

The Unabomber And The Left

His loony politics of nature and nostalgia can burn both
liberals and conservatives

Joe Klein

1996-04-22

A YEAR AGO, THERE WAS A great, gaseous harrumphing from the left, an effort to link familiar conservative figures like Rush and Newt with the loonies who blew up the Oklahoma City federal building. Much of this was hallucinatory extrapolation. But some of it made sense. The National Rifle Association was attempting to raise money by calling federal agents "ackbooted thugs." G. Gordon Liddy was expounding on the need for "head shots." And there was, moreover, an irresponsibly giddy antigovernment fervor among the more sophomoric House freshmen (and a messianic hubris among their leaders). In retrospect, the harrumphing may have had an effect. The Republican Revolution lost steam almost immediately; the Clinton comeback began. The "Contract With America" was obliterated along with the federal building.

All of which came to mind last week as we experienced the absence of a great, gaseous harrumphing from the right – practically no effort to link familiar liberal figures with the Harvard elitist accused of being the Unabomber. Why not? I considered, and quickly dismissed, the possibility that the right was simply more civil or responsible than the left. Of course it was always possible that the connections in this case were too abstruse: Al Gore may be a tree-hugger, but he's also a techno-nerd – hardly a Unabomber soulmate (and those who do share the Unabomber's Zeitgeist, the assorted neo-Luddites – followers of the 19th-century English weavers who smashed their power looms – were too obscure to pillory). There was also the fact that the Unabomber himself unleashed a scathing, and rather delightful, attack on the "over-socialized" left in his manifesto. He was miffed that liberals were too guilt-ridden, comfort-addled and wussified to authenticate themselves by "satisfy[ing] their biological needs AUTONOMOUSLY." That is, by spending their days hunting wittle wabbits for food. Indeed, the Unabomber seemed as much (Elmer) Fuddite as neo-Luddite.

Still, the terrorist's essential left-wing orientation seems indisputable. In *The Nation* last year, Kirkpatrick Sale – a neo-Luddite neo-leader – embraced him (after suitable hand-wringing over the violence): "Unless [the Unabomber's] message is somehow heeded . . . we are truly a doomed society hurtling toward a catastrophic breakdown." Well, I'm not sure Dick Gephardt or Ted Kennedy would go along with that. But, again: the orientation tracks. The Unabomber's economic pessimism and rhetorical emphasis on salvation through self-actualization are extreme versions of what has passed for conventional wisdom on the postmodern left. Especially the romanticization of the primitive, the aggrandizement of "natural" urges – and the perpetual aura of impending disaster. It was Gephardt, after all, who declared that 1988 was "midnight in America." It is Kennedy who calls the current economic prosperity a "Quiet Depression."

This is something new, this darkness. Marxism, the intellectual backbone of the left during the industrial era, was brutally sunny. Marx offered certainty: history was a science, with laws that could predict the future. Progress was science made manifest, an unalloyed good. Marxists were progressives. They adored assembly lines, swooned over smokestacks. (The remnants of the old left still do, which makes them reactionaries now, too.) The mass – the proletariat – was sanctified, not the individual. And the proletariat was always marching, fearlessly, into the future.

Not anymore. Now, we are told, the proletariat is terrified. Technological "progress" will bring despair, unemployment and ecological ruin. "The regulation of our lives by large organizations is necessary for the functioning of industrial- technical society," the Unabomber writes, using words that could easily have come from Ralph Nader, or any number of left-pessimist academics. "The result is a sense of powerlessness on the part of the average person." A full-service maniac, he offers an alternative: "The positive ideal we propose is Nature."

You remember Nature. It was big before Marx. The pursuit of "Nature," usually at the expense of the established order, has been a perennial touchstone for rebels of all ideological flavors. Nature is the opposite of History: it sanctifies the individual, not the mass. It is about liberation from authority, a return to a simpler, more primitive time. In "Citizens," a history of the French Revolution, Simon Schama writes: "Their faith was in the possibility of a collective moral and political revolution in which the innocence of childhood might be preserved into adulthood." In "Rites of Spring," a history of Germany's 20th-century debacle, Modris Eksteins notes the "fascination with primitivism" among the elites before World War I and the widespread veneration of Turnvater Jahn, a physical-exercise pioneer who "lived in a cave and later . . . walked the streets of Berlin dressed in a bear skin."

The headlong pursuit of "Nature" is what happens when prosperous societies grow indolent and parochial, and begin to indulge themselves. It is the politics of nostalgia and fetishism. Happily, most Americans seem immune to it. Oh, we gripe a lot: we want more security, and less intrusion from the government, and microwave ovens that cook more evenly. But there is also a fundamental conservatism that mistrusts revolutionary blather. Postmodern Democrats, perpetually bleak and positing doom, seem chronically out of sync with this (in 1992, Clinton succeeded because he posited doom while smiling). Republicans may have found, this past year, that when you play with incendiary rhetoric – especially the oxymoronic excesses of a conservative "revolution" – you can get burned. Which may be why, a year after Oklahoma City, conservatives didn't return the favor: the heat of the Unabomber's rhetoric was too familiar for comfort.

The Ted K Archive

Joe Klein

The Unabomber And The Left

His loony politics of nature and nostalgia can burn both liberals and conservatives
1996-04-22

Archive.org. Newsweek (International, Atlantic Edition) 1996-04-22: Volume 127,
Issue 17.

www.thetedkarchive.com