

The Unabomber's Open Letter Exchange with Tom Tyler

April 19, 1995-July 4, 1995

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April 19, 1995: The San Francisco Chronicle publishes an article about the Oklahoma City bombing and the lengthy spate of bombings attributed to the Unabomber.

The first person quoted in the Chronicle article is Tom Tyler, a social psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

June 30, 1995: Tyler receives a letter from the Unabomber, along with a copy of the manifesto. Ted explained the reason he wrote to Tom is that he had read the article and would like to challenge his views:¹

“I said in the article that the Oklahoma City bomber and the Unabomber were examples of people who had exaggerated feelings that the government was out to get them,” Tyler later recalls. “The Unabomber objected to that characterization of him.”

July 4, 1995: Tyler then went onto publish an open letter in the San Fransico Chronicle that he knew the Unabomber read, where he said he welcomed Kaczynski’s suggestion that revolution “need not be violent or sudden,” he also said that Kaczynski is not alone in feeling discontented with today’s society, and that “it is wrong to simply say that people who are dissatisfied are in some way non-rational.” However, he also argued that industrial-technological society can be reformed.

¹ George Lardner and Lorraine Adams. To Unabomb Victims, a Deeper Mystery [Essay]. Washington Post. April 14, 1996. [Original link](#). [Archived link](#).

The Initial Article Quoting Tom Tyler

LOSS OF FAITH IN INSTITUTIONS / Bombings Linked To Social Malaise:¹

In a letter to one of his victims, the mysterious terrorist called the Unabomber warns of the evils of technology.

On a Michigan farm, as he is allegedly plotting the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh complains bitterly to neighbors that the U.S. government has become a tyrannical force.

They operate at very different extremes – the Unabomber declaring himself a left-wing anarchist, and McVeigh drawn to the growing militia movement on the right – but they seem to share a fundamental fear: A monolithic world order is robbing individuals of control.

”Whether it’s the technological elite or the government, it’s the same basic idea,” said Tom Tyler, head of the social psychology group at the University of California at Berkeley. ”It’s an exaggerated idea of a kind of secret, all-powerful group that’s controlling people’s lives.”

Although such views are typically marginalized as paranoid or fringe, some experts say they are merely the extreme expressions of a broader social malaise that also drives more ”mainstream” movements, such as the backlash against immigrants.

Americans, the analysts say, feel rootless and powerless. Faced with worrisome changes brought about by rapid technological advances, economic upheaval and the end of the Cold War, they are losing faith in basic social institutions – government, big business and the media.

”This kind of extremism usually comes during times of perceived threat and ambiguity, where people are not exactly sure what’s happening,” said social psychologist John Dovidio of Colgate University. ”We have a society that’s in moral chaos. Our values are shifting in ways it’s hard for anybody to feel comfortable with.”

¹ Pamela Burdman. LOSS OF FAITH IN INSTITUTIONS / Bombings Linked To Social Malaise [Essay]. SF Gate. 1 May 1995. Original link. Archived link.

Experts often relate such anxieties to turbulent economic times, when people feel shut out of job opportunities or excluded from the mainstream. Economic insecurity is a common explanation for the recent rise of citizens' militias and hate groups.

Although the Unabomber seems less motivated by economic worries, his vision of computers taking over the world manifests a similar fear of being left behind, said sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset at George Mason University in Virginia.

Disdain for big business, big government – and by extension, "big technology" – is nothing new in America, said Lipset.

"It declined sharply during the Depression and the New Deal," he said. "But since the Second World War, things have been reverting back to the classic American fear of the state. ... This is the most anti-statist country in the developed world."

Most people cope with troubled times without resorting to violence. But their fears may emerge in other ways.

"If we looked at more typical citizens who might be distrusting their government, the way that's getting manifested are things like the anti-immigration initiative, and 'three strikes, you're out,' the idea that we've got to have order and stop these people from destroying our society," said Tyler at UC Berkeley.

Psychologists typically distinguish between normal people and a small number of individuals who make some claim to the moral high ground to justify harming others. But, some warn, these extremists are really on a continuum with the rest of society and cannot simply be dismissed.

"I get nervous when it is said that these people are nuts, it doesn't reflect anything, it's just these crazies," said University of California at Santa Cruz psychology professor Thomas Pettigrew. "They said the same thing about people who desecrated Jewish synagogues. They always said that about the Klan."

While most experts agree that the recent acts of terrorism on U.S. soil are somehow a sign of the times, there is little consensus about what they portend.

One school of thought predicts that society will grow increasingly intolerant – and violent.

"We know that in Germany, the hyperinflation of the 1920s produced enormous insecurity in the middle class, then the depression broke open, the boundaries of society fell apart and the Nazi party came to power," said social psychologist Raphael Ezekiel at Michigan University.

"A big part of what they were doing was creating violence in the streets, then saying, 'Look, the government can't protect us from violence in the streets.' "

Others, such as Dovidio, say that the current rise in extremism reflects the ebb and flow of society and that tragedies like the Oklahoma bombing may actually inspire a search for greater harmony.

"Society has in general a self- corrective nature," said Dovidio. "Crises develop, kind of the flash points, and those crises help to bring people together again and develop a new sense of direction and coherence."

* * *

Ted's Letter to Tom Tyler

Ted:¹

Dr. Tyler:

This is a message from FC. The FBI calls us "unabom." We read a newspaper article in which you commented on recent bombings, including ours, as an indication of social problems. We are sending you a copy of a manuscript that we hope the New York Times will get published for us.

The trouble with psychologists is that in commenting on what people say or do they often concentrate exclusively on the non-rational motivations behind speech or behavior. But human behavior has a rational as well as an irrational component, and psychologists should not neglect the rational component. So if you take the trouble to read our manuscript and do any further thinking about the "unabom" case, we suggest that you should not only consider our actions as a symptom of some social or psychological problems; you should also give attention to the substance of the issues that we raise in the manuscript. You might ask yourself, for example, the following questions:

Do you think we are likely to be right, in a general way, about the kind of future that technology is creating for the human race?

If you think we are wrong, then why do you think so? How would you answer our arguments? Can you sketch a PLAUSIBLE scenario for the future technological society that does not have the negative characteristics indicated by our scenario?

If you think we are likely to be right about the future, do you consider that kind of future acceptable? If not, then what, if anything, do you think can be done about it?

Do you think our analysis of PRESENT social problems is approximately correct? If not, why not? How would you answer our arguments?

If you think we have identified some present social problems correctly, do you think anything can be done about them? Will they get better or worse with continual growth and progress?

¹ Ted Kaczynski. U-13: Letter from "FC" to Dr. Tom Taylor [Letter]. California University of Pennsylvania Special Collections. 1995-06-24. Original link. Archived link.

We apologize for sending you such a poor copy of our manuscript. We can't make copies at a public copy machine because people would get suspicious if they saw us handling our copies with gloves.

FC

* * *

Tom Tyler's Open Letter Response

An Open Letter – Professor to Unabomber / Response addresses concerns of 'FC' by Tom Tyler:¹

On May 1, The Chronicle published an article using both the Oklahoma bombing and the actions of the Unabomber (FC) as examples of general social malaise in America. I was one of several psychologists interviewed for the article.

I have received a letter from FC commenting on that story, along with a copy of his manuscript, "Industrial Society and its Future." I have read the manuscript and am writing this open letter to address the concerns raised by FC, both in his letter to me and in the manuscript itself.

I regret that we cannot communicate more directly. Hopefully, you will read this reply to the questions you have raised. In your letter, you suggest that we look beyond the questions of whether you have social or psychological problems and consider the substance of the issues you raise in your manuscript. This seems to me a fair request.

There is a widespread feeling of social malaise in our society today and we need to consider why people have those feelings. It is wrong to simply say that people who are dissatisfied are in some way nonrational.

We should also consider whether the structure of society is hurting people and needs to be changed. The manuscript you prepared directly addresses this issue.

I agree that it is important for all Americans to talk about what is wrong with our society and to try to find ways to improve it. By circulating your manuscript you are encouraging us to think about these important issues.

I have tried to read and consider your arguments with an open mind. I think violent actions are wrong, and I am pleased that you have decided to communicate your ideas by sending me (and others) your manuscript.

I cannot completely present or comment on all of the issues you raise in your lengthy manuscript within this letter. But I would like to note what seems

¹ Tom Tyler. An Open Letter – Professor to Unabomber / Response addresses concerns of 'FC' [Essay]. SF Gate. July 4, 1995. Original link. Archived link.

to me to be several key arguments. The central point of your manuscript is that the economic and technological changes in our society have had a negative effect on people's lives.

Your concerns about widespread feelings of inferiority and over-socialization into conformity with society's rule are widely shared, as is your suggestion that many people do not find their lives very satisfying. Many people today do feel that they have little control over their lives and few opportunities for autonomy.

As you say, they do not feel that they have power over their lives. I think that your feelings and concerns are widely shared. Many people in America are searching for ways to make their lives more fulfilling. I agree with you that technology is resulting in many social problems and that our society has to address those problems and their solution.

You also argue that industrial- technological society cannot be reformed. Here I am less certain that I agree. There have been increasing signs that people are making choices that create individual freedom and local autonomy for themselves.

People quit jobs in corporations to start their own small businesses, people move from large cities to the country, people voluntarily conserve water, recycle their trash, and lower their use of electricity and natural gas.

People are finding many ways to change their lives in positive ways. It seems to me that the revolution you advocate is already occurring. Instead of being trapped in the system through psychological or biological manipulation, people are finding ways to live better lives. People are developing the type of anti-technology ideology that you advocate in your manuscript.

Of course, many people's lives continue to be difficult, and change takes time.

But, given evidence that people are able to make choices that give them a sense of control, does it not seem possible that society can change?

You suggest two ways of creating social change: Developing an alternative ideology and promoting social stress and instability.

As I have noted, there is already evidence that people themselves are developing an alternative ideology that lessens the importance of technology and increases their control and autonomy over their lives.

But how is it useful to promote social stress and instability, especially through acts of violence?

My impression is that people react to violence by becoming less willing to change. Instead of encouraging social change, threats of violence make people fearful and unwilling to consider new ideas.

How can you encourage people to think about your alternative ideology by creating fear and insecurity?

I think that education is the key to changing people. Would it not be possible to try to develop the core group of intelligent, thoughtful, rational people that you describe in your manuscript?

That core group could articulate and develop a new ideology that allows us to move beyond the problems of technological-industrial society. Many members of our society would welcome new ideas about how to deal with the problems created by technology. That group could change society by showing people a better way to live their lives. Do you have thoughts about how such a group could be formed? Who should be on it? What the most important issues for it to address might be?

Let me close by saying that I especially welcome your suggestion in the manuscript that a "revolution" that changes the economic and technological basis of our society need not be violent or sudden. It can occur peacefully and over a period of decades. In that spirit, I think our society should consider the important issues you raise in your manuscript.

* * *

Finally, Ted made a note of having read Tylers' open letter response in his journal:²

[He] doubts my claim that the system can't be reformed, and suggests that my revolution is already in progress. As evidence, he mentions that people are moving to the country and recycling their trash.

² Ted Kaczynski. C2: Checks papers for publication of manuscript; lists hiding places for various articles with maps; list of names at Orvana Mining; serial numbers of guns; location of telephone boxes [Journal]. California University of Pennsylvania Special Collections. Original link. Archived link.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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