

Mad Loner Builds Perfect Bomb

Terry Teachout

July 13, 1996

Some historian of the law of unintended consequences may devote at least a footnote to the strange case of Theodore J. Kaczynski, the suspect in the Unabom case, who was an avid reader of Joseph Conrad's novels, especially "The Secret Agent."

According to The Washington Post, the F.B.I. believes Mr. Kaczynski used "Conrad" or "Konrad" as an alias on at least three occasions when he traveled to Sacramento, Calif., where the authorities say he may have mailed deadly package bombs.

Anthony P. Bisceglie, the lawyer for Mr. Kaczynski's mother and brother, adds that in 1984 the suspect reportedly told his family he was reading Conrad's novels for "about the dozenth time." In "The Secret Agent," published in 1907, the bomb-builder is known as "the Professor." The character is a "bespectacled, dingy" chemist who gives up his career and moves to "a small house down a shabby street, littered with straw and dirty paper." He moves there to build the perfect bomb.

His goal is elegant in its mad simplicity: "What's wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life ... Therefore I would shovel my stuff in heaps at the corners of the streets if I had enough for that; and as I haven't, I do my best by perfecting a really dependable detonator."

In fact, "The Secret Agent" and its companion volume, the 1911 novel "Under Western Eyes," are ferocious satires of the revolutionary mind-set. But Conrad might not have found it altogether surprising that someone could have found in "The Secret Agent" not a stark indictment of modernity but a plan of revolutionary action. In "Under Western Eyes," a Russian revolutionary says that "women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action."

Perhaps the blackest irony of all is that Mr. Verloc, the title character of "The Secret Agent," is ordered by his controller to blow up the Greenwich Observatory with one of the Professor's bombs. "The demonstration," he is told, "must be against learning — science ... Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics."

A little learning, Alexander Pope famously said, is a dangerous thing. Never has that truth been more spectacularly demonstrated than in the Unabom case.

"Industrial Society and Its Future," the Unabomber's "manifesto," is the work of an intelligent but half-educated man — of a mind floating in a cultural vacuum.

Its author would have done well to read the preface of "Under Western Eyes," in which Conrad removes the mask of irony and speaks with the terrible clarity of a prophet:

"The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given human institutions. These people are unable to see that all they can effect is merely a change of names."

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The New York Times, July 13, 1996, Section 1, Page 19. <www.nytimes.com>

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