

# Yale Professor, a Unabomber Target, Takes Aim at Modern American Society

David Gelernter's book savages academe, the press, feminism,  
and the sexual revolution

Robin Wilson

September 19, 1997

The bomb that exploded in David Gelernter's office at Yale University four years ago nearly blew off the professor's right hand and severely damaged his right eye and ear. In the aftermath of the Unabomber's attack, Mr. Gelernter lay on a sofa in his darkened living room, searching for an explanation.

As he recuperated, he decided that the villain was not only the person who had sent him the mail bomb, but an American culture that took such violence in stride. In a book out this month, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber* (Free Press), the computer scientist says what happened to him was but a symptom of America's deep decline.

"The F.B.I. needed to sift the evidence in hopes of catching the criminal, as eventually it did," he writes of the serial bomber, whom authorities say is Theodore J. Kaczynski, awaiting trial in a California jail. "From my point of view, the twentieth century is the crime scene, and I found as I struggled to regain my balance and get my bearings that I needed to hunt through it."

He didn't like what he found. The United States emerged from the 1960s, he maintains, as a society marred not only by violent crime but also by disrespect for authority and a callous disregard for morality and civility. Among the perpetrators he identifies: mothers who hold jobs outside the home, elite universities that have abandoned admissions systems that favored the white and the wealthy, and reporters, artists, and poets who have lost touch with everyday people.

Americans have abandoned their respect for the military and for "traditional sex roles and family structures," Mr. Gelernter contends. No longer are "formality or fancy dress or good manners" important, he writes. "The blast that injured me was a reenactment of a far bigger one a generation earlier, which destroyed something basic in this society that has yet to be repaired."

Mr. Gelernter grew up in the 1950s and early '60s, and in his book he repeatedly refers to that time and the decades before as a kind of Golden Age. "In many ways," he writes, "life was better then."

Of course, many people believe that life was better then only if you were a white male. Mr. Gelernter acknowledges that the country has gained in "tolerance" since that time and is a better place in some ways. "When I compare the world of my kids with the world of my parents, my kids are immensely wealthier and everything is open to them," he says of his two young boys, who attend a Jewish day school. "On the other hand, the cultural milieu was immensely better for my parents in the '30s and '40s. Morale was higher, the religious community was healthier, and the culture was radically less coarse."

The book marks Mr. Gelernter's latest attempt to reinvent himself as a cultural critic. A successful computer scientist who is known for innovations in the field, he has focused his efforts since the bomb on exposing what he sees as flaws in American life. He has written about them every chance he gets, producing opinion pieces for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He appears regularly in *Commentary*, a neoconservative journal published by the American Jewish Committee, and in the

*City Journal*, a publication of the Manhattan Institute, a New York think tank. In July 1996 he was named art critic for a conservative political magazine, *The Weekly Standard*.

His subjects are varied: the declining quality of public schools; the public's obsession with the O.J. Simpson trial; the way that Winslow Homer's work portrayed his love of America, in contrast to the work of contemporary artists.

It is an unusual role for a computer scientist from one of America's most prestigious universities. While some scholars find his willingness to speak out encouraging, they take issue with his conclusions.

Gary Chapman directs a project at the University of Texas at Austin that explores the contributions of science and technology to the future. He agrees with Mr. Gelernter that society is "trapped in a depressing decadence," but Mr. Chapman, an adjunct professor of public policy, does not blame the '60s. Rather, he points to "runaway cowboy capitalism" and to the computer industry itself, which he says encourages a fixation on technological advances without regard for history.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago, says Mr. Gelernter's indictment of American culture goes too far. "We are in some kind of trouble as a society, and it's true that male-female relations are in a bit of a shambles," she says. "But there were authentic issues at stake" during the '60s, including "women's role in American society."

Mr. Gelernter says he has always been more of a humanist than a scientist, counting literature and art as his first loves. "Being blown up," as he refers to it, simply reminded him of that, and led him to redirect his energy. He is an avid painter, although he pursues it mostly for enjoyment.

"My general feeling had been that I had plenty of time to do anything," he recalled during an interview this month in his office in Yale's Arthur K. Watson computer-science building.

Before the bomb arrived in the mail in June 1993, Mr. Gelernter had begun writing a book on infusing computers with emotions, to make them "think" more like people. *The Muse in the Machine* was published in 1994 by the Free Press. Since then, he has written another book, published by the Free Press, called *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, which is half-history, half-novel. He is at work on a novel about the American Jewish community.

Only a couple of reviewers have taken up *Drawing Life* so far. The *National Review* called the book a "sparkling" memoir that "digs deeply into the reasons why our society is worse off today in important ways than it was in 1940 or 1960." But a review by *Kirkus Reviews* labeled the book a "peculiar rant" and a "thin and unoriginal tract," one that is "full of solipsism, smugness, and petty arrogance."

Mr. Gelernter did worry that emerging as a conservative critic within academe would "cause 95 per cent of my colleagues to hate me." He explains: "If you stop the average academic on the street and ask him is there such a thing as a principled anti-

environmentalist position and a principled anti-feminist position, he'd say: 'Of course not. You're talking about right-wing, fundamentalist, Bible-belt loonies.'"

Mr. Gelernter is not one of those. He is a 42-year-old Jew who grew up "a liberal Democrat" near New York City. He opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War, he says. But after it ended, and Vietnamese people began fleeing their country in boats to escape the Communists, he changed his mind: "We were full of it when we said there was nothing to fight for and nothing to defend."

Mr. Gelernter lives with his wife and their two sons in a Connecticut suburb. He earned a bachelor's degree in religious studies and a master's in Hebrew literature from Yale, and pursued a Ph.D. in computer science from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, he says, only after deciding that writing and painting wouldn't financially sustain him.

Paintings that he has done since the bombing hang on his office wall, behind his computer. One is a portrait of the French artist Degas. Another is of Robert Moses, who as New York City's parks commissioner during the 1930s oversaw the building of highways and the Triborough Bridge. Mr. Gelernter has struggled to learn how to write and paint with his left hand. A self-portrait dated "5-97," complete with his black beard and wire-rim glasses, appears on the dust jacket of *Drawing Life*. The thumb and little finger of Mr. Gelernter's right hand were destroyed by the bomb, and his middle fingers were badly mangled. Doctors performed surgery to give him some use of his hand, and repaired his eye and ear.

A framed piece of rose-and-white stained glass etched with the Hebrew word for life sits on his window sill – a gift from two graduate students after the bombing. But mostly his office is dominated by piles upon piles of papers and books. They spill off his desk and onto the floor.

He obligingly answers a reporter's questions, but he seems uncomfortable, often staring at the floor. "This isn't my medium," he explains. "I'm much more articulate writing than talking."

Mr. Gelernter says he has always considered computer science a "trade." But since joining the Yale faculty in 1982, he has made major contributions to the field. He and a former graduate student created a computer language called "Linda," which allows for "parallel processing." Typically, individual processors within a computer work separately on different tasks. The new language lets processors work simultaneously on a single problem.

His latest work in computer science involves a new way of conceptualizing data within a computer. Instead of "windows" that separate data and documents by files, "Lifestreams," as he and his colleagues call it, organizes information in one place, chronologically, as the computer user enters it (*The Chronicle*, April 4). Such a system makes using the computer and retrieving data much easier, he says. The idea is considered revolutionary.

It was Mr. Gelernter's involvement in computer science that apparently attracted the Unabomber. The professor refuses to refer to the accused bomber by name, calling

him “hut man” or “St. John of Montana.” Mr. Kaczynski was arrested in April 1996 and charged with setting or mailing bombs that killed three people and injured 22 others from 1978 to 1995. His trial begins in November, and Mr. Gelernter expects to testify.

The bomb that was sent to Mr. Gelernter arrived at Yale in an ordinary package. He opened it on June 24, 1993, and the blast set his office on fire. He ran to Yale’s on-campus clinic, bleeding profusely. He didn’t return to work for six months. He now wears a black-leather glove on his right hand, which was almost completely destroyed.

The Unabomber wrote a letter to Mr. Gelernter after he sent him the bomb, saying that the professor and other technology wizards were responsible for society’s ills. That Mr. Gelernter was the target of a technology hater is somewhat ironic. The professor himself is not entirely persuaded that computers are a good thing. He says they should be used sparingly in schools.

It was while he was recovering from the blast that Mr. Gelernter’s ideas about what is wrong with America began to form, he says. It was not so much the bomb itself, he says, as the reaction he received from those around him. In that category, the press comes in for his harshest criticism. The reporters who continually contacted him by telephone and by fax, requesting interviews just as he was returning home from the hospital, were guilty of “bad taste and crummy judgment,” he says.

Those reporters he did speak with, he says, steered clear of making judgments about the Unabomber. They would not talk about good and evil, even though the facts in his case seemed so clear. “The press approaches the country the way an adult approaches a child,” he says. “It regards itself as being fundamentally more sophisticated than the country at large, and that places it above worrying about petty moral considerations.”

It wasn’t always so, he maintains. But over the past few decades, journalism has become “academicized,” as more and more reporters come from journalism schools at major universities. The same is true of art, poetry, literature, and painting, he says. People in those fields have joined the intellectual “elite,” he writes, distancing themselves from ordinary Americans.

“The intellectuals have been preaching this line for a long time: disdain for patriotism, for partisanship, for the details of moral judgment.” But while they represented a small proportion of the population in the ‘20s and ‘30s, “America has now been intellectualized across the board,” he writes.

Mr. Gelernter acknowledges that this is an odd contention, coming from a professor at an elite university. But he calls himself “a dissenting intellectual.”

He also says computer science is perhaps more in touch with the “real world” than most other academic fields are. Computer scientists, he says, “don’t have the option of making an academic reputation based solely on the publication of papers in academic journals that don’t have any pragmatic consequences.”

Lately, he has begun considering leaving academe. “The day will come,” he says, “when I’ll be confident enough of being able to support my family by writing and painting.”

“Before I got blown up, I had the typical young man’s feeling of life being infinite,” he says. “Being blown up made a lot of things that had been hazy in my mind a lot sharper.”

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Robin Wilson began working for *The Chronicle* in 1985, writing widely about faculty members’ personal and professional lives, as well as about issues involving students. She also covered Washington politics, edited the Students section, and served as news editor.

The Ted K Archive

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