



BOOK REVIEW

Reactionary radicals, radical reactionaries

A review of *Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity*

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Abstract

Paul Kingsnorth, in his book *Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity*, asserts that the ecological destruction, consumerism, and social atomization that have come to define contemporary life are the product of a malevolent force he calls the Machine. This review finds that his proposed solution to these crises, namely a return to "traditional" forms of family and community, insufficiently addresses the material and structural conditions underlying the capitalist mode of production. Kingsnorth's dismissal of Marxism is then interrogated by juxtaposing his critique of the Machine with Marx's analysis of estranged labor. Finally, this review concludes that the political program that Kingsnorth outlines towards the end of the book ("reactionary radicalism") shares several affinities with right-wing thought.

Kingsnorth, P. (2025). *Against the machine: On the unmaking of humanity*. Penguin Books.

Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity is concerned with many issues that have come to define contemporary life: rampant ecological destruction, ruthless consumerism, an overwhelming sense of atomization, and cultural malaise. But the solution put forth by the author, the once-committed green Paul Kingsnorth, seems to have entirely abandoned the eco-left influences that inspired his earlier work (Kingsnorth, 2003). Instead, a generalized attachment to progress, which he sees as being embraced by all existing political parties, is the main target of his extended (but ultimately unconvincing) critique. The Machine, as he calls this malevolent force, destroys "self-sufficient people, skilled people, independent people, [and] thinking people" (Kingsnorth, 2025, p. 185). To fight the Machine, he argues, we must commit ourselves to "the passing down of skills and stories from elders; the raising

and educating of children; ... the conjuration of a story and song around the fire”—put simply, we must make a concerted effort to return to the past (Kingsnorth, 2025, pp. 184–185).

Kingsnorth would deny that this call to resuscitate some of the socio-economic structures that capitalism has seriously weakened (the family, place, community) is in any way fascistic or aligned with the right-wing movements that have spread across the globe in recent years. Instead, he prefers to spend significant time discussing what he calls the “excesses” of left-wing critiques of patriotism or national pride. He, for example, finds much at fault in the Canadian establishment’s treatment of the so-called “Freedom Convoy.” But at this preliminary step, calling his backward glance nativist or nationalist requires further substantiation. Therefore, it might be more productive to focus on what I perceive to be one of the main lines of argumentation within *Against the Machine*: its outright dismissal of Marx.

There’s no better place to start than with Marx’s quip about “rural idiocy,” which Kingsnorth cites several times to bolster his claims about the “progressive” nature of Marxism in general. I offer the quotation (from the *Communist Manifesto*) in full:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (Engels & Marx, 2000, para. 28)

Is the phrase “rural idiocy” an unfortunate oversimplification for what is inevitably a complicated and historically contingent way of life? Rural communities certainly have distinctive forms of knowledge; this claim is more than plausible. But to attribute a progressive (or non-progressive) orientation to a thinker’s entire thought—from a single sentence nonetheless—seems to stretch the limits of credulity. In lieu of citing further examples of Marx’s work, Kingsnorth turns to a slightly more convincing treatment of the Soviet Union. One has to agree that the Soviet Union was a failure, for precisely the reasons

Kingsnorth outlines: it was obsessed with preserving an (environmentally unfriendly) mode of production, which opened the door for totalitarian excesses and, eventually, intellectual censorship and mass murder. However, this “grand new social structure” that Kingsnorth describes is just Marx seen through the lens of Soviet communism, the two being essentially interchangeable in his opinion:

What Schumacher knew but Marx denied—with all the terrible consequences that the twentieth century produced—was that the solution to the triumph of want, as far as there can ever be one, is not political revolution followed by a grand new social structure, but something harder and less spectacular: spiritual vigilance. (Kingsnorth, 2025, p. 99)

We can briefly point to some sources that have challenged this reductionism in relation to Marxism and the Soviet system (Postone, 1978; Postone, 1996). But we might be best served by letting Marx speak for himself: his early, more “humanistic” approach, often derided by later communist party officials, had the following to say about labor under capitalism:

In estranging from man (1) nature, and 2 (himself), his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labour estranges the species from man. It turns for him the life of the species into a means of individual life. First it estranges the life of the species and individual life, and secondly it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract and estranged form. (Marx, 1959, para. 28)

In slightly less obtuse terms, what defines human separation, in a total sense, from one fellow human and from their own labor, is the mode of production of capitalism itself. Others have argued that, in a relative sense, the Soviet system dispensed with capitalism’s mode of distribution but never truly superseded the mode of production (Postone, 1978). Lenin, after all, was heavily inspired by Frederick W. Taylor when planning the Soviet economy.

We can go even further, and quote from the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s preparatory notes for *Capital* (and the beginning of his “scientific” turn). Quite counterintuitively, he argues that capitalism

leads the individual to “the grasping of his own history as a process, and the recognition of nature (equally present as practical power over nature) *as his real body* [emphasis added]” (Marx, 1973, para. 23). Here we can see that Marx identifies humans with nature, as one indissoluble body. This sentiment would seem squarely in line with much of what Kingsnorth has articulated in his critique of the Machine: capitalism has separated humans from nature, turned them into an individualized subject, forcing them to desire objects and experiences that previously did not exist (smartphones, international travel)—and which require the continued destruction of the earth. Upon final analysis, the Machine and capitalism seem to serve the exact same function in both thinkers’ projects, prompting a rather pointed question: has Kingsnorth simply rebranded the Marxist critique of (technological) progress?

While this is partly true, there remain important points of difference that lead one to ask: on what issues do Marx and Kingsnorth really differ? Kingsnorth is looking for spiritual answers to an economic problem, which leads him back to the family and community as an imagined outside to capitalist accumulation. This is essentially what Slobodian (2025) sees as the defining feature of the right-wing in the contemporary era: “The assumption seems to be that the Far Right ideology is either post- or pre-material: it inhabits a space of culture detached from issues of production and distribution” (p. 69). This is the exact trap that Kingsnorth continuously falls into throughout *Against the Machine*. To place so much emphasis on “the spirit,” to ignore the material world, is to ultimately ignore the mode of production that engenders these “spiritual” issues in the first place. What Kingsnorth rejects, to borrow a phrase from Althusser and Balibar (1970), is the primacy of the economic in the last instance.

This is perhaps where Kingsnorth most explicitly differs from Marx; he inverts the Marxist paradigm, placing the social world before the economic. Slobodian (2025) would argue, once again, that this is a defining strategy of the Far Right today:

...the second school of interpretation finds the origins of the Far Right in the spirit of capitalism itself. Rather than a rejection of neoliberalism, they see the Far Right as a mutant form of it, shedding certain features—like a commitment to multilateral trade governance or the virtues of outsourcing—while doubling down on Social Darwinist

principles of struggle in the market translated through hierarchical categories of race, nationality, and gender. (p. 64)

This explains the recent right-wing emphasis on “family values.” Often framed as a “return” to the family unit, a bygone era where everyone had a preordained place and purpose, it might more accurately be framed as a reterritorialization; it allows the ruling class to performatively address some of the issues of capitalist accumulation, such as the “death” of the family, without ever questioning the system’s underlying material conditions.

That said, Kingsnorth is correct to diagnose some of these societal ills as stemming directly from the Machine (or capitalism), but he fails to accept that socio-economic structures, such as the family, have been weaponized by the Machine and, in a more fundamental sense, support it. Two seemingly contradictory things can be true at the same time: capitalism both degrades and uplifts the family unit. Much of the same can be said of its treatment of the nation-state (place) and, in many Western Nations, of race. Thus, when reading Kingsnorth, one has to wonder: in a phase of capitalism that seems hellbent on resuscitating the nation-state, can centering national pride in your political project *really* be considered a radical act? To underscore my point, Murray Rothbard (2010), an “economist” and avowed racist, labeled the alignment between nationalists and neoliberals “radical reactionaries.” Toward the end of *Against the Machine*, Kingsnorth offers a tentative name for his political program: “reactionary radicals.” Are we not, in the end, discussing a narcissism of small differences?

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