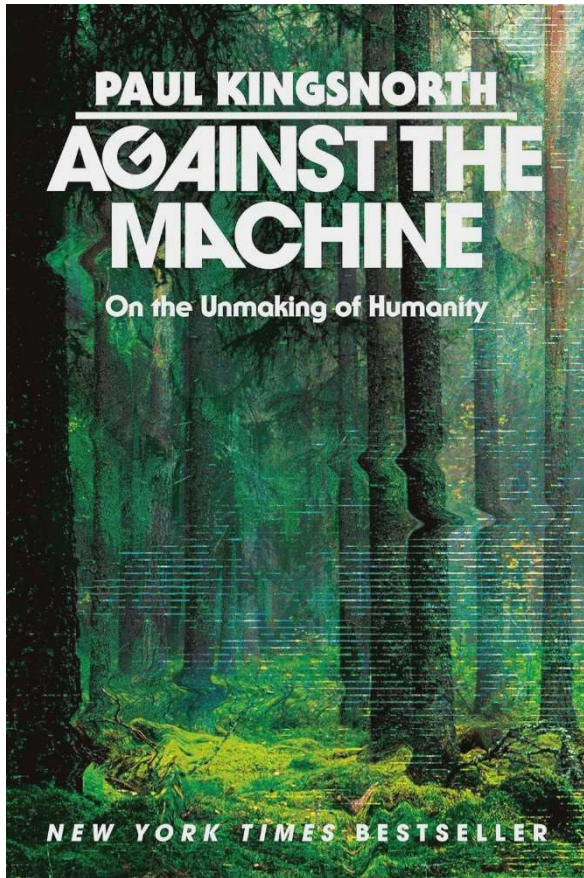


‘Against the Machine’ should be discussed everywhere

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“Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity” by Paul Kingsnorth. New York, NY: Thesis (an imprint of Penguin Random House, LLC), 2025, 368 pages, \$32.00.



“I was sure of something else, too: that the political and cultural upheavals which continue to roil the West have historical, technological and ultimately spiritual roots,” Paul Kingsnorth explains near the beginning of “Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity,” his eye-opening new incursion into a reality most of us experience on a daily basis, albeit without realizing it

“The ‘decline of the West’ which is so hotly debated right now is, in my view, not a matter of the wrong people being in charge, or the wrong economic policies being pursued,” Kingsnorth continues. “It is not due to the rise of China or Russia, or racism, or ‘misinformation,’ or nasty populists. Or the institutionalization of ‘woke’ ideology. As such, it will not be solved by tougher border controls, or radical rightist governments, or revolutions, or ‘decolonization,’ or controls on freedom of speech in the name of ‘protecting our democracy.’ Any number of these things might or might not be real or true or desirable, but they are symptoms, not causes, of our malaise.”

“The malaise is deeper, older, more interesting and far more consequential than any of this, and it affects the very basis of our humanity. What happens next will determine what it means to be human in the twenty-first century and beyond. This book seeks to tell the tale of this Machine: what it is, where it came from, and where it is taking us next. Drawing from history, from religion, from current events and from the work of many other writers and thinkers, it aims to pin down and shape the genesis of this thing.”

A tall order, for sure, with existential implications that go far beyond the pragmatic immediacy of others who are currently grappling with the same subject matter. What Kingsnorth is describing is our ongoing quest to make sense of our relationship to the order of the universe and how that paradigm is perpetually evolving at an ever-increasing pace. If we’re being completely honest, humans have always had a tenuous relationship with technology in all its various incarnations – going all the way back the dawn of civilization. We are both creator and creation; anytime there is “breakthrough” that advances our concept of “progress,” it is always accompanied by unintended consequences. But are those consequences really unintended? Or is there more going here than most of us are aware?

Conceptually, “Against the Machine” is presented in four major sections after the Introduction: “Part One: The Western Deviation,” comprised of the inaugural three chapters, “Part Two: Divining the Machine,” the next eight chapters, “Part Three: The Hollowing,” consisting of eleven chapters (and where the essence of the narrative is revealed in my humble opinion), and “Part Four: The Savage Reservation,” made up of the concluding five chapters. Kingsnorth’s thesis is supported by twelve pages of source notes that I found myself using more than with similar works. The prose is accessible to a general audience, although those with a background in philosophy and religious studies - especially as it relates to the Judeo-Christian tradition - will no doubt be able to appreciate the treatise at a deeper level.

The world Kingsnorth seems to know intuitively is both surreal and terrifying. We are indeed caught up in a complex and amoral spiderweb that seems to be encroaching on every aspect of our being. Techno-capitalism is all the rage these days. We simultaneously view with awe and disdain those on the leading edge of the technological tidal wave that promises to take us to a utopian paradise or drown us in a sea of mindless conformity and orthodoxy. Many of the changes we are living through are probably irreversible, which adds even more poignancy to the cautionary tale. From the first tools we shaped to the inevitable rise of artificial intelligence, the fate of humanity has hung in the balance. Given the present reality, the significance of past inflection points were grossly overvalued. The path we choose now is paramount.

The Deputy Editor of *The Ecologist* magazine in the 1990s, Kingsnorth was one of the founders of the Free West Papua Campaign in 2004, a movement working to free the tribal people of West Papua. In 2009, he launched the Dark Mountain Project with Dougal Hine. In 2024, he was asked to deliver the thirty-seventh Erasmus Lecture, “Against Christian Civilization,” an annual event hosted by *First Things* magazine and the Institute on Religion and Public Life. A prolific author and philosophical thinker, his previous books include “*The Wake: A Novel*,” in 2014, “*Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays*,” in 2017, and “*These Our Monsters: The English Heritage Collection of New Stories Inspired by Myth & Legend*,” with several co-authors, in 2020. Kingsnorth is currently working on “*The Book of Wild Saints*,” about the hermetic tradition in Christian nature mysticism.

Although I may use the phrase “a real gamechanger” as hyperbole from time to time, for me “Against the Machine” definitely deserves this oft-maligned distinction. Each page brought new insight and revelation. For example, take “The Nation and the Grid,” the thirteenth chapter and one I re-read twice to make sure I got the full effect. See if you have a similar response:

“The Grid is a physical manifestation of the values of the Machine on the landscape itself, and it is, I think, replacing the nation, just as it is replacing culture and antiquated notions of ‘tradition’ and the like. It is part of that ongoing process of colonization. The Grid doesn’t care about nations, roots, identities, patriotism or tradition. It doesn’t care about anything... It goes without saying that the Grid is also global. Like electricity or the internet, it knows no borders, and neither do its children. It manifests an identikit globoculture of sameness, a pipeline of product and corporate-progressive verbiage, and its proponents talk relentlessly about ‘diversity’ because the Grid produces the precise opposite. We all know the bland, correct, corporate Gridspeak we must use to get by in this new country: it is what facilitates Progress, by which we mean uniformity disguised as difference.”

Even if you don’t completely understand or agree with the point Kingsnorth is making here, you instinctively feel the weight of the existential dystopia he is describing in such vivid detail. His words transcend their context to form a backdrop from which to categorize the subtle ache we all feel when we are conscious and separated from our true nature.

Perhaps Mary Harrington, celebrated author of “Feminism Against Progress,” says it best:

“Kingsnorth has done something extraordinary: he has captured the spiritual crisis of our time in language so compelling I could not put the book down. The vision he paints is a bleak one: a post-human, machine future. But as long as our world still has space for voices this vivid, I dare hope we have not yet succumbed to the Machine.”

Agreed.

This one needs to be discussed everywhere, at the dinner table, at the water cooler, in the classroom, and from the pulpit. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.

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