

Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber

Kenneth B. Noble

May 7, 1995

When newspapers last week published a letter from the elusive serial bomber in the Unabom case, at least one person – a rumpled, middle-aged man who lives here in Eugene – found some measure of tempered satisfaction in all the attention given the writer’s pro-anarchist views.

”It’s kind of unfortunate that it depends on spectacular violence by somebody, or whoever it is, to get it into print,” said that man, John Zerzan, a leading pamphleteer and self-described anarchist and technophobe who has become a guru of sorts for anti-technology leftists. ”That’s not the best way to do it. But I really feel that we’re getting to the point – and perhaps this is wishful thinking – that these ideas are about to burst on the scene.”

The unidentified bomber has long baffled investigators trying to get to the bottom of 16 package-bomb attacks that have killed 3 people and wounded 22 in the last 17 years. But just before his most recent attack, which killed a timber industry executive in Sacramento, Calif., on April 24, he left a number of intriguing leads, in letters that described his hatred of technology and his desire for an anarchist world.

”He’s describing his actions and motives for the first time in 17 years,” Jim Freeman, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s San Francisco office, said of the letters, one of which was mailed to The New York Times four days before the most recent blast and was subsequently published by The Times and other newspapers.

Now investigators, who had been looking at extremist groups of all types in their search for clues, have narrowed their focus to the anarchist movement, a small and obscure network of intellectuals, labor organizers and political idealists who share a darkly apocalyptic view of Western civilization.

No one appears to know how big or far-flung that network is – Mr. Zerzan himself says he does not know – but Oregon and Northern California, dotted by a number of anarchist bookstores and reading rooms, are believed to be its center.

What is clear is that for some time Mr. Zerzan (pronounced zer-ZAN), an unpretentious and faintly melancholic man of 51, has been a bit of an idol within the movement, especially among those who see themselves as enemies of the microprocessor and its offspring.

Some anarchists, like Mr. Zerzan, call themselves simply that – anarchists. Others see themselves as ”neo-Luddites,” successors of the early-19th-century British textile workers who smashed labor-saving machinery in the belief that the equipment threatened their jobs.

Mr. Zerzan himself believes that technology is by its nature a master of mankind and therefore antithetical to freedom. In an interview the other day at his small, tidy, book-lined apartment, where an old telephone and a battered black-and-white television set offered the only evidence of compromise, he said:

”There are a lot of anarchists who have no beef whatsoever with technology. They would just like to see a world in which technology serves, and so forth. Our point of view is that that’s a tremendous illusion, that the impoverishment of society and the

individual is just not going to be changed with modern technology. That's right at the heart of what is so chronically wrong with the fabric of society."

The serial bomber expressed a similar ideal in his letter to *The Times*, postmarked in Oakland, Calif., on April 20. "We feel that just now the time is ripe for the presentation of anti-industrial ideas," wrote the bomber, whom the authorities believe to be acting alone despite his use of the first-person plural.

Mr. Zerzan, who is not a suspect in the case and says he has no idea who the bomber is, calls the letter "a pretty thoroughgoing critique."

Over the years, Mr. Zerzan's ruminations have roamed eclectically among subjects like television, advertising, consumerism and technological innovation. His two collections of essays, "Elements of Refusal" and "Future Primitive," are regarded among anarchists and technophobes as underground classics.

In a recent issue of *Anarchy*, a quarterly published in New York, an admiring Paul Z. Simons, contributing editor, said "Elements of Refusal" was "sufficient to make you want to kill your landlord, boss, TV, alarm clock, Oxford English Dictionary, an art museum curator and the local horticulturist."

"He tore into just about every founding principle of civilization," Mr. Simons wrote, "with the gusto of a starving pit bull on a side of beef."

Kirkpatrick Sale, an author who has written extensively and skeptically about technology and who describes himself as "a great admirer of Zerzan," said he would not be surprised if Mr. Zerzan was among those the bomber had in mind when he referred in his letter to anarchists and radical environmentalism.

"I'm sure for many people in this admittedly small world" Mr. Zerzan "has been an important voice for their ideas," said Mr. Sale.

"My politics," Mr. Zerzan said, "is an undoing of technology. My vision of politics is to go back to a place where there is no division of labor."

And of the bomber's letter, he added: "I have a sense that this guy is somewhat on that track. And the world would be unrecognizable if we did that."

Asked how he would achieve his "vision," Mr. Zerzan said: "That's the big problem. I could say what I envision, but I certainly would not like to put out any blueprints," largely because he is not sure what such a blueprint should entail.

This John Zerzan is a long haul from the young undergraduate who in the late 1960's thought he would become a college professor and majored in political science at Stanford University – "a giant waste of time," he says now. He also received a master's degree in history at San Francisco State and spent three years in a Ph.D. program at the University of Southern California, although he never got a doctorate.

After several years working as a labor advocate in San Francisco, he moved in the early 1980's to Eugene, mostly because living was cheaper here, and he could study, read and write.

Mr. Zerzan, a bachelor who lives alone, said that since moving here, "in terms of income I do mostly child care and yard work to survive; I don't get any money from

books, and I probably won't ever get any money from the books," since most of his work is published by nonprofit collectives.

His life has been pared to what he considers the bare essentials. Naturally he does not own a computer. "Not only am I philosophically against that whole business," he said, "but to me writing takes a pencil and a piece of paper. I just don't understand how a machine helps you think."

Asked about his owning a television set, he threw up his hands in mock embarrassment. "Like other people," he said, "I have to be narcotized."

The Ted K Archive

Kenneth B. Noble
Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber
May 7, 1995

The New York Times, May 7, 1995, Section 1, Page 24. <nytimes.com/1995/05/07/us/prominent-anarchist-finds-unsought-ally-in-serial-bomber.html>

www.thetedkarchive.com