Analysing the Ideologies of Radical Groups

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One problem facing the ideology analyst is that ideologies are not always produced in ways easily amenable to the interested researcher. Some political movements remain underground, to avoid persecution. Outputs from such groups may be coded, jocular, or layered in irony, such that ideological interpretation becomes a far from straightforward matter. In "Excavating the underground", Sean Fleming offers a nuanced guide to analysing the ideologies of radical groups, which may operate with exactly such coded forms of ideological production. Fleming argues that these problems need not be insurmountable, but they will require a significant degree of methodological flexibility and adaptability on the part of the researcher. Publications, online content, interviews and archival research, each with its potential pitfalls, can offer the researcher the opportunity to at least partially break the code of underground ideologies.

Introduction

Studying the ideologies of radical groups presents unique methodological and practical challenges. Whereas political parties have published platforms, recognised leaders and authorised spokespeople, radical groups tend to operate in clandestine ways, under heavy cloaks of anonymity or pseudonymity. Many radical groups do not have well-defined principles, organisational structures or memberships; some are only loose collections of cells. How is it possible to study the ideologies of groups that are so shadowy and ephemeral?

This chapter provides a brief how-to guide for studying the ideologies of radical groups, drawing in part from my own experience researching anarchism, radical environmentalism and anti-technology radicalism. The first section examines the features of radical groups that make them difficult to study. The second section surveys the advantages and disadvantages of four kinds of source: radical publications, online content, interviews and archives. The challenge for researchers is to excavate and reconstruct the ideologies of radical groups from limited and fragmentary evidence.

The study of radical groups' ideologies is itself quite fragmentary and the existing scholarship is scattered across political theory and terrorism studies. Yet there are some discernible clusters of work with methodological affinities. First, there are intellectual–historical approaches, which aim to uncover the sources and origins of radical ideologies (e.g., Tait 2019; Fleming 2022). This kind of work typically focuses on manifestos and other texts produced by influential proponents of an ideology. Second, there are thematic approaches, which aim to identify the characteristic motivations, thought patterns and rhetorical strategies of radical groups (Macklin 2022; Loadenthal 2022; Hughes, Jones and Amarasingam 2022). This kind of work tends to rely on a broader range of "vernacular" ideological content produced by radical groups, including social media posts, memes and videos as well as communiqués and manifestos. Third,

there are social-movement approaches, which aim to understand the social milieus and networks from which radical ideologies emerge (e.g., Gordon 2007; Lubarda 2023). This kind of work tends to rely on interviews and participant observation in addition to textual evidence. Each approach has advantages and limitations. Although my own work on radical groups is primarily intellectual–historical, my plea in this chapter is for methodological pluralism and humility. The best way of studying a radical group's ideology depends on both the characteristics of the group and the questions that the researcher is trying to answer.

The Underground

By "radical" groups, I mean groups that use illegal tactics such as violence, sabotage or disruptive protest. A group is "radical" if it uses means that the state deems to be out of bounds.[1] By this definition, environmentalist groups such as Earth First! and Extinction Rebellion are "radical," but so are far-right groups such as Atomwaffen Division and so too are many separatist and political dissident groups. This broad, means-based definition of "radical" admittedly assumes the perspective of the prevailing political order, but it is not intended to be prescriptive or pejorative. It assumes nothing about the content of radical groups' ideologies or about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their causes. To use one of the Unabomber's euphemisms, radicals are those who use "methods more potent than the mere advocacy of ideas" (Kaczynski 2020: 101), whatever their objectives might be. Groups that use methods of this sort must, of necessity, operate wholly or partly underground. Since illegal tactics inevitably invite repression or negative attention from the authorities, radicals are forced to conceal some or all of their activities from public view.

Radical groups tend to be fairly small and marginal, which raises the question of why they warrant scholarly attention in the first place. Although they rarely have much hope of gaining political power, radical groups are consequential in other ways. Through the "radical flank effect", the presence of a radical group can increase support for more "moderate" groups with similar aims (Simpson, Willer and Feinberg 2022). In addition, the radical fringe is an important space of ideological innovation. Ideologies that are now mainstream – environmentalism, feminism, even liberalism – were once revolutionary. While many of today's radical groups are destined for the dustbin, some may be antecedents of tomorrow's mainstream political parties and movements. The growing antagonism between anti-technology radicals and radical techno-optimists might foreshadow a new division in modern politics, which cuts across the old division between left and right. The growing hostility toward green energy among radical environmentalists could prefigure a shift in the mainstream environmentalist movement.

[1] This means-based definition of "radical" excludes many political parties on the "radical right", which question liberal–democratic principles but do not resort to illegal tactics. On the terminology of "radical right", "extreme right" and "far right", see Pirro (2023).

Looking at the radical fringe can give scholars of ideologies a sense of what the future might hold. It can help us anticipate emerging ideological trends and coming shifts in the ideological landscape.

Decentralised Structures

States, political parties, unions and corporations all have more or less centralised structures, with clear leaders and explicit chains of command. Their decision-making procedures are described in statutes, charters, constitutions and organisational charts, which makes it fairly straightforward to determine who speaks and acts for the group. If the goal is to understand the ideology of the British Labour Party, for example, then its official communications – its platform, its leaders' speeches and its spokespeople's statements – are obvious places to start (see the chapter by Eunice Goes in this volume). But many radical groups do not have recognisable leaders; some do not even have spokespeople or statements of principle. Radical groups tend to have decentralised structures, because a tight chain of command is a liability for those who are involved in illegal activity.

The structures of radical groups are decentralised in different ways and to different degrees. Most radical groups *act* in decentralised ways, through independent operatives or cells, but some radical groups nonetheless *communicate* in centralised ways. For example, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) carried out its "covert direct actions" (e.g., arson attacks against industry) through independent, underground cells. Yet the ELF had an above-ground "press office" and a spokesperson tasked with publicising the group's ideas and justifying its attacks. Anyone could carry out "direct actions" in the name of the ELF provided that they adhered to the guidelines published by the ELF Press Office:

1. To cause as much economic damage as possible to a given entity that is profiting off the destruction of the natural environment and life for selfish greed and profit.

2. To educate the public on the atrocities committed against the environment and life.

3. To take all necessary precautions against harming life (ELF 2001: 15).

By maintaining a strict separation between its above-ground and underground divisions – between legal communication and illegal action – the ELF was able to present a more or less coherent message while mitigating the risk of infiltration by law enforcement (Joosse 2007).[2]

Insurrectionary anarchist groups such as the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI) are even more decentralised. Unlike the ELF, the FAI does not have above-ground

[2] On the Earth Liberation Front, see also Brown (2020), Joosse (2012) and Loadenthal (2014).

spokespeople, nor even a definitive statement of principles. Independent individuals and affinity groups carry out attacks and attribute them to the FAI as they see fit (Lubrano 2024; Marone 2015). Antifa speaks and acts in similarly decentralised ways (Rilla 2024). Some cells seem to be little more than throwaway monikers. After a single attack in Argentina, "Antagonist Nucleus of Anger" disappeared, never to be heard from again. Other cells recur or reappear, though there is no way of knowing for certain whether two communiqués written in the name of the same cell actually have the same authors. The pseudonymity and ephemerality of insurrectionary anarchist cells create problems for scholars and law enforcement alike.

Table 3.1 Group structures

	Centralised action	*Decentralised action*
Centralised communication	Labour Party	Earth Liberation Front
Decentralised communication	Facebook[a]	Informal Anarchist Federation

[a] On Earth First!, see Lee (1995), Woodhouse (2018) and Taylor (2008).

It can be difficult to find any semblance of a coherent ideology in the cacophony of communiqués. Different cells operating under the broad banner of the FAI have different motivations and concerns. Some are preoccupied with the role of technology in surveillance and social control, while others do not even mention technology in their communiqués. Some identify with the anti-capitalist left and the labour movement, while others denounce "workerism" as counter-revolutionary. Even the ELF sometimes failed to produce a consistent message, despite the fact that it had a central press office. In its 2001 FAQ, the ELF disavowed violence against human beings: "If an action similar to one performed by the ELF occurred and resulted in an individual becoming physically injured or losing their life this would not be considered an ELF action" (ELF 2001: 28). But the following year, the "Pacific ELF" announced that "segments of this global revolutionary movement are no longer limiting their revolutionary potential by adhering to a flawed, inconsistent 'non-violent' ideology ... we will no longer hesitate to pick up the gun to implement justice and provide the needed protection for our planet" (ELF 2002). Of course, the ideology of a group need not be perfectly consistent. Most ideologies contain internal contradictions and it is to be expected that groups contain factions with different views. Yet some radical groups have so many internal factions and disagreements that it is difficult to discern their ideological "core", if there is one to be found.

Fuzzy memberships

A related problem is that radical groups rarely have well-defined memberships. This is obviously true of cell-based groups such as the ELF and the FAI, but it is also true,

to lesser degrees, of many other groups. The radical environmentalist group Earth First! is a good example.[3] Earth First!'s de facto leaders and prominent personalities operated "above ground", and the editors of the *Earth First! Journal* were identified by name inside the cover. But other Earth First!ers, especially those who were involved in "monkeywrenching" (i.e., sabotage), kept a low profile. While the group's above-ground membership was clear enough, its underground membership was opaque. In addition, the line between "members" and "sympathisers" is difficult to draw. The Unabomber was allegedly a regular reader the *Earth First! Journal* – does that make him an Earth First!er? For the purpose of ideology analysis, the line between members and non-members has to be drawn somewhere, because judgments have to be made about whether particular statements, attitudes and actions are attributable to the group. Did Earth First! unequivocally condemn violence against human beings? The answer depends on who counts as an Earth First!er.

One tempting response to this problem is to forget about "groups" and to shift the focus to the ideologies of broader "movements." The indeterminate boundaries of Earth First! seem less troubling if the aim is to analyse the radical environmentalist *movement*. But this response is inadequate for two reasons. First, it comes at a steep price in terms of granularity and specificity. There are many ideological differences between the groups that comprise the radical environmentalist movement – for instance, between Earth First! and Deep Green Resistance. Although it may well be possible to make some worthwhile generalisations about the movement as a whole, these generalisations are probably best made in a bottom-up way, based on more fine-grained analyses of particular radical environmentalist groups. Further, shifting the focus from groups to movements only pushes the problem back a step, because the boundaries between movements are also fuzzy. The radical environmentalist movement bleeds into the green anarchist movement and the green anarchist movement bleeds into the insurrectionary anarchist movement.

Another tempting response to this problem is to focus on the ideas of specific individuals instead of the ideologies of collectivities. Instead of studying the ideology of Earth First!, scholars of ideology could study particular environmental activists such as Dave Foreman and Judi Bari. There is much to be said for a turn toward the individual in ideology studies (Ostrowski 2024). I am admittedly partial to this turn, because much of my work focuses on the ideas of particular thinkers (Fleming 2021; Fleming 2022; Fleming 2024). But to jettison the study of collective ideologies would be a mistake. First of all, it would be naïve to try to study the ideologies of particular thinkers without reference to the groups in which those thinkers are embedded (fuzzy and ill-defined though they may be). The ideologies of Dave Foreman and Judi Bari can be fully understood only against the backdrop of Earth First! as a group – its internal dynamics, culture and discourse, its rifts and rival factions. Second, in the turn toward the individual, prominent figures and canonical writers receive the

[3] On the ideas of *Fifth Estate*, see Millett (2012).

lion's share of the attention. What tends to get lost is the study of the "vernacular" ideologies that motivate and underpin the everyday practices of political actors. While studying the ideologies of prominent anarchists and radical environmentalists is undoubtedly important, it is equally important to understand how their ideas have been received, appropriated, adapted and applied by activists on the ground – and in the underground.

Although radical groups are troublesome entities, there is no way to eliminate them without eliminating or obscuring a great deal of valuable content. Scholars of ideology had best face the difficulties head-on, armed with the only effective weapon against vagueness, ambiguity and uncertainty: evidence.

Types of evidence

The problems with studying the ideologies of radical groups are, in part, epistemological. How is it possible to know who counts as a member or who speaks and acts for the group? How it is possible to discern an ideology from a cacophony of contradictory claims? However, the main difficulties are methodological. If one were a fly on the wall, privy to all the internal workings of Earth First!, the ELF or the FAI, analysing their ideologies would not be much more difficult than analysing the ideologies of political parties. Their structures would be clearer and their memberships less fuzzy if only we could peel back the layers of anonymity and pseudonymity to reveal the concrete relationships underneath. The challenge is to piece together the ideologies of radical groups from limited and fragmentary evidence. The crucial questions, then, are what kinds of evidence to use to how to use them. There are four main sources of evidence about radical groups, each of which has advantages and drawbacks: 1) radical publications; 2) online content; 3) interviews; and 4) archives.

Radical publications

Most radical groups produce publications of some sort – pamphlets, 'zines, journals and newsletters. These publications serve as vehicles for spreading ideas, as recruiting tools and as forums for debate among group members. Many radical publications feature extensive discussions of theory, strategy and tactics. They often contain detailed programmatic statements, akin to the platforms of political parties. While their content might seem low-grade and amateurish to political philosophers, radical publications are goldmines for scholars of ideologies.

One problem with relying on radical publications is that they may not accurately represent the views of the groups with which they are associated. Many publications are edited or otherwise dominated by prominent personalities and prolific writers. The *Earth First! Journal* was under the editorial control of different factions at different times. The anarchist newspaper *Fifth Estate* was long dominated by a few writers,

including David Watson ("George Bradford"), Peter Lambourn Wilson ("Hakim Bey") Andy Smith ("Sunfrog") and Peter Werbe.[4] It is often difficult to know whether a group's prominent writers accurately represent the views of its rank-and-file members and this problem is compounded by the fact that many radical groups have neither ranks nor files.

The Letters to the Editor sections of radical publications can provide a broader sample of opinion. This is especially true of anarchist and radical environmentalist publications, which tend to have an ethos of openness. *Fifth Estate, Green Anarchist* and the *Earth First! Journal* would print most letters from readers, no matter how rude or critical. Although most anarchists and radical environmentalists probably never published a full-length article, many read radical literature and many sent an occasional letter to the editor – most often, it seems, when they disagreed with the publication's editors or leading writers. The Letters to the Editor thus provide helpful gauges of dissent and disagreement within radical groups, which scholars of ideology can use to identify gaps between a group's leading figures and its ordinary members.

However, Letters to the Editor sections have to be read with a critical eye. Letters are often published under throwaway pseudonyms. A letter that appears to be from an ordinary reader might, in fact, be a pseudonymous letter from a prominent writer and letters with different by-lines might actually be written by the same person. Further, not every letter-writer is a regular reader or a committed member of the group. Some letters to radical publications are sent by "raiders" from related or rival groups, often for the purpose of promoting their own views or their own journals. For instance, many green anarchists wrote letters to the *Earth First! Journal* in the 1990s, arguing that Earth First!'s uncompromising commitment to non-violence was misguided. Although the boundary between green anarchism and radical environmentalism is fuzzy at the margins, it would be a mistake to assume that these letters from green anarchists represented "rank-and-file" Earth First!ers. More likely, they represented the fringe of Earth First! or adjacent radical groups. Letters to the Editor sections of radical publications serve not only as venues for their readers' opinions, but also as "trading zones" (Ashworth 2012), where members of different groups trade ideas and criticisms.

Many radical publications also include communiqués, which are relatively short, pseudonymous statements released after attacks. Insurrectionary anarchist publications serve primarily as repositories for communiqués. A typical communiqué has three components: 1) a claim of responsibility; 2) a justification; and 3) a statement of solidarity. For example, in May 2012, a nuclear energy executive was shot in the leg in the Italian city of Genoa. The "Olga Cell" of the FAI later released a communiqué titled *Against the corporations of death.* The communiqué began with a claim of responsibility: "We have crippled Roberto Adinolfi, one of so many sorcerers of the atom"

[4] It is difficult to come up with a "pure" example of a group that communicates in a decentralised way but acts in a centralised way, but social media platforms are fairly good examples. Although Facebook facilitates decentralised communication among its billions of users, it is owned and operated by corporation that is as centralised as any other.

(Olga Cell 2012: 1). It then offered a justification for the attack. Adinolfi was targeted because he "designed and renovated nuclear plants that have caused and are causing deaths around the world" (Olga Cell 2012: 1). Finally, the communiqué expressed solidarity with other anarchists, including the cell's namesake, an imprisoned Greek anarchist named Olga Economidou (Olga Cell 2012: 2–3). Between the opening claim of responsibility and the closing call to arms, this communiqué is packed with ideological content – claims about human nature, the relationship between capitalism and technology, the necessity of violence and the place of Adinolfi and others like him in the larger system of power. Loadenthal's (2017) pioneering book, *The Politics of Attack*, shows how valuable communiqués can be to scholars of ideology. Reading "communiqués as political theory," Loadenthal provides the first in-depth analysis of insurrectionary anarchists' ideas and motivations.

In sum, radical publications are useful to scholars of ideology in at least four ways. First, they contain programmatic statements from the group's leading writers and intellectual figures. Second, they contain letters from ordinary readers, which provide a broader survey of opinion within the group. Third, they contain letters from members of related or rival groups, which help to illuminate the connections and divisions between radical groups. Fourth, radical publications often contain post-attack communiqués, which tend to be rich in ideological content.

Online content

Radical publications used to be DIY paper pamphlets, 'zines and journals, which were available only locally or by mail order. But the internet has made this sort of literature much more widely available. Many radical journals are now published online as sleek and professional-looking PDFs and some radical literature from past decades has now been scanned and digitised. Most of the back issues of *Green Anarchist* and *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* are only a click away.

In addition to making radical publications more widely available, the internet has given rise to a multitude of new forms of communication. Radical groups now use blogs, message boards, social media platforms, YouTube videos, Discord channels and Telegram and WhatsApp groups to spread their ideas and find new recruits. At first glance, much of this content seems flippant and frivolous. Ironic memes and anonymous "shitposts" hardly seem worthy of scholarly attention. But there is often serious ideological content beneath the façade of unseriousness. Radicals tend to drape their online communications in thick layers of irony, absurdity and humour, in part to maintain plausible deniability. Online content can rarely be taken at face value, but to dismiss it entirely would be to ignore a significant portion of the content that contemporary radicals produce.

Traditional approaches to ideology analysis can be used to analyse online content. For example, Tait (2019) critically analyses the blog posts of neoreactionary writer "Mencius Moldbug" (Curtis Yarvin), much as historians of political thought have criti-

cally analysed the works of Carl Schmitt. The pseudonymous streams of content from social media platforms can also be useful to scholars of ideology. In his work on the ecofascist sub-culture, Macklin (2022) analyses the texts of influential writers – Ted Kaczynski, Savitri Devi and Pentti Linkola – alongside pseudonymous posts from far-right Telegram channels. Visual analysis of online content is also useful, because a significant portion of this content consists of images and memes. Loadenthal (2022) analyses both the textual and visual content of far-right accelerationist Telegram channels. Similarly, Hughes, Jones and Amarasingam (2022) use images and text from Telegram and Twitter to identify the dominant themes in the ecofascist sub-culture. Online content can be analysed morphologically or genetically, textually or visually, qualitatively or quantitatively. There are surely many fruitful methods and approaches that have yet to be tried.

There are two main problems with online material. First, since most of it is anonymous or pseudonymous, there is usually no way of verifying information. Posters may not be who they claim to be and some may not even be human. Some radical content is generated by poseurs and provocateurs who really have little to do with the groups or causes that they purport to represent. Other content is generated or disseminated by "bots". For these reasons, the volume of material may be a misleading indicator of opinion within online sub-cultures. Further, online sub-cultures may be disconnected from offline radical groups. Although some research has found that "intensifying expressions of grievances online predict participation in offline violence" (Bailard et al 2024), the relationship between online content and offline action may be tighter or looser depending on the group. Radical environmentalist Telegram channels may not accurately represent the views or motivations of the activists who are engaged in "direct action".

The second problem with online material is that it is ephemeral. Websites and blogs may be taken down, message boards may become defunct, images are frequently deleted and posts often become buried within days or even hours. Using online material thus requires a great deal of foresight and planning. Scholars have to quickly and systematically archive material before it disappears.

Archiving online material has to be done with caution, however, because downloading "extremist" material is a criminal offence in some countries. Under Section 58 of the UK's Terrorism Act (2000), it is unlawful to collect, record or even access "information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism". This could be something as simple as, for example, downloading an anarchist journal that contains instructions for making Molotov cocktails. Although the Act lists "academic research" as a "reasonable excuse" for possessing or viewing this sort of material, this excuse does not give researchers free rein. Academic research is not a valid defence against the charge of *disseminating* terrorist material (Universities UK 2019). It is better to seek permission from an ethics board than to beg forgiveness from a judge.

Interviews

One obvious problem with relying on written sources, physical or digital, is that not everything important is written, let alone published. The advantage of written sources is that they are durable, but the disadvantage is that they are inevitably incomplete. Interviews are invaluable for gaining in-depth understandings of radicals' motivations and worldviews (Ellinas 2021; Damhuis and de Jonge 2022).

However, interviewing radicals comes with a multitude of problems. Active radicals, like politicians who are still in office, are often unwilling to give candid interviews. While the above-ground spokespeople of radical groups tend to give carefully curated answers, much like party politicians, underground members of radical groups can be difficult to contact. Underground members will sometimes give anonymous interviews or communicate through pseudonyms, but the testimony of unknown sources is of questionable value to scholars. Anonymous "radicals" might, in fact, be imposters or provocateurs and they might give deliberately misleading information. Unless their testimony can somehow be independently verified, it is little better than a rumour or an anonymous post on a message board. Yet "retired" radicals can be valuable sources of information. Like politicians who have left office, radicals who are no longer active – and who no longer fear arrest – are often eager to talk about their experiences. For example, several former members of the ELF have given candid interviews since they were released from prison (Sotille 2022).

"Retired" radicals can tell us only about the past. In order to understand the *current* dynamics of a radical group, it is necessary to interview people who are actually involved in it. Lubarda's (2023) work on far-right ecologism provides an excellent demonstration of how to do this, as does Gordon's (2007) "movement-driven" research on contemporary anarchism. As Gordon argues,

> an authentic picture of a movement's ideological articulation can only emerge from attention to the verbal medium in which the bulk of it takes place. Thus, while books, pamphlets and websites should not be ignored, the primary material for interpretation is the continuous and polyphonic conversational activity that takes place among the participants.
>
> (Gordon 2007: 30–31)

The only way to access this "conversational activity" is to become part of the conversation, through "first-hand participant observation of the vernacular culture of activists" (Gordon 2007: 30–31). Further, Gordon (2007: 32) argues, "Only embeddedness in activist networks can afford a sufficiently literate approach to activists' written expression." In other words, in order to develop a fine-grained, contextual understanding of radical publications, it is first necessary to immerse oneself in the radical sub-cultures that produce them.

Although first-hand experience with radical groups is undoubtedly valuable for understanding their ideologies, it is not without problems, nor unquestionably superior

to other types of evidence. First and most obviously, anthropological approaches raise ethical and legal issues. Whatever its merits, a project that involves participant observation of groups that are involved in illegal activity is difficult to sell to an ethics board. Merely associating with groups such as the FAI or the ELF would be against the law in many countries. To some degree or another, these ethical and legal issues confront anyone who wishes to interview members of radical groups.

Second, interviews and participant observation are much more useful for answering some questions than others. If one's goal is, like Gordon's, to understand contemporary radical groups, then there is no substitute for first-hand, insider knowledge. But if one's goal is to understand a radical group's origins or ideological formation, then asking active radicals might not be the best approach. People may intentionally distort or simply misrecall their intellectual influences. As Burkhardt (2005: 13–14) says, "memory is a tricky resource in itself, inevitably involving considerable selection and reconstruction". Not many people can accurately recall what they were reading five years ago, let alone five decades ago. But when asked they are likely to produce an answer, which may be little better than a wild guess. In general, written sources are more reliable than interviews for excavating a radical group's intellectual influences. John Zerzan, the grandfather of anarcho–primitivism, probably cannot remember everything he read in 1988. He will likely remember some of what he read, though his assessment of what was important at the time may well be distorted by the prism of hindsight. It is better to ask Zerzan's "past self", so to speak, by looking at the footnotes from the books and articles he wrote at the time. After several years have elapsed, written sources can often tell us more, and more reliably, about the past than the flesh-and-blood author can.

Archives

Identifying authors' intellectual influences is not always as simple as looking at their footnotes. For one thing, some radical sub-cultures are opposed to very idea of intellectual property and contemptuous of academic citation practices. In insurrectionary anarchist literature, Loadenthal (2017: 94) observes, "ideas are adopted and stolen without attribution". Even in radical sub-cultures in which a quasi-academic style is common, such as green anarchism, there is no guarantee that authors' footnotes will accurately represent their intellectual influences. Sometimes authors deliberately conceal their sources to exaggerate their originality; sometimes they unwittingly borrow ideas; and sometimes the sources that appear most prominently in the footnotes are not the most important ones. When it comes to *genetic* ideology analysis, or excavating the origins of ideas, archival evidence is supreme. Drafts, notes, letters and other unpublished materials often reveal sources and connections that are not visible in published texts.

The case of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, illustrates how useful archival material can be for ideology analysis. Kaczynski's famous anti-technology manifesto, *Industrial*

society and its future, was jointly published by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in September 1995 (Kaczynski 1995). Unsurprisingly, given that Kaczynski was a former mathematics professor, the Unabomber manifesto reads like a journal article, with numbered paragraphs and a full slate of footnotes. One commentator at the time described it as "a woodenly written term paper, full of academic jargon" (Sale 1995: 305). Yet scholars and journalists who tried to identify the Unabomber's intellectual influences by looking at his footnotes were on a fool's errand. As I have discovered, Kaczynski deliberately omitted his key sources from the footnotes (Fleming 2022). He had sent letters to authors he admired, such as the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, and he feared that citing them would get him caught. The FBI would have tracked down these authors, questioned them and possibly found letters with Kaczynski's name on them that were suspiciously similar to parts of the Unabomber manifesto.

I would not have discovered this had I not gone to the archive and read Kaczynski's unpublished writings. The Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan contains copies of much of the material the FBI confiscated from Kaczynski's cabin when he was arrested in 1996, including his journals, notes, drafts, letters, library requests and unpublished essays. One of the most important pieces of evidence is a set of "private" footnotes, which Kaczynski wrote to keep track of his sources for posterity. These private footnotes reveal some of the crucial sources that he carefully concealed in the published version of his manifesto.

The Unabomber's paper trail is of more than historical interest. Genetic analysis of Kaczynski's intellectual influences helps to inform morphological analysis of his ideology. In other words, uncovering the origins of Kaczynski's ideas sheds new light on his motivations and worldview. The archival material gives the lie to the common narratives about the Unabomber's ideological formation. According to one story, Kaczynski was a 1960s radical who was influenced by countercultural figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Paul Goodman (Luke 1996). His lament for the decline of purpose and autonomy in the modern world and his call for a revolution against "the system" sound like common tropes from 1960s. This story is even more compelling in the light of Kaczynski's biography: he was a faculty member at Berkeley from 1967–69, at the height of the student protests. But as Kaczynski's journals and letters reveal, he detested the student protesters and even supported the Vietnam War. The Unabomber manifesto's critique of "leftism" is, in fact, a broadside against the heirs to 1960s radicalism. According to another common story, Kaczynski was a radical environmentalist, akin to Earth First! and the ELF (Arnold 1997; Barnett 2015). This story is also quite compelling: he read radical environmentalist literature, including the *Earth First! Journal* and his counter-ideal to technology is "wild nature". But the archival evidence shows that he borrowed very few of his ideas from radical environmentalists. He had not even heard of Earth First! until nearly a decade into his bombing campaign (Fleming 2024).

Delving into Kaczynski's sources helps to reveal the novelty of his ideology. Its main conceptual components – "the technological system", "the power process", "surrogate activity" and "oversocialisation" – are not from radical literature, but from academic

authors and popular scientists. While Kaczynski's understanding of modern technology is heavily indebted to the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, his understanding of human nature was shaped by the British zoologist Desmond Morris and the American psychologist Martin Seligman. Kaczynski's "bioprimitivism", as I have called it, is a synthesis of Ellul's critique of technology with a Darwinian worldview (Fleming 2022). Although it does have some affinities with radical environmentalism, its intellectual roots and motivating concerns are different. Kaczynski opposes modern technology not primarily because it is ecologically destructive, but because it is incompatible with the biologically hard-wired features of human psychology. This sort of anti-tech radicalism, if not entirely new, is a distinct ideological current. Scholars have missed what is novel about the Unabomber's ideology because they have shoehorned him into existing categories – radical environmentalist, green anarchist, ecofascist and so on (Fleming 2024).

In addition to illuminating Kaczynski's ideology, the Unabomber archive sheds new light on the anti-tech sub-culture that has emerged in his wake. The Labadie Collection contains much of Kaczynski's prison correspondence since his arrest in 1996. These letters reveal a lot about the structure of his broader network. They also provide an inside look at how the anti-tech sub-culture has developed over time.

The Unabomber archive is, in some ways, exceptional. Few figures leave such a long and detailed paper trail. But many other important radical figures have donated extensive collections of papers to university libraries. Bob Black, the influential "post-left" anarchist, has also donated his papers to the Labadie Collection. John Zerzan has donated his papers to the University of Oregon. These archives remain largely unexamined by scholars.

Of course, archival research on radical groups also has limitations. First, archives are usually built around infamous or influential individuals. Although an influential individual's correspondence can provide a window into a broader sub-culture, it is far from a comprehensive view. Second, archives are often selective samples of material. The donor may omit material that is incriminating or unflattering. Third, archives tell us mainly about the past. They are much better for uncovering the history of radical groups than for gaining an up-to-date understanding of their activities or ideas.

Conclusion

The best kind of evidence for studying a radical group depends largely on the question that the researcher aims to answer. If the question is a historical one, about the group's intellectual influences or ideological formation, then radical publications and archives are usually the best sources. But if the question is about a radical group's current dynamics, then interviews and online material are invaluable. There are no hard-and-fast rules. Sometimes online material constitutes historical evidence, and sometimes archives can answer questions about contemporary movements. For instance,

websites and newsgroups can tell us a lot about the reception of the Unabomber's ideas in the 1990s, and his prison correspondence can tell us a lot about today's anti-tech movement. The main lesson is that scholars of ideology should be evidential omnivores. They cannot afford to be too picky or method-driven, because the available evidence about radical groups is so limited. Studying the ideologies of radical groups is a matter of piecing together incomplete and ill-fitting fragments while blindfolded by anonymity and pseudonymity. By using as many kinds of evidence as possible and by cross-checking each against the others, it is possible to find gaps in the blindfold.

Although my starting supposition was that radical groups are fundamentally different from other political groups, the differences are smaller than they initially appear. "Above-ground" political groups, such as governments and political parties, are often more clandestine than people in democratic societies like to believe. WikiLeaks has thrown this fact into sharp relief. While governments pay lip-service to transparency and openness, they frequently engage in espionage, propaganda campaigns and covert actions (Cormac 2023). Political parties publish their platforms, but they also make backroom deals and carefully guard their campaign plans. Even the members of mainstream political parties have been known to organise in secret (van Duyn 2020). The public communications of governments and political parties are valuable sources of evidence for scholars of ideology, but there is a risk of putting too much stock in this carefully curated material. Scholars should bear in mind that above-ground political groups have basements, bunkers and dungeons, which have to be "excavated" just like the shadowy chambers of radical groups.

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