

Unabomber's Secret Treatise

Is There Method In His Madness?

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The central point the Unabomber is trying to make—that “the industrial-technological system” in which we live is a social, psychological and environmental “disaster for the human race”—is absolutely crucial for the American public to understand and ought to be on the forefront of the nation’s political agenda.

I say this, of course, as a partisan. The Unabomber stands in a long line of anti-technology critics where I myself have stood, and his general arguments against industrial society and its consequences are quite similar to those I have recently put forth in a book on the people who might be said to have begun this tradition, the Luddites. Along with a number of people today who might be called neo-Luddites—Jerry Mander, Chellis Glendinning, Jeremy Rifkin, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Dave Foreman, Langdon Winner, Stephanie Mills and John Zerzan among them—the Unabomber and I share a great many views about the pernicious effect of the Industrial Revolution, the evils of modern technologies, the stifling effect of mass society, the vast extent of suffering in a machine-dominated world and the inevitability of social and environmental catastrophe if the industrial system goes on unchecked.

We disagree, to be sure, about what is to be done about all this and the means by which to achieve it. In the course of his career, at least as the F.B.I. has reconstructed it, the Unabomber has carried out sixteen bombings, killing three people and injuring twenty-three others, apparently choosing targets in some way connected to modern technology—a technological institute at Northwestern University, the University of Utah business school, a Salt Lake City computer store, a University of California geneticist, and a Yale computer scientist, among others—to try to “propagate anti-industrial ideas and give encouragement to those who hate the industrial system.” That strikes me as simple madness. Maiming and killing people does not normally propagate ideas, and in this case no one knew what ideas were in the Unabomber’s mind until he started writing letters this past year and then delivered his treatise in June. As for getting the message across, the only message that anyone got for sixteen years was that some nut was attacking people associated with universities and computers (hence the F.B.I.’s tag, Unabomber).¹

“Industrial Society and Its Future” is the modest-enough title, and it is labeled as “by FC,” which the author describes as a “terrorist group” though there is no sign from the writing style here that more than one person is behind it, and the F.B.I. believes that the Unabomber is acting alone. (The fact that he has escaped detection for seventeen years—especially during this past year, when he has become the target of the largest manhunt in the agency’s history—would tend to support that.) “FC” is variously cited as the initials for “Freedom Club” or “Freedom Collective,” although it is popularly thought to stand for a vulgar comment about computers; it is not explained in his text.

¹ The “a” stands for “airline” because one early target was an airline executive, but I remain unconvinced that this was a genuine Unabomber victim. I’d render him “Unibomber,” considering nine of the sixteen bombs were aimed at university targets or professors.

The sixty-six pages that follow begin with two pages of trivial typo corrections, showing the kind of fastidiousness one might expect from a craftsman whose bombs the F.B.I. has described as "meticulously" constructed; then come fifty-six pages of argument divided into twenty-four subtitled sections and 232 numbered paragraphs; and it all ends with thirty-six footnotes, mostly qualifying statements in the text. That form, plus the leaden language and stilted diction, the fondness for sociological jargon and psychobabble, and the repeated use of "we argue that" and "we now discuss" and the like, make it certain that this was written by someone whose writing style, and probably whole intellectual development, was arrested in college.

The F.B.I. has said that it believes he was a student of the history of science, but on the evidence here he was a social psychology major with a minor in sociology, and he shows all the distressing hallmarks of the worst of that academic breed. He spends twelve pages, for example, on a strange and somewhat simplistic explanation of "something that we will call the power process," consisting of four elements "we call goal, effort and attainment of goal," plus "autonomy," all in an effort to explain why people today are unhappy and frustrated. Only someone trapped in the social sciences would talk that way.

Various professor types have been quoted in the papers saying how "bright" this fellow must be, but the arguments here are never very original and the line of reasoning is often quite convoluted. He has read a lot in certain areas—no poetry, though, I'll bet—and has thought a lot about the particular things that concern him, but aside from a few flashes there is no suggestion of anything more than a routine mind and a dutiful allegiance to some out-of-the-ordinary critics of modern society. I'm sure he makes good bombs, but grading him on his intellect I wouldn't give him more than a C+. I venture to say he didn't make it to his senior year.

The opus isn't helped by the fact that at least a third of it is essentially irrelevant, social-psych padding and scholarly back-and-forthing, one-hand-and-the-othering. Two long sections attacking "modern leftism" and "leftish" academics have nothing to do with his thesis, and I suspect they are offered because he had a bad time with certain sectarian groups in the early 1970s—no surprise—and with certain progress-minded, pro-technology Marxists he met in the academy.² Any good editor would have cut it.

But as near as I can fathom it after three careful readings, the Unabomber's argument would seem to be this:

"Industrial-technological society" has succeeded to the point where, because of its size and complexity, it has constricted human freedom, meaning one's power to "control the circumstances of one's own life." Such freedoms as we do have are those permitted by the system consistent with its own ends—economic freedom to consume, press

² The F.B.I. has leaked the idea that the Unabomber is really Leo Frederick Burt, one of the "New Year's Gang" that bombed the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin in August 1970 and who has been a fugitive ever since. If so, he probably was steeped beyond human endurance in the kind of fractious sectarian stews aboiling in those days and comes by his dislike of what he thinks is leftism legitimately.

freedom to expose inefficiency and corruption—and do not in fact give individuals or groups true power, in the same sense that they have control over satisfying “life-and-death issues of one’s existence: food, clothing, shelter and defense.” “Today people live more by virtue of what the system does FOR them or TO them than by virtue of what they do for themselves... Modern man is strapped down by a network of rules and regulations, and his fate depends on the actions of persons remote from him whose decisions he cannot influence.”

Industrial society must perform this way in order to succeed—“The system has to regulate human behavior closely in order to function”—and cannot be reformed to work differently. “Changes large enough to make a lasting difference in favor of freedom would not be initiated because it would be realized that they would gravely disrupt the system.”

Industrial society must increasingly work to constrict freedom and control behavior since “technology advances with great rapidity” and on many fronts: “crowding, rules and regulations, increasing dependence of individuals on large organizations, propaganda and other psychological techniques, genetic engineering, invasion of privacy through surveillance devices and computers, etc.”³

But the problem of “control over human behavior” continues to bedevil this society, and right now “the system is currently engaged in a desperate struggle to overcome certain problems that threaten its survival,” primarily social (the “growing numbers” of “rebels,” “dropouts and resisters”) but also economic and environmental. “If the system succeeds in acquiring sufficient control over human behavior quickly enough, it will probably survive. Otherwise it will break down. We think the issue will most likely be resolved within the next several decades, say 40 to 100 years.”

Therefore, the task of those who oppose the industrial system is to advance that breakdown by promoting “social stress and instability in industrial society,” which presumably includes bombing, and by developing and propagating “an ideology that opposes technology,” one that puts forth the “counter-ideal” of nature “in order to gain enthusiastic support.” Thus, when the system becomes sufficiently stressed and unstable, a “revolution against technology may be possible.”

Now, this is a reasonable enough argument—the Unabomber is not irrational, whatever else you can say about him—and I think it is even to some extent persuasive. There is nothing wild-eyed or rabble-rousing about it (it could actually use a lot more Paine-ist fomentation and furor) and the points are most often buttressed with careful arguments and examples—though nowhere, interestingly, a single statistic. It is too slow, too plodding, too repetitive; but you have to say its case is made in a competent, if labored, fashion.

³ Oddly, the Unabomber’s antipathy toward technology is more in the abstract than the particular. He actually likes certain technologies—“electricity, indoor plumbing, rapid long-distance communications...how could one argue against any of these things?”—and argues that revolutionaries should use “some modern technology.”

His critique of industrial society today is most telling, I think, and reads as if he'd spent a lot of time defending it in the back rooms of bars. (Excerpts presented in the Times and the Post for some reason concentrate on the treatise's weaker and tangential early parts and give only limited attention to this central message.) Just picking at random, I find these examples:

The system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs. Instead, it is human behavior that has to be modified to fit the needs of the system. This has nothing to do with the political or social ideology that may pretend to guide the technological system. It is not the fault of capitalism and it is not the fault of socialism. It is the fault of technology, because the system is guided not by ideology but by technical necessity.

If the use of a new item of technology is INITIALLY optional, it does not necessarily REMAIN optional, because new technology tends to change society in such a way that it becomes difficult or impossible for an individual to function without using that technology... Something like this seems to have happened already with one of our society's most important psychological tools for enabling people to reduce (or at least temporarily escape from) stress, namely, mass entertainment. Our use of mass entertainment is "optional"...yet mass entertainment is a means of escape and stress-reduction on which most of us have become dependent.

The technophiles are hopelessly naive (or self-deceiving) in their understanding of social problems. They are unaware of (or choose to ignore) the fact that when large changes, even seemingly beneficial ones, are introduced into a society, they lead to a long sequence of other changes, most of which are difficult to predict... In fact, ever since the industrial revolution technology has been creating new problems for society far more rapidly than it has been solving old ones. Not inspired, but thoughtful, perceptive enough, when abstracted from its labored context.

What's surprising about all this, though, is that it reads as if the Unabomber thinks he's the first person who ever worked out such ideas. It is hard to believe, but he seems woefully ignorant of the long Luddistic strain in Western thought going back at least to William Blake and Mary Shelley, and he does not once cite any of the great modern critics of technology such as Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Paul Goodman, Max Weber, E.F. Schumacher or Rachel Carson, nor any of the contemporary laborers in this vineyard. In one of his letters to the Times he does say that "anyone who will read the anarchist and radical environmentalist journals will see that opposition to the industrial-technological system is widespread and growing," so he must know something about the current critics, although he does not mention specific articles or authors or particular periodicals. (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, but he does not name it anywhere.)

That failure to ground himself in the Luddistic tradition, where both utopian and dystopian models proliferate, may be the reason that the Unabomber is so weak on envisioning the future, particularly the kind of revolution he seems to want.

I would agree with the Unabomber's general position that "to make a lasting change in the direction of development of any important aspect of a society, reform is insufficient," and I might even agree that in certain circumstances therefore "revolution is necessary." But I can't figure out at all what kind of revolution this is to be. He says that "a revolution does not necessarily involve an armed uprising or the overthrow of a government," a conviction he is so certain of he repeats it twice more, adding that "it may or may not involve physical violence," and in two footnotes he suggests that it might be "somewhat gradual or piecemeal" and might "consist only of a massive change of attitudes toward technology resulting in a relatively gradual and painless disintegration of the industrial system."

This is a somewhat peculiar position for a man who has been killing and injuring people in service to his dream of a new society, and I'm not sure what he thinks revolutions are or how they are achieved. If he has in mind something more like the Industrial Revolution or the Copernican revolution, he doesn't suggest how that might come about, and the sorts of strategies he ends up advocating—promoting social instability, destroying and wrecking "the system," seeing "its remnants...smashed beyond repair"—sound an awful lot like a revolution with a good deal of violence. He even suggests at one point that the models are the French and Russian revolutions, both pretty bloody affairs.

The whole question of violence indeed is confused in the Unabomber's mind, oddly enough after seventeen years during which he must have been thinking about it a little. He never once addresses the reasons for his own string of bombings or explains what he thinks he has been accomplishing, other than to say that this was the way to have "some chance of making a lasting impression." He is critical of "leftists" who commit violence, because it is only "a form of 'liberation'<FU10>" they justify "in terms of mainstream values...fighting against racism or the like," and later is critical of leftists because they are "against competition and against violence." His revolution is not necessarily to be violent, yet he never confronts the idea of a nonviolent revolution or how it would be strategically carried out.

The one task of revolutionaries the Unabomber is clear about is the business of producing an anti-technology "ideology," although he doesn't anywhere concern himself with the hard business of saying what that would consist of. But it doesn't much matter to him, since the primary purpose of this ideology is "to create a core of people who will be opposed to the industrial system on a rational, thought-out basis," an intellectual cadre who can then dish it out "in a simplified form" for the "unthinking majority" who "like to have such issues presented in simple, black-and-white terms." "History is made by active, determined minorities," you see, and "as for the majority, it will be enough to make them aware of the existence of the new ideology and remind them of it frequently." Lenin couldn't have put it better.

The Unabomber's idea of a systemic breakdown is, I think, more plausible than his concept of revolution; one could see how, as the system was breaking down of its own weight and incompetence, unable to manage the problems its technology creates,

this might be "helped along by revolutionaries." Just how the breakdown would come about is not spelled out. The Unabomber gives only a passing glance to the multiple environmental disasters the system is producing for itself and never mentions the likelihood, as chaos theory predicts, that the complex industrial house of cards will not hold. At least he does posit a "time of troubles" after which the human race would be "given a new chance."

I should note that the Unabomber, on the evidence here, does not have any special vision of an ecologically based future, as the newspapers have suggested. Indeed, he is no environmentalist, and I'd say he has only the faintest grasp of the principles of ecology. It's true that he refers to nature at one point—"That is, WILD nature!"—as a "positive ideal," but this is almost entirely cynical, nature as a concept that he figures will be useful in propaganda terms because it is "the opposite of technology," because "most people will agree that nature is beautiful" and because "in many people, nature inspires the kind of reverence that is associated with religion." He shows no real understanding of the role of technology in enabling industrial society not only to exploit nature but to pass that off as legitimate, and not one individual environmental problem is addressed here, except overpopulation. (And on that one the Unabomber, though acknowledging that it produces overcrowding and stress, indicates no awareness of its awful consequences for all the other species of the world, whose endangerment and extinctions we are causing by our exploding numbers, or for the natural systems of the world, whose degradation we are causing by our exploding consumption.)

It's clear enough that the Unabomber counts "radical environmentalists" as among those rightly opposing technology, and his use of wood in some of his bombs and his killing of a timber lobbyist in California suggests a further affinity. But he indicates no sympathy for the kind of biocentric "deep ecology" and bioregionalism espoused by most of them, and his concerns are exclusively anthropocentric, his appreciation of other species and natural systems nil. He also mocks those who believe in the "Gaia theory" of a living earth, common in many environmental groups: "Do its adherents REALLY believe in it or are they just play-acting?"

In short, it feels to me that his appeal to nature is entirely utilitarian (like adding another little mechanism to your bomb to make sure it works) rather than a heartfelt passion, of which he seems to have very few in any case.

But if nature does not inspire his vision of the future, it is hard to tell what does. Presumably he would want, as a self-described anarchist, some kind of world where "people live and work as INDIVIDUALS and SMALL GROUPS," using "small-scale technology...that can be used by small-scale communities without outside assistance." But he nowhere bothers to hint at how this future society would operate (other than to say it would burn all technical books), nor does he refer to any in the long line of anarcho-communal writers from Kropotkin to Bookchin who have given a great deal of thought to the configurations of such a society.

It's true that the Unabomber offers the defense at one point that "a new kind of society cannot be designed on paper" and "when revolutionaries or utopians set up a

new kind of society, it never works out as planned.” That gives him leeway to avoid discussing what kind of world he wants (even in a three-page section called “THE FUTURE”); unfortunately, it also leaves a gaping hole in his treatise. Even those who agree that the industrial system should be torn down will want to get some idea of what is supposed to replace it before they are moved to endorse the cause, much less become the revolutionaries the Unabomber wants.

So, in sum, what are we to make of this strange document? So important to its author that he is prepared to kill people (even though he has written that he is “getting tired of making bombs”) to get it published in a major newspaper. So embarrassing to those newspapers that they don’t know what to do with it.

It is the statement of a rational and serious man, deeply committed to his cause, who has given a great deal of thought to his work and a great deal of time to this expression of it. He is prescient and clear about the nature of the society we live in, what its purposes and methods are, and how it uses its array of technologies to serve them; he understands the misery and anxiety and constriction this creates for the individual and the wider dangers it poses for society and the earth. He truly believes that a campaign of social disorder led by misfits, rebels, dropouts and saboteurs (and presumably terrorists), coupled with the concerted propaganda work of a dedicated intellectual elite, has a chance to cause or hasten the breakdown of industrial society, and this motivates him in his grisly work.

The document is also the product of a limited and tunnel-visioned man, with a careful and dogged but somewhat incoherent mind, filled with a catalogue of longstanding prejudices and hatreds, academically trained, occasionally inventive, purposeful and humorless. He is amoral, not to say coldblooded, about acts of terrorism, which are regarded as an effective tactic in service to the larger cause. He is convinced enough in his cause to have produced this long justification for it, complete with numerous bold assertions and his own “principles of history,” but he repeatedly finds qualifications and reservations and indeed ends up calling the article no more “than a crude approximation to the truth,” as if to suggest that somewhere within he is not quite confident

All in all, I think despite its flaws it is a document worth publishing, and not only because that could presumably help stop the killing. There is a crucial message at the core of it for those with fortitude enough to get through it, and unless that message is somehow heeded and acted on we are truly a doomed society hurtling toward a catastrophic breakdown.

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