

The Unabomber as Student of Science and Technology?

Richard Rogers

1995

When The Washington Post and The New York Times finally met the unabomber's demand and The Post published his neo-Luddite manifesto in a special supplement on 19 September, it also was made available on Time Warner's "pathfinder" site on the World Wide Web. Printed later that same week in the Oakland Tribune because of overwhelming regional demand, the document, entitled "Industrial Society and Its Future", calls for the destruction of the "economic and technological basis of the present society" and a return to "wild nature". The manifesto may be of more than passing interest to scholars of science and technology, if only for the connection the American FBI suspects between the history and sociology of science and technology and the views espoused by the serial bomber.

According to a New York Times article of 5 August, the bomber's "35,000 word manifesto (...) not only corroborated that interest [in the history of science] but also gave the bureau insight into the issues that concerned the bomber, the depth of his reading and the authors he respected". The NYT article goes on to explain how that "radical milieu seems to have been the breeding ground for the bomber" and points to the likes of Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul and Theodore Roszack as possible figures of inspiration. The suppositions in the article arose from the visit the FBI paid to the joint meeting of the Society for the Social Study of Science and the History of Science Society in New Orleans earlier this year. The FBI invited selected scholars to read the manuscript for clues as to the bomber's identity and even went so far as to pour over the membership records of both societies.

The bomber or group of bombers, who go by the name of "FC" or "Freedom Club", has sent or planted 16 bombs intermittently since 1978. Bombs have been placed in common areas at universities and have been posted to airlines, engineers and scientists, including academics at Vanderbilt, Northwestern, Yale, Berkeley, the University of Michigan and the University of Utah Business School. The unabomber's pipe and newer letter bombs, concealed in handcrafted wooden boxes and occasionally mailed under false return addresses from American universities, recently have claimed the lives of a Young & Rubicam advertising executive in New Jersey and the president of California Forestry Association, described in the press as a timber lobbyist. In 1985 a computer rental store employee in Sacramento, California was the first to be killed by an FC bomb, disguised as a road hazard. Over the years 23 others have been maimed or wounded in the explosions. FC, who first claimed responsibility for the bombings in a letter to the San Francisco Examiner in 1985, this year offered to discontinue the campaign in exchange for publication of the manuscript in The New York Times or The Washington Post. At the behest of the FBI and the federal Attorney General's office, The Post decided to publish the manifesto in full in the interest of public safety. The FBI supposedly has launched its largest manhunt in history.

At least two scholars of science and technology have read and published on the contents of the manuscript. Daniel J. Kevles (in The New Yorker) and Kirkpatrick Sale (in The Nation) each in his own way have endeavored to distance the intellectual pursuits of science and technology scholars from those of the bomber. In "E Pluribus

Unabomber” Kevles places the bomber’s passions in the broader, popular context. Kevles writes that not only has technology’s promise soured for an increasingly larger audience but the “critique of high-technology appeals to almost all of us in one way or another”. The unabomber’s romance of the pre-industrial past, he concludes, however, is not shared by the public at large, and few would wish to swap their present lifestyles for a small, autonomous communalism endorsed in the manifesto.

Kirkpatrick Sale, who, unlike Kevles, had read the entire manuscript before going to print, plunges deeper in his critique, at once expressing sympathy for FC’s “persuasive” case and criticizing his lack of originality and “convoluted reasoning”. The manuscript’s argument, which Sale also recounts, can be summarized more or less as follows. Modern man’s freedom has been constrained by the breadth and scope of the techno-economic system. The widespread frustration apparent in Western civilization owes to man’s inability to provide his material necessities for himself, satisfy his innate, psychological needs and control his own destiny. The decisions which affect our lives are taken at such a remote distance by so few that individuals and small groups have very little input in and control over the outcomes. Man has lost his personal and local “autonomy”, and for solace has turned to the mass entertainment industry and useless, “surrogate activities”, as stamp-collecting, spectator sports and even science. Without these palliatives for the people, the system, which has to produce them, would collapse.

Our sorry society is currently in crisis, though, and the goal of the revolutionaries, still to be recruited, consists in “heightening the social stresses within the system (...) so that a revolution against it becomes possible”. The revolutionary strategy is to frame the future as a clear-cut choice between technology and wild nature, so as to appeal to the environmentalist strain in the masses. The bomber continues this what-is-to-be-done? line of thought in paragraph 166 by saying that the “factories should be destroyed, technical books burned, etc.”. Thus the neo-Luddite tag.

Otherwise Sale is surprised by the bomber’s lack of familiarity with the “long Luddistic strain in Western thought”, for the manuscript neither cites nor relies on (his list of) Blake, Shelley, Mumford, Ellul, Goodman, Weber, Schumacher or Carson. According to Sale, the bomber’s inspiration may have come from the Fifth Estate, a long-standing anti-technology publication out of Detroit, while the New York Times article took aim at Science for the People, the 1970s “leftist organization” based in Chicago. The FBI suspects that the bomber studied in or around Chicago and now resides in the San Francisco Bay area. But the unabomber, for his part, spends a lengthy amount of space on the vacuousness of leftism and the spinelessness of its politically correct followers within and without academia, proclaiming the prospective revolution as apolitical.

STS readers will notice only a few lines of reasoning superficially consistent with a broader introductory literature, although, significantly, the semantics are off-line as are the assumptions about the workings of science and technology. The bomber, in paragraph 18, argues that leftist philosophers “insist that everything is culturally relative” and admits that the foundations of objective reality are difficult, if not impossible, to delimit. In paragraph 69 he distinguishes between the psychological effects of

synthetic and natural risks. “Primitive” man accepted the risk of disease “stoically”, for it is natural, while modern man’s frustration and anger are a result of “MAN-MADE” threats “imposed” on him. These are the extent of any incipient, general resemblances.

The section entitled “The Motives of Scientists” does not seem to benefit directly from readings in the sociology of scientific careers and practices, current or classical. The bomber reasons that it is absurd that scientists “are motivated by ‘curiosity’”, or by any clear benefit their work could have for humanity. Scientists, as the rest of the human race, work out of a need to “go through the power process”, which earlier in the work is defined as the cycle of “goal, effort, attainment of goal” and “autonomy”. Nowhere is there a hint of the notion of a reputational structure at work within science or, say, a systemic need to construct soluble, financible problems or to recruit like-minded scientists and graduate students for a growing, competing scientific program. For that matter, the words paradigm, construct and constructivism do not appear in the text, which considering the bomber’s stances towards university “leftists” would seem to be obvious, critical starting points.

As for the bomber’s views of technology, again they reveal little familiarity with much specialized STS reading of the last decade or, patently, with any of the field’s standard truisms or bogeys. Thus, in paragraph 129, we read that “technological progress marches in only one direction; it can never be reversed”. Technologies do not liberate; they do not empower. On the contrary, technology’s linear development takes away one individual freedom after another, and thus the only recourse is revolution. To the bomber, other historical or contemporary paths of development (the word “trajectory” does appear once) are not possible. “Never forget that the human race with technology is just like an alcoholic with a barrel of wine.”

In paragraph 215, with an accompanying footnote, FC calls himself an anarchist, who opposes technology as it “makes small groups dependent on large organizations”. Pre-industrial revolution technology, or “small-scale technology”, is preferable because it is not “organization-dependent”, and it is easier to control by the more naturally emerging, autonomous communities of up to 100 people, which he advocates. Considering the bomber’s philosophy of history and view of technological progress, it is rather obvious why he feels that under the current circumstances society is not in the position to rearrange itself in a pre-industrial or scaled-down mode. So “[i]t would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences.” Apart from those inferences mentioned above, there are few scenarios concerning what those future consequences may be. Apart from the goal of eliminating modern technology, there isn’t what may be called a grand design, which admittedly would seem to be far too communist, socialist or at least planned for FC’s anti-“collectivist” leanings. Indeed, the agitators are meant to take an “empirical approach” to revolution, discarding or supplementing the premises of the manifesto as they destabilize.

The manuscript has its consumers. The Washington Post has no spare copies remaining, the demand for the manifesto, spurring The Oakland Tribune’s reprint, has been particularly strong around San Francisco, and at least one American university

lecturer, at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has gone on the record in *The Post* as saying he'll have his students study it this semester. He was quoted as saying the bomber has some of the trappings of a Henry David Thoreau. Personally, I would concentrate less on any similarities to a Thoreau and, following the bomber's lead in one of his letters, take a more contextual and empirical approach to studying the manifesto, looking more closely at certain historical and contemporary utopian and/or communal experiments in the U.S.A., reading the non-Marxist and libertarian anarchist press, and snowballing far downfield from the respectable school of thought known as social ecology, with its emphasis on freedom, autonomy, communal living, organicism, spontaneity, human scale and revolution and its disdain for the academy and managerial leftism. While the manuscript departs from this school by overgeneralizing about and seeing no future in technology as well as by not dealing explicitly with such concepts as spontaneity and organicism, nevertheless it is there that those concerned may begin to learn something of the context. Without making mistaken innuendos reminiscent of *The New York Times*, I should like the reader to consider this a passing of the baton to someone more conversant with that or another literature or milieu more relevant than STS's.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



Richard Rogers

The Unabomber as Student of Science and Technology?

1995

EASST Review, Volume 14, Issue 3, Pages 8-10. Faculty of Science.

<<https://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.114788>>

www.thetedkarchive.com