognize and insist upon the need for change. But history shows us that this process moves very slowly. And in the race against systemic dominance or collapse, common sense comes in a very distant third place.[11]

The most decisive case against reform is global climate change. Faced with a potential global catastrophe, the world is unable to act. Even confronted with sound scientific analysis, we continue to dither. Few crises could be more urgent, and yet no serious action is forthcoming. The problem, of course, is that we cannot find a way to mitigate climate change without imposing radical constraints on the technological system—manifest primarily as a radical economic slowdown. But the system will not allow radical constraint. It demands that we push ahead full-speed. It thinks it can win the race. We shall see.

Technology is a particularly insidious force. It attacks our dignity, our morals, our compassion, our sensitivity to nature. Most troubling, it is able to undermine our very capacity for deep, rational thought—precisely that which we need to find a way out of our predicament. It engulfs and corrupts rationality itself, by restricting us to purely objective, analytical, quantitative thinking. The creative, expansive, sympathetic, far-reaching sort of mind that we need is captured, contained, drugged, and dissected. Technology truly debilitates the mind. In this sense, it is a kind of 'mental AIDS': just as the HIV virus destroys the body's immune system—the very system that would

normally fight off an invading virus—so too does technology destroy our capacity for the kind of thinking that would allow us to overcome it. The gravity of this situation cannot be overestimated.

And so Kaczynski calls on us to overthrow technology now, before the situation worsens, and while we still have, perhaps, some small chance to influence the future course of events. As harsh as his views may seem, he has good company. Critics of technology reach back to the beginnings of civilization, and include the likes of Lao Tzu and Plato.[12] Rousseau's first *Discourse* warned about the corrupting effects of the sciences and the arts.[13] Thoreau observed that "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."[14] By the 1860s Samuel Butler could insist that a "war to the death should be instantly proclaimed" against technology;[15] "every machine of every sort should be destroyed by the well-wisher of his species." In the 1960s, Lewis Mumford warned us about the Megamachine, an all-embracing system that has "become increasingly coercive, totalitarian, and…compulsive and grimly irrational." Mumford's conclusion: "a deliberate large-scale dismantling of the Megamachine, in all its institutional forms, must surely take place…"[16] More recently, computer expert Bill Joy argued that we should literally relinquish our most dangerous technologies.[17] Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*, Ellul's *La Technique*—all these recognized the imperative of taking direct action to gain the upper hand on the technological system. And yet we, collectively, have stifled these voices and chosen to serve the demands of the system rather than reassert our inborn sense of dignity, autonomy, and freedom. Let us hope that we can still summon the courage to act.

Notes

[1] University of Michigan, Dearborn.

[2] I should state at the outset that I am in no way endorsing or advocating Kaczynski's crimes, which include murder. I am merely interested in a discussion of the relevant ideas and theories, not in promoting violence. And I think philosophy has an obligation to consider and examine all theories and points of view, no matter how unpopular or uncomfortable they may be.

[3] "It is because those in authority are too fond of action / that the people are difficult to govern" (2.75). Large states continually tend to grow by swallowing up the smaller, like water running downhill. But they cannot be well-run. "Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish" (2.60)—both are easily spoiled. Hence the constant struggle: "Reduce the size and population of the state" (2.80).

[4] The manifesto can be found online: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Industrial_Society_and_Its_Future. Note that this is the original, uncorrected version from 1995. The corrected version can be found in Kaczynski's book ***Road to Revolution*** (2008).

[5] ***Technological Society*** (1964: xxx).

[6] An allegorical story, "Ship of fools," was published in a student newspaper in 1999. His essay "Hit where it hurts" appeared in the journal ***Green Anarchy*** in spring of 2002. Attempts to publish the book ***Truth Versus Lies*** have been so far unsuccessful.

[7] Published simultaneously in French: ***L'effondrement du système technologique***. At present we are working with an American publisher, Feral House, to produce an updated version of the book. This is due out in mid-2010.

[8] Though of course I do not intend this to be a formal syllogism.

[9] The range of physical and mental health issues that are attributable to modern technological society is extensive. Nearly 44% of the American public is medicated, and the average person consumes 12 prescription drugs per year. Almost 15% of Americans has a personality disorder, according to clinical definitions; about 26% possess some degree of mental illness. Attention deficit disorder (ADHD) and, especially, autism—now over 1% of American children—have been linked to television and computer usage. A 2002 study showed a direct correlation between daily computer usage and a host of symptoms, including lethargy, anxiety, depression, headache, eyestrain, back pain, and sleep disorders. Recently,

multitasking has been shown to be detrimental to one's ability to concentrate, and the so-called 'Web 2.0' technologies are jeopardizing our moral sensitivities. Of special note was an article by Nick Carr in ***The Atlantic*** magazine (July/August 2008), titled "Is Google making us stupid?" And all this is not to mention the run-of-the-mill industrial accidents, shootings, military and terrorist actions, technology-induced cancers, and even automobile fatalities—now claiming about 1.3 million lives annually.

[10] In reifying the technological system here, I am speaking half metaphorically—but only half. Recall my comparison with the mind as an emergent of brain cells. Just as the mind is a manifest unity with a concrete awareness, will, identity, morality, etc, so too does the technological complex manifest itself as quasi-concrete reality. Such a composition of mind seems to be a basic metaphysical property. It accounts for the (non-brute) emergence of higher orders of mind from lower orders, at all levels of being. For further discussion see my chapter "Minds, objects, relations: Toward a dual-aspect ontology," in ***Mind That Abides*** (D. Skrbina, ed.; Benjamins Publishing, 2009).

[11] This is why, I think, Kaczynski has placed so little value on 'normal' actions of activist reform or scholarly advocacy. On his view, these things are utterly incapable of responding to the magnitude of change demanded by the present situation. And the system and its chief promoters (including those who derive profits or power from it) furthermore conspire against effective action, by censoring, minimizing, or relegating to oblivion all ideas that might threaten their 'well-being'.

[12] From the ***Tao Te Ching***: "The more sharpened tools the people have / the more benighted the state." (II.57) In the ***Phaedrus*** Plato warns about even so benign a technology as writing (274c-277a).

[13] ***Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*** (1750).

[14] ***Walden***, chapter 2.

[15] "Darwin among the machines", 1863. Even then, he harbored no illusions that such a revolt was actually possible.

[16] "Technics and the nature of man", 1965.

[17] "Why the future doesn't need us," ***Wired***, April 2000.