

Academic roots of paranoia

The Unabomber may not be such an intellectual loner

Stephen Budiansky

May 13, 1996

Following the arrest of Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski last month, conservative columnists and talk show hosts were quick to charge that the alleged Unabomber's 18-year campaign of violence that left three dead and 23 injured had been inspired by, if not actually linked to, radical environmental groups. Among the Unabomber's most recent victims were two environmentalist targets: Gilbert Murray, president of the California Forestry Association, a timber industry group, and Thomas Mosser, an executive of Burson-Marsteller, a public-relations firm that the Unabomber claimed — incorrectly — had “helped Exxon clean up its public image after the Exxon Valdez incident.”

Radical environmental groups such as Earth First! have been equally quick to disavow the connection. “The Unabomber has been bombing people for a lot longer than Earth First! has even been in existence. There's no incitements to violence in the Earth First! Journal. It's exactly the opposite,” says Craig Beneville of the journal's editorial staff.

There is no evidence that the Unabomber had any direct ties with environmental radicals. And while direct calls to violence are not unknown in the radical environmental journals — including Earth First! — the environmental groups are correct that they are rare, more sophomoric than serious and largely confined to a tiny fringe.

But in their rhetoric and strategy, some environmental and animal-rights extremists bear an eerie resemblance to the far-right militias. Both ends of the political spectrum profess a near-total distrust of government and believe they must attack the system to change things.

The self-styled Environmental Rangers in Montana, for example, have armed themselves and conducted patrols to stop the construction of a gold mine. And Animal Liberation Front member Rodney Coronado was sentenced to 57 months in prison last year for firebombing a Michigan State University research office. A law enforcement official in the Northwest says radical animal-rights and environmental groups “are not high on our radar screens, but we're very much aware that in the past they've planned such things as blowing up transmission towers. There's always the risk that someone may go off the deep end, based on this kind of rhetoric, and commit a violent act.”

Despite Earth First!'s disavowals, the organization has advocated tree-spiking, vandalism of bulldozers at logging sites and other acts of sabotage and “monkey-wrenching.” An article in the December-January 1995 issue of Earth First! Journal by Mike Roselle declared, “Monkey-wrenching is more than just sabotage, and your [sic] goddamn right, it's revolutionary! This is jihad, pal. There are no innocent bystanders, because in these desperate hours, bystanders are not innocent. ... And more spiking is needed to convey the urgency of the situation!”

Lumber mills have become more cautious since a worker was seriously injured in 1987 when his saw hit a spike; the radical environmental newspaper Live Wild or Die! now tells its readers to use ceramic spikes to foil metal detectors. It also published an “Eco-f—er Hit List”; at the top of the list was Murray's predecessor at the California Forestry Association, then known as the Timber Association of California.

Although mainstream environmental groups reject violence and look to science and technology for solutions to environmental problems, a surprising number of leading academic writers on animal rights and the environment share the Unabomber's paranoid hostility to science. That may be the real "tie" between the Unabomber and environmentalism, one conservatives, with a grain of truth, say has been ignored by the same people who eagerly tied the Oklahoma City bombing to the antigovernment rhetoric of mainstream conservatives.

Intellectual roots. Many passages in the Unabomber "manifesto," published last year by the New York Times and the Washington Post, bear a striking similarity to antisociety and antisience indictments by mainstream environmental intellectuals.

Consider these quotations:

"The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race ... they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering ... and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. ... We therefore advocate a revolution against the industrial system. ... Its object will be to overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society."

"It was once thought that science and technology would remedy the social ills of humanity by mastering nature. Instead, they have only compounded and increased those ills."

"The Earth's cry for rescue from the punishing weight of the industrial system we have created is our own cry for a scale and quality of life that will free each of us to become the complete person we were born to be."

"Western life seems to be drifting toward increasing entropy, economic and technological chaos, ecological disaster, and ultimately, psychic dismemberment and disintegration. ... the split between analysis and affect which characterizes modern science cannot be extended any further without the virtual end of the human race."

The first is the Unabomber; the second is Michael W. Fox, a widely published writer on animal rights and the environment; the third is from *The Voice of the Earth*, a book by leading environmental thinker Theodore Roszak of California State University that even carries a blurb from Vice President Al Gore ("powerful, compelling"); the last is from *The Reenchantment of the World*, a frequently cited work on environmental philosophy and ethics by Morris Berman, published by Cornell University Press.

The common thread in all is an extreme, conspiratorial view of science and technology as a force out of control, irredeemably evil and just as damaging to the human spirit as its material consequences have been to the planet. Carolyn Merchant of the University of California at Berkeley, another oft-cited environmental philosopher, goes

so far as to write that the “mechanistic” world view of science which arose in the 16th century is alone responsible for “the death of nature,” the oppression of women and the loss of “connection” in life.

All argue that even the benefits of science have taken power from the individual, and that nothing short of a revolution of one sort or another can free the world from the grip of science and technology. Both the Unabomber and many of the environmental intellectuals explicitly hold up medieval or primitive society as a model for mankind’s future.

Particularly striking is the similarity between the Unabomber’s manifesto and portions of Berman’s book. Berman, like the Unabomber, blames mental illness, alienation and frustration in modern life directly upon science, declaring the industrial-scientific system “dysfunctional”:

“We stand at a crossroads in the evolution of Western consciousness. One fork retains all the assumptions of the Industrial Revolution and would lead us to salvation through science and technology; in short, it holds that the very paradigm that got us into trouble can somehow get us out. ... [This] fork clearly leads to a blind alley or Brave New World,” Berman writes.

The Unabomber titles one section of his manifesto, “Human Race at the Crossroads,” and writes: “It is very probable that in their attempts to end poverty and disease, engineer docile, happy personalities and so forth, the technophiles will create social systems that are terribly troubled, even more so than the present one. ... Ever since the Industrial Revolution, technology has been creating new problems for society far more rapidly than it has been solving old ones. Thus it will take a long and difficult period of trial and error to work the bugs out of their Brave New World (if they ever do).”

It is not known if the Unabomber read any of these works; one of Kaczynski’s favorite books, however, was Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd*, a 1960s indictment of “the system” that includes a denunciation of the “dominance” of science and its effect of alienating man from nature.

None of these works advocates violence. But their sweeping indictments of science and technology, their portrayals of science as a force beyond political control, might lead a weak mind to conclude that extraordinary evils require extraordinary solutions. As the Unabomber states, “The only way out is to dispense with the industrialtechnological system altogether. This implies revolution.”

The Ted K Archive

Stephen Budiansky
Academic roots of paranoia
The Unabomber may not be such an intellectual loner
May 13, 1996

U.S. News & World Report, Vol. 120, No. 19, Pg. 33. Section: U.S. NEWS.

www.thetedkarchive.com