

4S, the FBI, and Anarchy

Sal Restivo

Winter 2001

October 31, 1994

Dear Dr. Restivo:

The mission of the UNABOM Task Force is complex and demanding. It is made easier through the assistance of persons like yourself who are concerned about making our society a better place to live.

—The FBI

Early one October morning in 1994, Wes Shrum, the 4S secretary, and I walked into a nondescript diner in New Orleans with A. J., a special agent for the FBI, and T. C., a postal inspector. This was the first of two 4S meetings I would preside over as the 4S president. We were meeting for breakfast across the street from the Clarion Hotel where the annual meeting of the 4S was getting under way. How did it happen that a former adviser to Students for a Democratic Society, *Nation* subscriber, and self-styled anarchist was sitting down to breakfast with the FBI, more or less voluntarily?

A few weeks earlier, Wes had called to tell me that the FBI wanted to attend our conference, and in particular they wanted to meet with our council, the governing body of the society. As Wes told me what little he knew, I began imagining bomb threats and some terrorist group that had targeted 4S for destruction (perhaps led by some deranged vanguard of the Science Wars). Since Wes couldn't tell me why the FBI wanted to meet with us, I told Wes to tell them "No" (Could I do that? Say "No" to the FBI? Well, at least I could ask Wes to say "No" to them; after all, I was the president!). In the end, I agreed to meet with the agents so that they could tell us what was going on and I could decide whether the situation warranted letting the FBI disrupt our meeting. We needed to proceed cautiously because, in my view, the barbarians were at the gates of an intellectual sanctuary. Well, the barbarians turned out to be as civil as you could imagine (if you closed your imagination to the apparatus of power and violence that sustained them), no apparent threat to Greek democracy or the 4S thought collective.

The two agents were members of the UNABOM TASK FORCE. OK, so this was about the Unabomber. They shared the basic facts of the case with us, they showed us charts and clippings, and then we exchanged business cards. I handed my Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) card to the postal inspector sitting beside me. He looked at it, sat back in his chair, and turned to me. "This is where it all started," he said. I suddenly felt that I had become a suspect, and decided it would be prudent not to give away any of my anarchist credentials! The RPI story turned out to be a little confusing. Early on, I got the impression that the first bomb was mailed to Professor Edward Smith, an electrical engineering professor at RPI, a little over twenty years ago. The bomb was apparently mailed from Chicago, and never reached Smith. Later, the agent who delivered the Unabomber's manifesto to me in my RPI office told me that the first letter bomb was mailed to Northwestern University with an RPI return address—Professor Edward Smith. Wes and I listened as the agents

unfolded the Unabomber story. They were interested in getting a scholarly reaction to a surviving letter, appended to a letter bomb mailed to that worm runner scientist at the University of Michigan. We all remember his planaria worm experiments on cannibalism and memory, don't we? How many of us, though, remember that he founded the *Worm Runner's Digest* and confused scientists by publishing bona fide scientific articles alongside parodies and satires. This created a scandal because readers couldn't tell which was which. It was a nice little exercise in a pre-Sokalian era in the sociology of science for a while.

I decided to allow the agents to present the letter to council, but with as little disruption of our normal business as possible. Wes has given the details of this meeting and the aftermath. It was, incidentally, awesome to watch some of our scholarly community's most talented text analysts work on that letter without any hint of its context.

On our way out of the diner, the postal inspector, musing on whether they were going to catch this guy, said he didn't know, but that if he was ever in the same room with him he would know. A chill ran up my spine. What if I were the Unabomber? Would he know?

No bombs went off at the Clarion, no Science Wars terrorists invaded the lobby to kill and maim social constructionists.

Soon after the manifesto was published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, I received a call from the FBI's Albany, New York office. Special agent N. M. wanted to see me about the Unabomber case. We discussed the RPI connection and I learned that the FBI had been investigating on the RPI campus for nearly twenty years on account of the Edward Smith return address on the first letter bomb. A couple of days later, N. M. delivered the manifesto to me, with the request that I read it in the next couple of days if possible. We would then get together again to discuss my reactions. The agent gave me the clear impression that things were coming to a head and that the Task Force was confident it was closing in on the Unabomber. I was hesitant about reading the manifesto under such a deadline, but I did read it. Just a few pages into the work, I began to get the same sorts of feelings I had gotten when during my undergraduate years I read parts of *Mein Kampf*. Further on, the voice I heard coming from the blue paper in my hands reminded me of the Weatherman taxi driver I regularly rode with in E. Lansing, Michigan during 1968. On my short rides from the train or bus station to my apartment, I had to endure the driver's outbursts about how much he hated his father and how he was getting back at him by bombing banks.

The profile that came into focus for me as I read through the manifesto contradicted some of the statements I had been reading in the papers. I concluded that the writer was trained in computer science, mathematics, or engineering and that it was extremely unlikely that he had had any disciplined exposure to the history and sociology of science. I also concluded that he had had an abusive father who coerced him in his studies. I found it very curious that when T. K. was captured and his story began to emerge

that his father was never, to my knowledge, mentioned. Was he dead? Living apart and alienated from the family? Did I actually see him interviewed on a television news program? Was the Unabomber sending bombs to “his father?” The agent I discussed this with had a psychology background and was sympathetic to my (check one) learned insights/wild Freudian speculations.

Sometime later, before T. K. was captured, I was invited to a Unabomber workshop in San Francisco organized by the Task Force. I declined the invitation. Later still, with T. K. now under arrest, I received a call from a law clerk in San Francisco. It wasn’t clear whether she was working out of the local FBI office, the offices of the Task Force, or the San Francisco District Attorney’s office. She wanted me to tell her about my experiences with the FBI, which agents I had met with, and under what circumstances I had been interviewed or otherwise offered expert testimony to them. I wasn’t sure I wanted to, could, or should divulge that information. I told her I wanted to ask the Albany FBI special agent I had discussed the manifesto with what, if anything, I could discuss/divulge. The agent was very upset, said they shouldn’t be bothering me, and that she would take care of things. I never heard from the law clerk again.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions of anarchy prominently feature terms like *political disorder* and *lawlessness*. An anarchist is “one who upsets settled order.” But they also do some justice to the idea that anarchy is about resisting arbitrary and unwanted Authority, and individual liberty “without the implication of disorder.” T. K. was not the neo-Luddite some of us wanted him to be. And his rhetoric notwithstanding, he was not a techno-critic, nor was his primary motivation techno-social criticism in the interest of progressive social change. And strictly speaking, he wasn’t an anarchist. He was a mathematician and, as John Allen Paulos put it in an OP-ED piece in *The New York Times*, “Dangerous Abstractions” (7 April 1996): “The Unabomber a mathematician? It figures.” Nonetheless, in a 4S banquet speech following the 4S/FBI episode, I thanked my colleagues for electing me president and giving one type of anarchist an opportunity to help the FBI capture another type of anarchist. A sociologist of mathematics? It figures.

—Sal Restivo
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The Ted K Archive

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