On the Question of Technological Slavery

A Reply to Campbell and Lipkin

David Skrbina

2015

Let's do a quick study in comparative morality. Late in the evening on October 4, 2013, an American military helicopter flew over the countryside near Jalalabad, Afghanistan. In one village, according to reports by CNN and other sources, five people were sitting outside "enjoying some relief from the heat." The helicopter flew overhead and fired on them, killing all five instantly. A NATO spokesman called the attack "a coordinated precision strike," and added that initial reports indicated "no civilian casualties." Local officials said all five were civilians, three of whom were children. "We are still assessing the situation," said American Lt Col. Will Griffin.

In an instant, some anonymous, highly-skilled American soldier, a professional killer, using one of the most technologically-advanced machines on the planet, caused more death than Ted Kaczynski did in 17 years of his so-called terror campaign.

Clearly we do not yet know all the circumstances, and likely we never will. But what does it say about our collective sense of ethics when the murder of five people in Afghanistan elicits little or no response, but the killing of three men—the last nearly 20 years ago—calls for continual expressions of condemnation and outrage? Why is it acceptable when an *institution* does the killing, but not an individual? The pilot pulled the trigger, but most likely the decision to kill was authorized by a single, anonymous, unelected, self-styled defender of the American homeland. But a man like Kaczynski—another anonymous, unelected, self-styled defender, who rationally perceives a grave threat to himself, to nature, and to all humanity—must be portrayed as a psychotic murderer.

If nothing else, ethics demands consistency. Life is precious. Most would say: All killing is wrong, but it may, under extreme circumstances, be justified. The killing of five Afghans is pointless, arbitrary, and utterly indefensible; there is absolutely nothing to be gained by their deaths. Kaczynski's actions, deplorable though they may have been, led directly to the release of his infamous Manifesto, and to forcing the problem of technology into the public eye. In the end, we are appalled by Kaczynski—because he won.

It has now been two decades since Kaczynski forced the publication of "Industrial Society and Its Future." He was apprehended six months later, ultimately convicted of the Unabomber crimes and sentenced to life in prison. I know something about the man, having exchanged over 100 letters with him since 2003. Extended excerpts of these letters appear in his 2010 book,

Technological Slavery; I wrote the introduction. One might have hoped that, by now, Kaczynski's story would get a fair hearing in the court of public opinion. Evidently this is not the case.

Among recent commentators are two young Web journalists, Thomas Campbell and Michael Lipkin. In their essay on Kaczynski, they begin by trotting out many of the usual banalities: he is a paranoid schizophrenic, a man who "fears technological oppression," someone "who wants nothing to do with society," has sexual insecurities and problems with social awkwardness. True or not, such things are of interest only to those obsessed with this man's personal life. Apparently Campbell and Lipkin are inclined to such an obsession.

But we need to think about this situation rationally. Kaczynski is in prison for life; he personally presents no threat. Yet his ideas remain efficacious. They threaten to undermine the power structure of our technological order. And since the system's defenders are unable to defeat the ideas, they choose to attack the man who wrote them.

For my part, I couldn't care less about his personal life. There are far too many important issues in the world to waste time worrying about such mundane matters. One of those issues—the chief issue—is the problem of modern technology. And this deserves our full attention.

But this does not trouble our reporters. Indeed, they spend little time even describing the problem, let alone addressing it. It is consistent, I suppose, with their generally poor academic treatment of the subject matter. Granted, they are writing for a literary periodical, and this fact justifies a foregoing of the usual details of academic writing. Even so, the writers should strive to maintain a high standard of intellectual integrity. On many counts, unfortunately, they fall short.

Some problems are perhaps minor. For example, Ellul's book, *The Technological Society*, was written originally in 1954, and only translated in 1964. But what is the point of describing Rousseau—one of the most brilliant writers, philosophers, and social critics in history—as a "hater of civilization" and a "paranoid letter writer"? Rousseau was in fact the first critic of the technological society, and his first major work, "A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences" (1750), provides an insightful critique. To state otherwise is an obvious ad hominem attack, one designed to slander the man himself rather than address the substance of his work. But this is consistent with the related assault on Kaczynski. What, for example, justifies the claim that "torturous logic and naked personal resentment" motivated his attacks?

On what basis can the authors claim that "technological optimism" has grown since the mid-1990s? Is there any research that backs this up? I am unaware of any. Certainly technology itself has "grown," but this has no bearing on public optimism. In fact, a Forrester Research survey of 2005 showed that a majority of North Americans (51%) qualify as "technological pessimists." If this figure was even higher in the 1990s, then I suppose, by some contorted and misleading logic, that one could claim a "growth in optimism." But this is unlikely, and in any case unsupported by data. And we are furthermore confronted by such phenomena as "Facebook depression" and Internet addiction, nifty little technology side effects that were unknown in previous decades. All this suggests the opposite of their claim.

Other problems appear. In stating that "Kaczynski disagreed with Ellul about the effectiveness of violent means," the authors ignore the fact that Ellul justified violence in several situations, including those accompanied by various forms of idealism. They ignore that Ellul himself supported violence during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. And they overlook his statement, in the Foreword to *Technological Society*, that one route to avoiding technological determinism is "if an increasing number of people become fully aware" of the threat, and decide to "assert their

freedom by upsetting the course of [technological] evolution"—a veiled reference to a violent mass uprising.

Or again: Kaczynski's Manifesto, they imply, is merely "a repetition of points already made by Ellul and Lewis Mumford." On what basis do they make this claim? Have they read Ellul's three books—*Technological Society*, *Technological System* (1980), and *Technological Bluff* (1990)—and his many articles on technology? Have they read Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934) and his two-volume opus, *The Myth of the Machine* (1967–70)? Certainly there is overlap, as there would be in any such analysis. But Kaczynski's treatment of the issues is vastly different, and, obviously, much more up-to-date.

Most inexcusably, the writers nowhere mention *the title* of Kaczynski's collected writings: *Technological Slavery* (Feral House, 2010). Even now I find this hard to believe; surely it was a gross oversight, a typographical error of first magnitude. This book—which by all rights should have garnered substantial media coverage when it came out, the first published by the most famous American "terrorist" of the 20th century, a work that includes the only fully correct version of the infamous Manifesto, a book that has five previously unpublished essays along with detailed responses to my letters challenging his ideas—merits no citation and only passing, indirect reference. Are the writers so afraid of the name? "Technological Slavery"—is it like some medieval incantation, certain to hex all those who utter the very words? Or does it indicate something else: the well-known media tendency to "talk about something by not talking about it," of circling around and obfuscating reality precisely in order to bury it. "See, we're willing to talk about the Unabomber"; "See, we aren't afraid of controversial topics."

In fact there is a story behind its publication. Beginning in 2006, we spent two years looking for an American publisher, to no avail. Eventually we found a small Swiss firm, Xenia, that agreed to produce simultaneous English and French editions. The English version, titled *Road to Revolution*, was released in 2008. It contains much of the same content as *Technological Slavery*. But production was limited, and there was no distribution in the United States. (Those who own a copy—count yourself fortunate!) Shortly after it came out, Feral House agreed to work in conjunction with Xenia to publish a revised edition with a new title and new cover artwork. Of the infamous "bomb" photo, incidentally, we received explicit approval from the FBI to use it. And for what it's worth, neither Kaczynski nor I make any money from the proceeds.

The central question, above all, is the problem of technology—not technology per se, but rather specific manifestations and applications of it. For centuries, philosophers and social critics have recognized that it poses severe problems, threatens to disrupt social order, and carries with it morally corrosive qualities that cannot be effaced. Rousseau was the first to offer a detailed critique, but other notables soon followed, including Thomas Carlyle ("Signs of the Times") and Henry Thoreau (*Walden*). By the 1860s, the technological society had developed to such an extent that a young British essayist and critic, Samuel Butler, issued the first call for revolution. In his short piece "Darwin among the machines," he foresaw an evolutionary takeover in the making. "Day by day, the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them," he wrote. His solution was to attack now, while we still had the upper hand: "Our opinion is that war to the death should be instantly proclaimed against them. Every machine of every sort should be destroyed by the well-wisher of his species." So much for the gentile Brits.

Butler closes his essay with one of the finest, most prescient sentences in the history of technology criticism. He writes:

> If it be urged that this [revolution] is impossible under the present condition of human affairs…this at once proves that the mischief is already done, that our servitude has commenced in good earnest, that we have raised a race of beings whom it is beyond our power to destroy, and that we are not only enslaved but are absolutely acquiescent in our bondage.

Should Campbell and Lipkin wish to sharpen both their writing and critical thinking skills, they ought to read more Butler.

Butler was the first but not the only major critic to call for radical action against technology. In their own ways, Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, Ivan Illich, and even Mumford argued for as much. Kaczynski was only the latest in a line of radical, rational thinkers. Whether they were right or not remains to be seen; the signs are not good.

Clearly there is much to be said, and I can only give here the barest outline of the case against technology. Kaczynski's core argument is based on four simple points:

1. Humans evolved under primitive, low-tech conditions. This constitutes our natural state of existence.

2. Modern society is radically different than this, and imposes unprecedented stress upon us.

3. The situation is bad now, and will get much worse. We will either be humiliated into conforming to technology's demands, or be crushed by the system.

4. There is no way to reform the system to avoid the negative outcomes.

His conclusion, then, is straightforward and rational: bring the system to an end, as soon as possible. Granted, the odds of success are slim, but the longer we wait the lower they become and the worse the outcome will be—for both humanity and nature. We have essentially two choices: big, but survivable, pain now, or catastrophic pain later.

The fact that we live under increasingly abnormal conditions is starting to sink in to the popular mindset. Jonathan Crary's recent book, *24/7*, is a case in point. He demonstrates the striking contrast between a technology-driven society that never rests, and the basic biological need to sleep. We humans need time to relax, unwind, and decompress, but the system does not, and it applies both subtle and overt pressure to stay continuously engaged. In the clash between human needs and those of the system, the system wins. This is only one small example; humanity makes continuous, repeated compromises with technology, and we always come out on the short end. Hence the progressive decline in our physical and mental well-being.

Again, this is but a hint at the larger picture that Kaczynski paints for us. A full reading of *Technological Slavery* is necessary to get the complete view, and we can expect further elaboration from him in the future.

I trust that this gives a definitive close to my reply—unlike the ending of Campbell's and Lipkin's essay, which is oddly inconclusive. They are rightly struck by "just how total technology's grip on our world has become in the seventeen years since Kaczynski's arrest." But they draw no inferences from this fact. Instead we get trite references to Kaczynski's "crossing over into the principality of evil," and a denial of the claim that we all harbor a bit of technology skepticism—in fact, "the opposite is true," they state, without explanation.

Yes, we do need cooperation and imagination to get out of this bind, and yes, technology does drive such things into short supply. To put a sharp point on it: Technology acts like a mental AIDS; it destroys the very sort of thinking that we need to overcome it. The seriousness of this situation cannot be overestimated.

David Skrbina
On the Question of Technological Slavery
A Reply to Campbell and Lipkin
2015

usa.anarchistlibraries.net