

The Unabomber and the Future of Industrial Society

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“...If one has courage and daring without benevolence, one is like a madman wielding a sharp sword; if one is smart and swift without wisdom, one is as though riding on a fast mount but not knowing which way to go.

“Even if one has talent and ability, if one uses them improperly and handles them inappropriately, they can only assist falsehood and dress up errors: In that case it is better to have few technical skills than many.

“So, the ambitious should not be lent convenient power; the foolish should not be given sharp instruments.”

—Taoist adept, 2nd century B.C.E. 1

“We aren’t the first to mention that the world today seems to be going crazy...”

—“Industrial Society and Its Future” (the “Unabomber Manifesto”) 2

1: Go, Unabomber

Is the taoist master’s advice more relevant to a serial bomber or to the society that engendered him? Now that the Unabomber’s fifteen minutes of fame may be nearly ended, perhaps we can begin to discern his ambiguous significance to the megatech system he wants to overthrow. 3

Clearly, the unabomber struck a chord in the culture, rapidly becoming a perverse folk hero. If most considered him mad, some of his stated motives received a good measure of sympathy. This must have been particularly true among people physically damaged by industrial processes, or who have seen their livelihoods erased by automation, or been coerced into progressively constricted and surveilled routines by computerization, or witnessed some beloved place bulldozed in the name of progress, or simply felt the crushing burden of a world of machines, noise and dreary offices.

Suppressing a natural compassion for his victims—in the larger scheme of things, most of them little more than bystanders—some people secretly rooted for the unabomber. Perhaps they did so hoping he would improve his aim while sharpening his arguments (though few people actually read more than excerpts in the print media, and those who did, ironically, probably got the document off the Internet). In fact, his aim was decidedly scattershot, if he intended to strike effectively and clearly at major policy-makers within the megamachine. But in post-modern pop culture North America, the unabomber seemed to be all we technophobes had; he stood in for a mass movement that few of his secret admirers even noticed was lacking. He was, instead, a slice of mediatized saturnalia, a murky Robin Hood who put a scare into the normally smug “techno-nerds” while thumbing his nose at the police.

While humor can often be subversive, there was also an unmistakable element of cynicism (and thus resignation) in the comedic response to the Unabomber. Not only is life cheap (as soon as an airplane crashes the jokes start), when the media picks up a message, the meaning implodes. In the Unabomber's case, his own argument—an astute one, though hardly new, that revolutionary action has unforeseeable consequences—took an ironic turn: his image was emblazoned on bumperstickers (as in, “Don't Blame Me, I Voted for the Unabomber”), and sweat-shirts (one marketed in California showed the famous suspect sketch with the words, “There's a package for you ...”), and became the raw material for TV and radio comedy.

The Unabomber even became an attraction on the Internet. Several web pages were devoted to him, including an Area of multimedia giant Time Warner's Pathfinder site containing a game called “Find the Unabomber,” which asked visitors, “Is there a little of the unabomber in all of us?” Metroactive, a site formed by three Northern California newsweeklies, commented on the FBI suspect sketch, offering an updated, more fashionable sketch with the explanation, “This anarcho-terrorist is looking dynamite in wraparound sunglasses, \$140 by Giorgio Armani; black pin-striped suit, \$1,550; white corduroy shirt, \$395; and black silk tie, \$125, by Hugo Boss. Styled by Andre.” A student involved in Internet discussions of the Unabomber commented, “People aren't really fans, they're just impressed.”⁴

Another typical occurrence was the “name the unabomber” phenomenon. I suffered this common experience of being chided by co-workers for being the Unabomber because of my openly luddite attitudes. I'll probably never know if anyone seriously considered me a suspect, but it's sobering to know that at least 20,000 tips were received by the FBI Unabomber Task Force hotline before Kaczynski was arrested. If enough technophobia was in the air to elicit at least a muted, comic sympathy for the Unabomber, a widespread atmosphere of mutual suspicion and identification with the nation's secret police reflected quite a different aspect of the populace's character.

2: Enter Ted Kaczynski

Through Ted Kaczynski's countenance, the media inundated the public with images of the “twisted genius,” disheveled and dirty, eyes unfocused, an inaccessible and furious enigma. But it behooves us to contrast that image with another gracing the magazine and book racks—clear-eyed, stolid, spit-and-polish, a presence both comforting and commanding to the citizens. A retired military leader and former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, this person is widely admired and thought to be an appropriate alternative to the national political morass.

Whereas the brilliant “misfit” Theodore Kaczynski, if he is the Unabomber, only managed over a period of several years to kill three and injure 23 people, Colin Powell, hardly brilliant but undeniably competent and well-adjusted, oversaw in just a few weeks the deaths and injuries of perhaps several hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers and civilians. And Powell's war—against the technological and social infrastructure of the enemy nation—continues to prove effective, consigning its victims to death by malnutrition and disease.⁵ While Kaczynski was reviled in the press and thrown into a cell (and may ultimately be executed by the state), Powell's deadly project is raised as the reasonable actions of enlightened, civilized polity. For his illustrious career in the service of death and destruction, Powell has been rewarded with parades, medals, a handsome pension, book tours and offers to run for public office.

The question “Who is sane? Who is mad?” immediately presents itself to anyone who doesn't take for granted the dystopian nightmares cooked up daily in industrial capitalism's laboratories, think tanks and board rooms. Compared to Bush, Schwartzkopf and Powell, with their arsenal of “dumb” and “smart” bombs, the Unabomber's damage was pitifully small.⁶ Compare, as well, the “irrationality” of the lone bomber and the “rationality” of the presumably respected mathematician Claude Shannon, cited in the Unabomber manifesto: “I visualize a time when we will be to robots what dogs are to humans, and I'm rooting for the machines.” Such celebrations of humanity's reduction to “servoprotein” and nature to laboratory dross are a familiar enough banality; that this banality reflects the potential extinction of human beings as an integral organism, and the actual, unprecedented physical extirpation of much that is recognizable in the natural world in which humanity evolved, might seem grounds enough to take desperate measures.

But while apt, the “who is sane” idea remains inadequate. Even perceptive technocrats have noticed the radical ambivalence of the Unabomber. Venture capitalist and cyber-maven Esther Dyson commented, for example, that she is “fascinated by the Unabomber ... No. 1, he’s a maniac. No. 2, he’s asking valid questions ...” 7 Indeed, elaborate evidence should be unnecessary to demonstrate that someone who has spent almost two decades sending fastidiously crafted bombs through the mail is one variety of maniac. The text, too, which took the counter-culture concept of “self-publishing” to unprecedented extremes, is a curious admixture of insight, ponderous scholasticism and delusion. Its description of the abundant maladies resulting from humanity’s inability to adapt to the modern artificial environment—among them depression, anxiety, suicide, and “pathological, even murderous alienation ... [a] hallmark of our time,” Robert Wright observes—brings to mind the Unabomber himself. As Wright comments, “The Unabomber is Exhibit A in his own argument.” 8

There may indeed be a little of the Unabomber in us all, as numerous mass market publications have so cleverly noted. But judging from the pattern of bombings and the text, it’s also apparent that the bomber shared not only his understandable luddite frustrations with modern society but that inchoate rage pervasive in today’s mass psychology, expressed in every possible response from passive withdrawal to shooting up schoolyards. Despite the fatuous idea voiced in one anarchist flyer lauding the Unabomber, that “it’s just a matter of listening to your own rage,” most people understand that such rage frequently turns out to be a large part of the problem. 9

There are countless men exhibiting a combination of smoldering rage and technical dexterity nowadays; they have generally been more likely to blow up their coworkers with the boss—or their ex-wives. Generally blind to ambivalence and nuance, rage by itself can engender a Unabomber, perhaps, but rarely an authentic revolutionary, who—if I may, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, quote one of my boyhood heroes—is “guided by great feelings of love.” Leaving aside his rightful sense of urgency, the Unabomber’s enterprise was less a reasoned response to a world gone mad than simply one more of the myriad dangers we who live in mass society must negotiate daily—hostages not only to the murder, mayhem and dysfunction issuing from the powerful institutions that rule this pathological civilization, but also to the acts of revenge and grievance carried out by its anonymous, disaffected victims.

The Unabomber does, in fact, have his enthusiasts—including a not entirely tongue-in-cheek “fan club” on the West Coast (though in post-modern radicalism, irony and gravity inevitably commingle), Green Anarchists in England (not much irony there), and an anonymous flyer showing a color reproduction of Kaczynski with the cut-out, ransom-letter style legend, “Be like Ted.” In Berkeley, California, a punkish anarchist told a *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, “We all think he’s pretty great ... I totally know where the guy’s coming from. Everybody’s just kind of laughing. They’re hoping he blows something up in Berkeley so they can see it. I wish they’d start selling T-shirts that said, ‘I love the Unabomber,’ because that would be kind of funny.” 10

In a *New York Times* interview depicting him as a “prominent anarchist” and “guru of sorts for anti-technology leftists,” John Zerzan judged the FC text to be a “pretty thoroughgoing critique.” In the flyer cited above, he extols the Unabomber’s “profoundly radical vision” of “a return to ‘wild nature’ via the ‘complete and permanent destruction of modern industrial society,’” and in another he praises the Unabomber’s “critique, in acts as well as words.” “I see in the eyes of Ted Kaczynski a sorrow reflecting what we have lost,” Zerzan writes. “But the Megamachine has not eradicated all resistance ... And at the very least we have seen the courage and honor of one who would not buy into this fraudulent society, who fought the Brave New World with pen and sword.” But the eyes of another sometimes reveal to us what we are most predisposed to find. Reading Zerzan, one almost forgets how obscure most of the Unabomber’s victims were. 11

True, Zerzan did not wholeheartedly endorse either the method or the manifesto. He argued that more than industrialism would have to be eliminated to achieve freedom, and judged mail bombs “too random,” their potential “collateral harm [a military term that came into use during the Persian Gulf War] not justifiable.” 12 According to Zerzan, Kaczynski’s “betrayal ... at the hands of his brother reminds us that pacifism, in its smug cowardice, is always, at base, the defender of what is.” But life is more complex than the pithy utterances on flyers. There is more than one kind of cowardice, just as there is more than one variety of courage and honor. If we can approve of some of the Unabomber’s motives without supporting all his means, it seems fair to grant the same consideration to David Kaczynski, who simply acted on the belief that “collateral harm is not justifiable.” 13

David Kaczynski, who likely knows him better than anyone, came to believe that his older brother was the Unabomber (and thus that he himself had, by giving his brother money, unknowingly subsidized some of the bombing campaign). Judging by what the younger Kaczynski had to say, if his brother was responsible, he was motivated by more than high principles and heroism. “The truth from my point of view,” David told *The New York Times*, “is that Ted has been a disturbed person for a long time and he’s gotten more disturbed.”¹⁴

Actually, if his brother were responsible for the bombings, the desire to publish his manifesto and to stop killing people could have meant Ted was becoming less and not more disturbed. (Curiously, the plaint in one communiqué against the tedium of making and testing bombs suggests that even criminal intransigence in the name of revolution can become an oppressive routine.)¹⁵ That the Unabomber could examine his own actions and try to articulate a more coherent perspective on modern society’s discontents offers some hope that others, seemingly incapable, may also be able to change.

3: Enter the Neo-Luddites

A form of “Name the Unabomber” inevitably occurred in the media, too. When he was shown the manifesto, Kevin Kelly, executive editor of the fashionable digerati magazine *Wired*, snorted, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say he sounds a lot like Kirkpatrick Sale.”¹⁶ Sale’s book *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution*, and his recent performances smashing computers (an instructive stunt which anarchists have practiced for several years), have earned Sale the media role of an official neo-luddite spokesman, in another serviceable media scenario of “techno-nerds vs. neo-luddites.”¹⁷

For his part, Sale argued in the pages of *The Nation* that the newspapers should agree to the Unabomber’s offer to stop killing people and publish the manifesto. Publishing it would likely preempt more deaths, and newspaper editors “needn’t worry about the propaganda effect” of the text, he pointed out, “since it is a woodenly written term paper, full of academic jargon and pop psychology, repetitive and ill-argued, that will keep only the most dedicated readers awake beyond its opening paragraphs.”

“Which,” Sale continued, “is a shame,” since the Unabomber’s main point, that industrialism has been a “disaster for the human race,” is “absolutely crucial.” The greatest flaws in the document, Sale averred, were its manipulative idea of political change, its lack of a genuine ecological perspective, and its failure to cite or trace its origins to “the long Luddistic strain in Western thought” or “the great modern critics of technology such as Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul,” and others.¹⁸

Sale’s exposition on the Unabomber text, while one of the better discussions I saw in the press, is alternately insightful and pedantic, his reading peevisish and occasionally inaccurate. His criticism of the text’s “appeal to nature [as] entirely utilitarian,” and of the Unabomber’s “faintest grasp of the principles of ecology,” lacks nuance and attention to the text. For example, according to Sale, the Unabomber “gives only a passing glance to the multiple environmental disasters the system is producing for itself and never mentions the likelihood ... that the complex industrial house of cards will not hold.” In fact, after writing in paragraph 5 that his text does not go into the question of “environmental degradation or the destruction of wild nature, even though we consider these to be highly important,” the Unabomber nevertheless returns to technologically-caused ecological catastrophes several times, and clearly argues the possibility that industrialism may collapse on its own. Sale seems mostly annoyed that the Unabomber doesn’t properly acknowledge deep ecology ideas, but, if anything, the Unabomber’s implied approval of “the idea that wild nature is more important than human economic welfare” places him close to deep ecology, if only to a misanthropic, catastrophist variety of it.¹⁹

According to Sale, the text’s reference to “anarchist and radical environmental journals” reveals that the unabomber knows “something about the current [technology] critics,” and he adds parenthetically, “If I had to guess which has been most influential on him, I’d say the Fifth Estate, a feisty anti-technology paper published out of Detroit for the past thirty years .. “ To describe the Unabomber as somehow both “prescient” and an “incoherent” fanatic of mediocre intellect, and to censure his lack of identification with the “long Luddistic strain” in the Western tradition and his failure to quote from this tradition, and then to name the Fifth Estate (which is clearly in this tradition and which quotes extensively from it) as the unabomber’s most probable influence, seems a rather

studied, if indirect, potshot. As a long-time F.E. reader, Sale had to know that neither the Unabomber's language nor his strategy resembled the F.E.'s work, that at best we share with him what Sale shares with him—a sense of urgency about technological catastrophe and a jaundiced view of industrialism's false promises.

Sale added nothing to his discussion by mentioning the F.E., just gratuitously tossed it in as an aside without the least substantiation. There is something utterly irresponsible, even contemptible, in offering such speculations, with the cops standing by, at a time when the FBI was harassing and investigating eco-radicals on the West Coast and obtaining subpoenas for the membership records of scholarly organizations such as the History of Science Society and the subscription lists of journals such as the left-wing *Critical Sociology*. (The manifesto was hand-delivered to him by FBI agents, most likely as part of their strategy to enlist journalists and academics to analyze the text for clues.)

Contrary to Sale's volunteer detective work, we found no evidence that the Unabomber was on our subscription list. Nor did anything like the Unabomber text turn up in our files of rejected manuscripts, though if it had, it was too long, too badly written and too confused for us to have accepted it. Sadly, if the Unabomber couldn't expect his text, despite its urgency, to be published in an anarchist anti-tech journal like the *Fifth Estate*, one can understand his sense of desperation. After all, the issues he raises—the destruction of wild nature, technological domination, genetic manipulation and ecological apocalypse—however confused their elaboration and whatever his shortcomings as a writer, are pressing. And if it takes a madman to tell us in his own mad way that our world is mad, then so be it. Truth be told, industrial capitalism is tattering the complex web of life to the point of global collapse, and legions of functionaries like the last two corporate bureaucrats the unabombs killed are reaping lavish benefits for helping the process along. Unfortunately, apart from pinprick attacks on a few of capital's relatively lower-level minions—switch men along the tracks to capital's ecospheric Buchenwald, we might say—and random violence against secretaries and others, the Unabomber ended by playing into the hands of the very forces of media and mass culture he opposed.

“To make an impression on society with words is ... almost impossible for most individuals and small groups,” he writes. “Take us (F.C.) for example. If we had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted. If they had been accepted and published, they probably would not have attracted many readers, because it's more fun to watch the entertainment put out by the media than to read a sober essay. Even if these writings had had many readers, most of these readers would soon have forgotten what they had read as their minds were flooded by the mass of material to which the media expose them. In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people.”

Not only does this statement sound strikingly like rationalization long after the fact for some wayward grudge killings, by its self-immolating logic, the propaganda of the deed is completely supplanted by the brute fact of the deed itself. According to the argument, only violence would have gotten the text published; without it the text would not have attracted readers. But even if it had found a large audience without the author having to resort to violence, its readers, overwhelmed by the flood of media-generated information, would have forgotten it anyway. Thus, the Unabomber believed, as technology critic Jacques Ellul has put it, “In a battle between propagandas, only propaganda can respond effectively.” But it did not occur to him, as it did to Ellul, that “the effects of one's propaganda on the personality are exactly the same as those of enemy propaganda...” 20

Naively hoping to “make a lasting impression,” even to destabilize industrialism, the Unabomber only managed to provide titillation (and further official pretext for harassment and surveillance of activists). His deadly “lasting impression” has faded with yesterday's newspapers, and his bombs—weapons which a century or so ago anarchist revolutionaries praised as “great equalizers” against authority—are now almost imperceptible in a landscape where bombs of every magnitude and variety, in the service of every ideology and grievance, have become ubiquitous. 21 (and bombings, of course, are only one manifestation of an endless array of modern disasters. It no longer matters whether an airplane crashes because of terrorism, corporate cost-cutting or the inevitable systems-errors of complex technology. In the mass society we inhabit, the first two causes are categories of the last.)

4: Two, Three, Many Unabombers?

We may never know if Ted Kaczynski is the Unabomber, but he clearly shares an enduring hatred for technology and love for nature with the author of the text. And though there is little evidence that high tech genocide in Vietnam directly influenced his decision to drop out (as some have suggested), there would only have been honor in his decision if it did. 22 On January 20, 1969—the day of Richard Nixon’s presidential inauguration—he resigned from the university of California-Berkeley math department and, emulating Thoreau, left to live his life deliberately at society’s margin.

At the time Kaczynski dropped out of the university, Lewis Mumford was finishing his landmark work, *The Pentagon of Power*, a book that could have easily been titled *Industrial Society and Its Future*. In that great, dark jeremiad, Mumford described two contrasting characterological types in megatechnic society. In one we find a Colin Powell: what Mumford called the “Automated, or Organization Man: he who takes all his orders from the system, and who, as a scientist, engineer, expert, administrator, or, finally, consumer and subject, cannot conceive of any departure from the system, even in the interest of efficiency, still less for the sake of creating a more intelligent, vivid, purposeful, humanly rewarding life.”

This automaton—perhaps a timber lobbyist or genetics researcher—this “limited, docile, scientifically conditioned human animal, completely adjusted to a purely technological environment,” was nevertheless “not born alone.” Rather, this personage has come with a twin, a dark shadow-self: defiant, not docile: disorderly, not organized or controlled: above all, aggressively destructive, even homicidal, reasserting the dammed-up forces of life’s crazy or criminal acts.” Though Mumford considered the aim of this “subversive” type to be the destruction of “higher attributes... whose gifts of love, mutuality, rationality, imagination, and constructive aptitude have enlarged all the possibilities of life,” he was not posing an argument for more control, more damming up, more technology, more adjustment and passivity. “It is in the light of [the megamachine’s] impending negations and destructions,” he emphasized, “that the whole concept of subjugating nature and replacing man’s own functions with collectively fabricated, automatically operated, completely depersonalized equivalents must at last be appraised.”

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Mumford would certainly have been surprised to find the nihilist “shadow twin” carrying out “crazy, criminal acts” in an explicit, calculated war against the automaton “techno-nerds” (as the Unabomber characterized them). It is as if instead of hanging himself, the Savage of Huxley’s *Brave New World* had decided to start killing the Alphas and Betas. But the bomber is more a symptom of crisis than any model for response. Indeed, rather than the “glint of hope” Zerzan found in the Unabomber’s campaign and manifesto—that, “in distinction to the widespread feeling that everything outside the self is beyond our control, the monopoly of lies has been broken”—the Unabomber’s pathetic one-man war both embodied and reinforced the bleak suspicion that the isolated self is all we have, undermining the contrasting sense that people working openly together may succeed in bringing about substantive change. (Oddly, the bomb-maker’s lonely operations at his work table parallel the solitary hacker in a cubicle, sending a different variety of poisoned gift into the technocratic void—a virus, perhaps, to “promote social stress and instability in the industrial system,” as “FC” urged, or simply to engage in some monad’s notion of dangerous play.) In the end, the bombings mostly left the “monopoly of lies” intact—a monopoly, in any case, that a small but growing number of people are starting to see through without the help of bombs.

No doubt, given the willingness of well-adjusted, well-rewarded automatons to experiment secretly with nuclear materials on human beings for decades, and their recent success in roughly mapping the human gene code, among other accomplishments (and under the rubric of the Highest humanitarian ideals, of course), one is tempted to welcome any response, even, if I may paraphrase my boyhood revolutionary hero, to invite “two, three, many Unabombers.” As Mumford might have put it, the Unabomber represents, in however distorted a form, the “dammed-up forces of life.” We should not be lulled into forgetting the real terrorist system, with its doomsday apparatus, its investment portfolios in mass extinction. As the anarchist revolutionary Voltairine de Cleyre wrote after a bomb incident in New York’s Union Square in 1908, “For truly, Anarchism has nothing in common with violence, and can never come about save through the conquest of men’s minds. But when some desperate and life-denied victim of the present system does strike back at it, by violence, it is not our business to heap infamies upon his name, but to explain him as we explain others, whether our enemies or our friends, as the fated fruit of the existing ‘order.’” 24

It could be argued that there are no innocent “bystanders.” To one degree or another, the rest of “us” participate in the apparatus, earning our daily bread, our own short-term dividends from apocalypse, as workers, functionaries, secretaries, and the like, all dependent on the industrial bribe.²⁵ But there is no revolutionary short-cut to social transformation, no simple lever to apply the brakes, no fast track to the future. As much as the Unabomber may believe that “active, determined minorities” are the sole makers of history, only majorities can ultimately bring about the social change needed to turn back from extermination. A frightening prospect, surely, given both how “functional” and “dysfunctional” people have been and are becoming in this society, but however different we might wish things to be, a campaign of destabilization to spark industrial collapse (which industrialism seems to be bringing about quite well on its own, thank you very much), will probably only succeed in driving the inmates of industrial society further into the protective embrace of the megatech state.

Active, determined minorities and individuals can make a difference and have done so, of course. After all, Thoreau was a relative loner and outsider, yet his influence eventually became immense. And to provide only one contemporary example, anyone who reads radical environmental journals, as the Unabomber recommends, can find evidence of active minorities and individuals who are making a large difference. As planetary life conditions inevitably deteriorate further under industrial capitalism, more isolated acts of hope and despair like the Unabomber’s are to be expected. Nevertheless, we are not likely to find our way through the examples of either lone assassins or terrorist cells. Rather, we must look to communities of people working both within and against this society to transform it for pathways to a new mode of life. The transformation is in fact already occurring in many seemingly unrelated social movements and cooperative endeavors around the world. Whether they are creating alternative institutions, resisting domination, or defending their neighborhoods, people acting as the subjects of their history participate in a kind of Eternal Return, moving beyond history’s limits. Resisting and working together creatively, they fulfill the same necessary role whatever the context or the outcome, recreating and rearticulating not only their faith in the continuity of life but life’s continuity itself. That is what the luddites did in smashing machines and engaging in other insurgent activities, a far more powerful act both politically and existentially than smashing a computer on stage (however dramatic the gesture), or sending a bomb through the mail (whoever does it).

The Unabomber text is a tormented scream against an empire whose claims to human improvement cannot conceal deepening domination and the ruination of the natural world. While it contains worthwhile insights, its abstract, mechanistic sociologism informs a survivalist, individualistic notion of freedom and a utilitarian outlook that considers any undertaking other than the most meager grubbing of food, clothing and shelter (but also, tellingly, the pursuit of status or revenge) to be an alienated, “surrogate” activity. This Crusoe’s text, with its pioneer flavor and autarchic notion of autonomy, does not stray far from the classic bourgeois political economy whence it came. In some sense it is a protest against the idea of any society. While it astutely sees through the rationalization and repression of modern civilization’s claim to universality, the text’s rejection of any human universality is an obscurantist idyll. Correspondingly, it rejects what it calls the “most basic values” of this society as “industrial values.” Among the values it rejects—the “official values of our society [because] they are useful to the industrial system,”—it names racial and sexual equality, helping the poor, “peace as opposed to war,” kindness to animals, and the idea that individuals have obligations to society and society to individuals. In fact, these represent a mix of modern and far more archaic values, some of them the very intuitions we most need in order to resist and overcome the forces of technological domination.²⁶

The Unabomber’s harsh, if naive, politics of catastrophism fails to recognize that the horrific future he predicts if industrialism doesn’t collapse dramatically, rapidly and soon, is already upon us. People in the future, he warns, “won’t be able to just turn the machines off, because they will be so dependent on them that turning them off would amount to suicide.” But people are already dependent; it is precisely this suicide that the Unabomber advocates. As for the potential negative consequences to human beings and even, one must surmise, to ecosystems, he shrugs, “Well, you can’t eat your cake and have it too ...” And he proposes that revolutionaries do everything possible to bring about this collapse to avoid technology’s far more destructive triumph. There is something evocative in this of an International Monetary Fund consultant’s recommendation of economic “shock therapy” and starvation of some populations to improve their countries’ laggard economies over the long run. It is the logic of someone who, either because they are sitting in an air-conditioned high rise or hiding in a cave, is somehow not connected to

life. A situationist once remarked that the bloodiest revolution would be far less painful than any weekend under capitalism, but the social-ecological disaster into which we are presently sliding, whether it be helped along by “determined minorities” or not, may prove far worse than we can imagine.

5: Things Fall Apart

Toward the end of his life, Mumford confided to Roderick Seidenberg, “I think, in view of all that has happened the last half century, that it is likely the ship will sink.” In another letter, to his friend Bruno Levi, he wrote, “I have not the heart to tell [people] ... what I actually think about our human prospects unless something approaching a miracle takes place.” 27

But Mumford still left open the possibility of such a miracle. He believed that if there was to be a successful revolutionary transformation, it would begin at society’s margins in “gestures of non-conformity” and withdrawal. He defended “every act of rebellion, every exhibition of group defiance, every assertion of the will-to-live, every display of autonomy and self-direction, at however primitive a level,” as attempts to stay the leviathan, prevent a cataclysm that a life worth living might not survive. To Mumford it was the anarchist Thoreau, not Marx, who represented the genuine “arch-enemy” of this complex pentagon of power, for his emphasis on disobedience and a life lived deliberately at the margins of society. 28

But if Thoreau, writing during a time of this civilization’s youthful exuberance, was able to bequeath us some of our wisest and most vivid insights into it, the Unabomber, writing in an era of disillusion, resignation, rage and social decomposition, could only produce a choleric, aridly rationalistic, nihilistic epistle and a scatter of explosions. We need neither condemn nor condone him; his text and his haphazard, deliberate campaign of terror are mostly ominous reflections of how thoroughly we are now pinioned in the gears.

It has not been my intention to reduce to objects of discourse, rather than confronting as subjects, the author of the Unabomber text, or the suspect Theodore Kaczynski, or outsiders known or unknown who might now be expressing our age’s deepest truths, or anyone else. That what I know about the Unabomber has come from the media makes this tendency inevitable. In any case, whoever the Unabomber turns out to be, he deserves pardon on the basis of insanity—an insanity that is more collectively ours than his alone. For how can it be that men continue to make their fortunes by unraveling the very foundations of complex life, reducing millions of years of evolution to rubble? Are they not the ambitious, exercising their convenient power, and the arrogant fools with their sharp instruments, as the wise one in this essay’s epigraph described them—are they not also the prosecutors and police, the judges and good citizens who may condemn to death the one they take to be this bitter doomsayer, this avenging angel?

And so this is also a plea for Ted Kaczynski, now set to take the rap. It is a plea for the Unabomber, whoever he may be. I do not know what should be done to such people or for them, only that this society, with its faceless machinery of murder, should not be allowed to carry out its sanctimonious determination to take his life as punishment for taking life, while continuing its far more grisly business. Surely this society faces far more imperative matters. If there is poignancy in the Unabomber’s final note that his arguments are likely imprecise and even “flatly false,” only “a crude approximation of the truth,” his ominous and ambiguous significance recommends similar humility on our part. Perhaps we can expect no miracles, only catastrophe after all. But we focus on this small parcel of armageddon at our tragic peril.

The unabomber phenomenon, a comet briefly throwing its harsh, weird light across deepening shadows, is a sign that neither business-as-usual nor absolute intransigence, neither this society’s coherence nor any variety of its incoherence, will have predictable results on a vortex that absorbs and neutralizes every opposition. Yet in his fury, isolation and ultimate failure he also reminds us that it is, paradoxically, only those everyday acts—of mutual aid, trust, empathy, and attentiveness to life through which we nurture what is worthwhile in this society or any other—that hold the transformative energies we need to carry us through this storm.

If things do fall apart, they won’t need puny bombs and manifestos. Industrialism cannot continue without smashing on reality’s rocks. Ultimately, if we love the living earth, our hope lies beyond even the prospects of our species’ survival. Life itself is more intelligent than either the megamachine or its enemies, and will survive and

thrive with or without us. Yet when all is said and done, most of us fight for what we cherish of the world we know. Connected to people and place, we have our feet planted in this world, even if our dreams open thresholds to another. Unlike the Unabomber, who argues that the destruction of technology “must be ... the single, overriding goal,” we have many complex, interrelated aims that cannot be resolved by this mechanistic, monomaniacal determination alone. We do battle, as the taoist sage recommends, “not ... to destroy what exists but to preserve what is perishing.”²⁹ That will mean carefully backing our way out of the labyrinth we have helped construct, like the hero following his lover’s thread to sunlight.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in *The Tao of Politics: Lessons of the Masters of Huainan*, translated and edited by Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1990), pp. 60–1.

2. Printed in a special section of the September 19, 1995 *Washington Post*, under the signature “FC.”

3. This essay does not presume that Theodore Kaczynski is the Unabomber. Though it may be a reasonable premise, given what we can know about the case, Kaczynski faces the possibility of being executed if convicted, based on evidence gathered by the FBI—an agency known to be one of the biggest lie machines in memory. He is a fascinating figure, from what we know of him; but given the charges and the possible repercussions, simple decency compels us to let the bombings, the manifesto and society’s response speak as much as possible for themselves.

4. “On the Internet, the Unabomber Is a Star,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1996. Most likely Time Warner shared its information with the FBI, using its site to draw “potential terrorists” and sympathizers into the police “web.” The website could have been created in part with that goal in mind.

5. According to United Nations reports, more than a half million children have died in Iraq since the end of the Persian Gulf War as a result of continuing sanctions.

6. In some ways the Unabomber is reminiscent of Norman Mayer, who was killed in December, 1982 by a police SWAT team in Washington, D.C. after occupying the Washington Monument and threatening to blow it up if the nuclear superpowers did not move toward rapid disarmament. Mayer, who protested the deadliest arsenal in history, only threatened property, but he was killed anyway (it turned out he had no bomb). See George Bradford, “Who Is Sane? Who Is Mad? Norman Mayer and the Missile X,” [FE #311, Winter 1982–83 (available from FE Books for \$2)].

7. *The New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 1996.

8. Robert Wright, “The Evolution of Despair,” *Time*, August 28, 1995. Of course, we should not forget that the definition of sanity and insanity is a complex question of power, representation and consent. Modern civilization’s medicalization and sordid treatment of psychic difference is one more measure of our alienation. Many expressions of what we now tend to consider madness should have a place, as there seems to be in some cultures, to play a legitimate role in the spectrum of human expression and experience.

9. See John Zerzan, “Whose Unabomber?” from AAA, PO Box 11331, Eugene, OR 97440.

10. “Are You the Unabomber? Or You? Or You? Or You?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 31, 1995.

11. This flyer is probably also available from AAA, PO Box 11331, Eugene, OR 97440. See also “Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1996. While no one at the *Fifth Estate* was willing to speak to the media, that doesn’t automatically invalidate Zerzan’s decision to speak to the *Times* and several radio stations—despite his well-known explicit rejection of all compromise and his notion of “the drastic as the minimum response toward health.” (*Future Primitive and Other Essays* [New York and Columbia: Autonomedia/Anarchy, 1994], p. 137) In an open letter distributed to anarchists, he answered those who criticized him for speaking to the press by questioning “deliberate self-marginalization [that tries] to put forth ideas to change an insane world while at the same time disdaining all contact with that world.” He adds, “Is it manipulative to want to break out of our tiny ghetto and connect with universally suffering human beings?” (The letter is probably available from the above PO Box.) Actually, in the interview with the *Times*, Zerzan comes off as honest, thoughtful and unpretentious. His reasoning for speaking to the media suggests that however complex and ambiguous the problem of addressing others through mass society’s means, the spectacle is never absolutely hegemonic, and, given how terrible the

times are, it might make sense to try. That our situation is dire does not automatically tell us which desperate measures might therefore be appropriate. Apparently, even intransigence may sometimes require compromise. The relationship between principles and strategies is not clear cut.

12. Zerzan criticizes the Unabomber text for its excessive emphasis on industrialism; actually, he argues, agriculture is a deeper, far more serious impediment to freedom. Will someone now start bombing soybean farmers? No more tofu?

13. According to his interview in the April 26, 1996 *Times*, he tried to communicate with his brother when he began to develop suspicions, but was rebuffed.

14. See the extensive coverage in the May 26, 1996 *Times*.

15. The letter was printed in *The New York Times*, April 26, 1995.

16. See the particularly smug and stupid article by Bob Ickes, "Die, Computer, Die!" in the July 24, 1995 issue of *New York*. For an inane argument between Sale and Kelly, packaged in Kelly's favor, of course, see "Return of the Luddites," in the June 1995 *Wired*.

17. *Rebels Against the Future* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995) provides a vivid account of the luddite revolt, and a sloppy, theoretically deficient discussion of the history of technological discourse and the recent emergence of revolt against mass technics.

18. Kirkpatrick Sale, "Unabomber's Secret Treatise: Is There Method In His Madness?" (*The Nation*, September 25, 1995).

19. A certain primitivist catastrophism can be found among some deep ecologists, anarchists and others, expressed for example by Christopher Manes' idea, in his *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), that "the time to make the choice between the natural and cultural world has come" (p. 248), whatever that conundrum is supposed to mean. For a discussion and critique of ecological catastrophism, see George Bradford, "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology," and related essays, in *FE #331*, Spring 1989.

20. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1962, 1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 137.

21. *The New York Times* reports that the country is currently witnessing "a proliferation of a sort of garden variety bomber," leading to arrests of mostly white suburbanites, for example, in Georgia, Arizona and Washington State. Bombings and attempted bombings increased by more than 50 percent in the last five years, and have nearly tripled over the last decade. "The number of criminal explosions and attempts went from 1,103 in 1985 to 3,163 in 1994," according to the article. See "Terrorism Now Going Homespun As Bombings in the U.S. Spread," August 25, 1996.

22. See "The Unabomb Case Is Linked to Antiwar Tumult on U.S. Campuses in 1960s," in the June 1, 1996 *New York Times*.

23. Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power: The Myth of the Machine Volume II* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 192–3, 284.

24. Quoted in *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre*, by Paul Avrich (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) p. 140.

25. What, indeed, is sanity and what is insanity at this late day? In his post-apocalyptic satire *Galapagos* (1985), Kurt Vonnegut writes of the late twentieth century that "human brains back then had such copious and irresponsible generators of suggestions as to what might be done with life, that they made acting for the benefit of future generations seem one of many arbitrary games which might be played by narrow enthusiasts—like poker or polo or the bond market, or the writing of science-fiction novels.

"More and more people back then ... had found ensuring the survival of the human race a total bore.

"it was a lot more fun, so to speak, to hit and hit a tennis ball."

26. The text's tedious, simplistically psychologistic critique of "leftism"—by which is meant any reform or humanist impulse, or notion of universalism, or altruistic act of solidarity with the suffering or oppression of those other than oneself or one's closest cohort—is an example of the dubious monadic individualism of the Unabomber. Leftism, he warns, with its identification with victims, its "moralistic tone," its willingness to work in the interests

of others, and its tendency to oppose violence and competition, is “inconsistent with wild nature,” which must therefore be competitive, violent, selfish and without moral significance. Strangely, the terrorist cell FC that the text identifies as its authors evokes the worst kind of clandestine, authoritarian, leftist group.

27. Quoted in *Lewis Mumford: A Life*, by Donald Miller (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 541, 422.

28. Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, pp. 433, 377, 330.

29. *The Tao of Politics*, *ibid.*, p. 50.

Sidebar: We Are The Veal?

FIFTH ESTATE, Vol. 31 No. 2 (Whole Number 348), Fall 1996, page 7

It's rare when supporters of a well-known candidate for political office prepare in advance for his anticipated loss. But even prior to the November election, Unapack, the group sponsoring the Unabomber presidential write-in campaign, planned to issue bumper stickers stating, “Don't Blame Me, I Voted For the Unabomber.” Undeterred by expected defeat, Unapack distributed thousands of stickers, leaflets, a manifesto of their own, and even erected billboards urging write-in votes for their candidate. Their seemingly whimsical slogans, “Hey, C'mon...Dare to be perky!” and “We are the veal?” have a serious intent.

Unapack spokespeople say they have no illusions about the electoral process: “The campaign is a serious election effort to undermine the election process itself...Votes for the Unabomber can't be rationalized or mediated or explained away. They are an expression of rage, not apathy, of utter contempt for the brutality and indifference of our 'civilized' society.

“Four hundred years ago, our suburbs and office parks were wilderness, forest and plains, mountains and rivers, teeming with an unimaginable diversity of life. Industrial society crushed out that diversity, and replaced it with monoculture: mile after mile of corn fields, each plant a genetically perfect copy; identical houses and cars in endless rows, one size fits all, even people standardized and stacked on top of one another like cans of beer.

“What native society ever built factory farms, or robotic slaughterhouses? What makes us so different from our veal cows, force-fed and chained to their pens, unable to take a single step? Who were the real savages? A vote for the Unabomber is a vote for the chaos of freedom, a vote for Wild Nature: Dare to join the barbarians at the gates. Contact Unapack at POB 120494, Boston MA 02112.

FE Note: We maintain our anti-electoral position.

Quotations included in print article

“I do not believe that ever since the world was created there has been witnessed such lamentation and wailing of people, accompanied by so great terror...for us wretched mortals there avails not any flight, since this monster when advancing slowly far exceeds the speed of the swiftest course. I know not what to say or do, for everywhere I seem to find myself swimming with bent head within the mighty throat and remaining indistinguishable in death, buried within the huge belly.”

— Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

“The individual who lives in the technical milieu knows very well that there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself.”

— Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (1964)

“When an ideology conveys such universal meanings and commands such obedience, it has become, in fact, a religion ...[E]ngaged by a conscious mission—that of spreading the empire by machine—the demands of mechanical progress had the effect of a divine ordinance, sacrilegious to challenge, impossible to disobey.”

— Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power* (1970)

“Technology has gotten the human race into a fix from which there is not likely to be an easy escape...Whatever else may be the case, it is certain that technology is creating a new physical and social environment radically different from the spectrum of environments to which natural selection has adapted the human race physically and psychologically. If man is not adjusted to this new environment by being artificially re-engineered, then he will be adapted to it through a long and painful process of natural selection.. It would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences.”

— F C (1995)

fifth Estate

T. Fulano (David Watson)
The Unabomber and the Future of Industrial Society
1996

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