Re-Reading the Unabomber Manifesto

Tim Luke

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To the extent that the now infamous manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," covers cultural, economic and political issues *Telos* has addressed for over a quarter century, the odd story of Ted Kaczynski and the particularities of his strategic bombing campaign against "the system" warrants reexamination.[1] Unabombs killed three and wounded twenty-three others in a string of sixteen bombings from 1978 to 1995. Many of the victims, however, were individuals not usually associated with targets of terrorist activities: comparatively poor, obscure, or powerless academics whom the Unabomber saw as the key personnel supporting the operators of "the system."

Immediately following Kaczynski's arrest, *Newsweek* pointed out his "essentially "left-wing orientation"[2] and placed him in a line of famous American oddballs who, beginning with Thoreau, often take up "a grubby, lonely existence in one of the most rugged regions of the North American outback." In the case of the Unabomber, this pattern of life suggests such a profound alienation that "it makes Thoreau, with his two-year sabbatical at Walden Pond, look like a social butterfly."[3] Kirkpatrick Sale, by contrast, saw the Unabomber's activities as those of "a rational and serious man, deeply committed to his cause, who has given a great deal of thought to his work and a great deal of time to his expression of it."[4] And, of course, analyses indulging in psycho-babble were not lacking. Thus, Maggie Scharf claimed that "the diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder seems to be the most illuminating explanation of the Unabomber's seemingly incomprehensible behavior." Allegedly, Kaczynsky is "deeply injured at the core and suffering from sorely depleted supplies to self-esteem . . . with a

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[1] David Kaczynski turned his brother, Ted, over to authorities after noting some disturbing parallels in Ted's personal letters, which espoused radical antiestablishment positions, and the manifesto published in *The Washington Post* (September 19, 1995). Because he was not caught in the act and did not confess to any of these crimes, Kaczynski's prosecution rests exclusively on forensic and circumstantial evidence. See *The Washington Post* (June 22, 1996), A3. The "Unabomber" tag is a product of the FBI's investigation, which described the elusive bomber by his attacks on universities (un) and airlines (a) as "Unabombs" from "the Unabomber." Nonetheless, government press releases to the media indicate that Kaczynski's small cabin in the Montana woods has yielded a considerable cache of potentially damaging evidence. The Justice Department also alleges it found lists of actual and potential bombing victims, as well as a secret numerical code used by the Unabomber to verify his identify in communicating with authorities. Kaczynski's DNA — as detected from saliva testing — apparently correlates positively with traces extracted from the postage stamps affixed to mail bombs dating back to 1978. Additionally, observers at hotels, restaurants and bus terminals have put Kaczynski in or around Sacramento, California, a location frequently used to post the bomb packages, when mail bombs were either mailed or detonated. See *The New York Times* (June 16, 1996), A12.

[2] Joe Klein, "The Unabomber and the Left," in *Newsweek* (April 22, 1996), p. 39.

[3] *Newsweek* (April 15, 1996), pp. 32-33.

[4] In his eagerness to promote his then forthcoming book on the Luddites, Sale wrote that "the Unabomber stands in a long-line of anti-technology critics" who share a great many views with himself as well as "a number of people today who might be called neo-Luddites — Jerry Mander, Chellis Glenndinning, Jeremy Rifkin, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Dave Foreman, Langdon Winner, Stephenie Mills and John Zerzan among them." See Kirkpatrick Sale, "Is There a Method in His Madness?" in *The Nation,* 261, No. 9 (September 25, 1995), p. 311.

sense of inner emptiness and painful feelings of unworthiness, despair and desolation."[5] Whether or not Kaczynski is mad or reasonable, narcissistic or selfless, evil or virtuous is not particularly interesting. More relevant are the relations between Kaczynski's life, his reputed manifesto, and the whole cultural context from which they emerged.

While the Unabomber manifesto is a flawed document, crudely reducing a complex society to "the system," it contains interesting insights. There are no signs that the Unabomber followed any of the *Telos* debates over the years, or pitched his arguments to today's burgeoning populist movements. A quick survey of the footnotes suggests that its author did not have access to materials much more sophisticated than what one might find in second-hand book shops or a public library in small western towns. Not unlike Paul and Percival Goodman's *Com- munitas* and their analysis of how "the means of livelihood" structure "ways of life," the Unabomber's violent destruction of those "man-made things" of "engineering and architecture" that are "the heaviest and biggest part of what we experience"[6] indicates that he recognizes how freedom is constrained by the categorical imperatives embedded in ordinary things.

Written in a disorganized series of short numbered paragraphs and running some 35,000 words in length, the Unabomber's manifesto begins with radical sentiments that many have shared for nearly 200 years: "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race," inasmuch as what is identified as the workings of "the industrial system" have "destabilized society, have made life unfulftlling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world" (¶1).[7] The essay outlines a vision of "what must be done," allegedly from the perspective of a burnt-out ex-academic living in Montana's backwoods. Because of this predicament, the bombings became a ploy to capture public attention.[8] But how lasting was this impression? The Unabomber killed 3 people in the course of 17 years, and the message in his manifesto was mostly tossed away with the rest of the September 19,1995 newspaper.

The Unabomber concedes that the manifesto is not comprehensive: it examines "only some of the negative developments that have grown out of the industrial system" — particularly those that "have received insufficient public attention or in which we have something new to say" (¶5). What he believes has received inadequate attention, or to be "new," are attempts to register how and why technology as "a means of

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[5] Maggie Scharf, "The Mind of the Unabomber," in *The New Republic* 214 (June 10, 1996: 20-23), p. 22.

[6] Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (New York: Vintage, 1960), p. 3.

[7] All subsequent citations from the manifesto will be to the paragraphs in the published text, rather than to particular page numbers.

[8] If the Unabomber had not committed any terroristic acts, he reasons, "and had submitted the writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been published." In order to get the message "before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people"(¶96).

livelihood" deprives people of their dignity and autonomy, while imposing a sense of inferiority and powerlessness. While this may be dismissed as another exercise in red-green confusion along the lines of Sale's "New Luddites,"[9] there is more here than this superficial critique lets on.[10] The Unabomber's belief that technology increases life-expectancy and everyday ease as it decreases life-enjoyment and freedom parallels Marcuse's reading of technology.[11]

What has garnered too little attention is the deadening impact of capital, research, and technology in market-mediated choices — how an allegedly emancipatory technology can, even within capitalist liberal-democratic regimes, result in a rational totalitarian order. The Unabomber approaches this question in several ways, but the concept of "oversocialization" captures much of his distaste. He sees human dignity and freedom bleeding away into pre-processed modes of subjectivity: "We are socialized to conform to many norms of behavior that do not fall under the headings of morality. Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. In many over socialized people this results in a sense of constraint and powerlessness that can be a severe hardship" (¶26). Ironically, he sees this condition afflicting leftists even more acutely than most people, because the prevailing blocs of power and wealth limit modern leftism mostly to acting out its resistance as artificial negativity with no relation to actual revolution (¶26-30).[12][13]

To compensate for lost power, the system not only provides for but also endorses "surrogate activities" that industrial peoples "set up for themselves merely in order to have some goal to work toward ... for the sake of the 'fulfillment' that they get from pursuing the goal" (¶39). Because "only minimal effort is necessary to satisfy one's physical needs," (¶39) most of what preoccupies anyone is a surrogate: art, science, athletics, literature as well as acquiring money, participation in corporatism, engaging

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[9] See Steven Marcus, "Rage Against the Machine: The New Luddites, the Old Luddites, and Some Very Bad History," in *The New Republic* 214 (June 10, 1996), pp. 30-38.

[10] See Kirkpatrick Sale, *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and their War on the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1996), pp. 261-279.

[11] According to Marcuse, the daily mechanism of the industrial system "provides the great rationalization of the unfreedom of man and demonstrates the 'technical' impossibility of being autonomous, of determining one's own life. This unfreedom appears neither irrational nor as political, but rather as submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labor." While technology/ industry/business pose as mediations of cultural liberation and humanitarian progress, they also generate "the legitimacy of domination" that opens out upon "a rationally totalitarian society." See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. xvi.

[12] As the Unabomber observes, "the system couldn't care less what kind of music a man listens to, what kind of clothes he wears or what religion he believes in as long as he studies in school, holds a respectable job, climbs the status ladder, is a 'responsible' parent, is nonviolent and so forth"(¶29). Conceding that his analysis is very rough, he argues that the rational totalitarianism represented by oversocialization causes "low self-esteem, depressive tendencies, and defeatism," because this regime "tries to socialize us to a greater extent than any previous society"(¶32).

[13] Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. xii.

in social activism, and pursuing celebrity. These surrogates are are "less satisfying than the pursuit of real goals ... one indication of this is the fact that, in many or most cases, people who are deeply involved in surrogate activities are never satisfied, never at rest" (¶41). The Unabomber states that "the effort needed to satisfy biological needs does not occur AUTONOMOUSLY, but by functioning as parts of an immense social machine" (¶41). When meeting real needs takes only trivial effort, and satisfying surrogate desires is given such latitude, the stage is set for individual marginalization on many interrelated levels. Thus a very fine line divides "Sensible Sam the Smart Consumer" from "Crazy Kaczynski the Alleged Founder of the Freedom Club."

The Unabomber's interpretation again parallels Marcuse's account of technology as "instruments of social and political control," because all individuals' sense of their current needs takes place through the scientific organization of labor and leisure, "which operate beyond and outside the work process and condition the individuals in accord with the dominant social interests." Autonomy under these conditions is difficult to attain because the individual's power is preempted by the highly rationalized social regime, which also, in turn, redefines rationality to suit the profit targets of its "merchants of desire."[14] As Marcuse notes, "the apparatus to which the individual is to adjust and adapt himself is so rational that individual protests and liberation appear not only hopeless but as utterly irrational. The system of life created by modern industry is defined in terms of expediency, convenience and efficiency... Rational behavior becomes identical with a matter-of-factness which teaches reasonable submissiveness and thus guarantees getting along with the prevailing order."[15]

Even though his resistance was futile, and perhaps irrational, Kaczynski acted against expediency, convenience, and efficiency in a life that would seem sociopathic even before he was indicted as the Unabomber. To live normally for him would have further interdicted his already tenuous freedom. As he emphasizes, this question of autonomy is decisive: "For most people it is through the power process — having a goal, making an AUTONOMOUS effort and attaining the goal — that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired" (¶44). Industrial society destroys these conditions for autonomous action by embedding people in weak, unfree roles in every amorphous aspect of market-mediated social reproduction. This is why this system is in crisis and has to be destroyed by a popular revolution: "when one does not have adequate opportunity to go through the power process the consequences are (depending on the individual and on the way the power process is disrupted) boredom, demoralization, low self-esteem, inferiority feelings, defeatism, depression, anxiety, guilt, frustration, hostility, spouse or child abuse, insatiable hedonism, abnormal sexual behavior, sleep disorders, eating disorders, etc." (¶44).

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[14] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

[15] Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modem Technology," in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences,* 9 (1941), p. 421.

To crush the regime of oversocialization and revitalize the power process, the Unabomber touts the merits of violent revolt, which are seemingly assumed to work as billed. His obviously poor sense of unintended consequences, however, pops up in this celebration of revolution, which must be "immediate" (¶166), "total" (¶179), "ecocentric" (H183), "technoscientific" (¶193), "global" (¶195), and "communitarian" (¶199). The preservation of wild nature and individual autonomy depend on dismantling "the system." Yet, with complete naivete, he somehow believes that his revolutionary program is antithetical to the visions of the future espoused by those technocrats, leftists or politicians who keep the present system running so smoothly. In positing that "the single overriding goal must be the elimination of modern teclmology, and that no other goal [social justice, material equality, popular participation] can be allowed to compete with this one" (¶205), he argues everything else should be examined through an open-ended "empirical approach" (¶206). Not seeing how his revolutionary analysis mimics the industrial system's elitist managerialism, the Unabomber merely reasserts the enlightened self-empowerment co-opted by the captains of industry, inventors of tomorrow, or scions of commerce. In accord with the Enlightenment schema, he asserts "history is made by active, determined minorities, not by the majority, which seldom has a clear and consistent idea of what it really wants" (¶189). Therefore, the coming revolution will follow an ideology written in two versions: one "more sophisticated should address itself to people who are intelligent, thoughtful and rational" (¶187), the other "should be propagated in a simplified form that will enable the unthinking majority to see the conflict of technology vs. nature in unambiguous terms" (¶188).

The revolutionaries of the Unabomber's Freedom Club must follow the classic Bolshevik strategy of energizing committed radicals and sensitizing the uninformed masses to ready themselves to coproduce their inevitable future under a visionary vanguard's lead: "until the time comes for the final push toward revolution, the task of revolutionaries will be less to win the shallow support of the majority than to build a small core of deeply committed people. As for the majority, it will be enough to make them aware of the existence of the new ideology and remind them of it frequently; though of course it will be desirable to get majority support to the extent that this can be done without weakening the core of seriously committed people" (¶189). This peculiar vision of the transition is decisively negative: "we have no illusions about the feasibility of creating a new, ideal form of society. Our goal is only to destroy the existing form of society" (¶182). The possibility that there are such big majorities of people to mobilize only because of how technological society works seems to elude the Unabomber's allegedly intelligent, thoughtful, rational elite.

Of course, Kaczynski does not buy into the redistributive millenarianism of 19th century socialism. He warns against "leftists of the most power-hungry type" (¶217), because ultimately "leftism is a totalitarian force" (¶219) "characterized by arrogance or a dogmatic approach to ideology" (¶230). Therefore, social justice as a revolutionary goal is forbidden because it tends to attract leftist do-gooders with power-hungry arrogance. It would compel revolutionaries to preserve large-scale, organization-dependent

technology, and would dilute the ecocentric focus of the revolution. In short, "it must not be allowed to interfere with the effort to get rid of the technological system" (¶201). Despite efforts to anticipate the possible consequences of mounting a revolution whose "focus will be on technology and economics, not politics" (¶93), there are no guarantees that this blow against technological progress would not self-destruct. In many ways, the Unabomber only seems committed to replacing technocratic new class managers with small groups of green leaders, who would rule by wise ecological fiat. What guarantees are there in his designs that anti-systemic ecological technophobes, like the industrial system's technocrats, would not lead "all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown" (¶180)?

The Unabomber embeds his critique in a fateful choice between two kinds of technology: "Small-scale technology and organization-dependent technology" (¶208). Pursuing a line of attack that basically concludes by celebrating the collapse of Rome and the rise of medieval feudalism, he observes that the Roman empire's organization-dependent technology (roads, aqueducts, urban sanitation, large buildings) did regress as the empire collapsed, while its small-scale technology survived in many households and villages. Since "small-scale technology is technology that can be used by small-scale communities without outside assistance" (¶208), it must play a major role in any post-revolutionary scenario. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, "primitive INDIVIDUALS and SMALL GROUPS actually had considerable power over nature; or maybe it would be better to say power WITHIN nature" (¶198). Therefore, "one should argue that the power of the INDUSTRIAL SYSTEM should be broken, and that this will INCREASE the power and freedom of INDIVIDUALS and SMALL GROUPS" (¶199).

Following the Goodmans, Marcuse, or Mumford, the nub of the Unabomber's protest is found in these questions: how does complex technology, defined as large-scale or organization-dependent, determine life by eliminating freedom and substituting empty surrogate activities for personal power? What must be done to escape the destructive consequences — on an individual, social or global level — of this industrial system? The destruction of the system depends on the disruption of the system's propagation of empty surrogates or false needs. If the mechanisms of such organizational dependence could be broken down by violent revolution, terrorism, or popular disinterest, then the networks needed for operating them "would quickly be lost" (¶210). As the Unabomber articulates this possibility, he anticipates the necessary advent of a new "dark age," arguing that: "once this technology had been lost for a generation or so it would take centuries to rebuild it, just as it took centuries to build it the first time around. Surviving technical books would be few and scattered. As industrial society, if built from scratch, without outside help, can only be built in a series of stages. You need tools to make tools... A long process of economic development and progress in social organization is required. And, even in the absence of an ideology opposed to technology, there is no reason to believe that anyone would be interested in rebuilding industrial society" (¶210).

Organization is where power actually ebbs and flows rather than in technology or the state or any individual alone. According to the Unabomber, all people need power; it is what defines autonomous human beings. However, the industrial revolution was about the concentration of power in abstract social machines. As a result, these industrial megamachines are where power for a few persists as powerlessness for everyone else. "Modern man as a collective entity, that is — the industrial system — has immense power over nature" (¶197). But, even more evil is the fact that "modern INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS OF INDIVIDUALS have far less power than primitive man ever did," because "the vast power of 'modern man' over nature is exercised not by individuals or small groups but by large organizations" (¶197). For an individual to wield the power of technology, it occurs only "under the supervision and control of the system" as "you need a license for everything and with the license come rules and regulations," so the individual has *only* "the technological powers with which the system chooses to provide him" (¶198).

Here too is the source of an intriguing level of operational survivability in organization-dependent technology; its codes of authority, legitimacy or use are embedded in the artifacts needed for its application. Consequently, the Unabomber is unequivocal about his immediate revolutionary program: "Until the industrial system has been thoroughly wrecked, the destruction of that system must be the revolutionaries' ONLY goal ... if the revolutionaries permit themselves to have any other goal than the destruction of technology, they will be tempted to use technology as a tool for reaching that other goal. If they give in to that temptation, they will fall right back into the technological trap, because modern technology is a unified, tightly organized system, so that in order to retain SOME technology, one finds oneself obliged to retain MOST technology, here one ends up sacrificing only token amounts of technology . . . never forget that the human race with technology is like an alcoholic with a barrel of wine" (¶200, 203). Fortunately for the Freedom Club, this tendency toward breakdown is already occurring on a global scale due to the excesses and inherent flaws in the large-scale disorder of organization-dependent industrial systems. When all is said and done, "the industrial system will not break down purely as a result of revolutionary action," because its vulnerabilities are a product of the regime evolving such that "it is already in enough trouble so that there would be a good chance of its eventually breaking down by itself anyway" (¶167).

Beyond the more obvious difficulties of constructing an anti-technological revolution, the Unabomber employs a simplistic construction of "nature" as the fount of indisputable objective reason that revolutionists should contrapose to the sullied irrationalities of technology. While his references suggest he has not perused the works of Arne Naess, Bill Devall or George Sessions, this reading of "nature" is straight out of deep ecology. With no sense of irony, the Unabomber asserts that "the positive ideal that we propose is Nature" (¶183), and "it is not necessary for the sake of nature to set up some chimerical utopia or any new kind of social order" (¶184). This might be true,

but could not nature itself, particularly when constructed along such deep ecological lines, become a new kind of social order for some chimerical utopia?

The Unabomber's categories of nature basically play ineffectually with Lukacs' two senses of nature.[16] "First nature," or "WILD nature; those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control" (¶183), is set up against technology as "second nature," or "an immense social machine" (¶41) composed of "technology that depends on large-scale social organization" (¶208). Human nature is the battleground between first and second nature, because "with wild nature we include human nature, by which we mean those aspects of the functioning of the human individual that are not subject to regulation by organized society but are products of chance, or free will, or God" (1,183). Destroy second nature, and first nature will be redeemed and reclaimed, allowing human nature to flourish amidst its tests of authentic power processes in the wild, not with artificial surrogate activities. In addition to healing the scars left on nature by the industrial revolution, "getting rid of industrial society will accomplish a great deal ... it will remove the capacity of organized society to keep increasing its control over nature (including human nature) ... it is certain most people will live close to nature, because in the absence of advanced technology there is no other way that people can live. To feed themselves they must be peasants or herdsmen or fishermen or hunters, etc.. . . local autonomy should tend to increase, because lack of advanced technology and rapid communications will limit the capacity of governments or other large organizations to control local communities" (¶184).

These radical interpretations of nature, however, are no less artificial or no more certain than the positive ideologies of technology the Unabomber opposes.[17] Instead, he simply conventionalizes a series of fashionable ecocentric assumptions about nature, and transforms them into constant timeless truths, like so many others who naively sign on to the good ship "deep ecology" without thinking about where its admirals might sail them. On this account, Klein's dismissal of the Unabomber for his "essential left-wing orientation" is laughable.[18] The Unabomber's contempt for modern leftism seconds deep ecology's criticisms of modern socialism's trust in big science, complex technology, and vast organizations to create limitless material abundance. Nonetheless, his commitment to "wild nature" does not lead ail the way into a biocentric Gaia worship; indeed, he razzes such ecospiritualist devotions as frivolous play-acting, even though he admits that nature often inspires quasi-religious reverence.

Rather than singing from Marxist hymnals, the Unabomber merely recycles questionable assumptions cribbed from primers on wild nature philosophies: nature is the opposite of technology, nature is beautiful, nature is popular, radical environments must exalt nature and oppose technology, nature takes care of itself, nature is a spon-

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[16] Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 83-110.

[17] Tim Luke, "Community and Ecology," in *Telos,* 88 (Summer 1991), pp. 69-79.

[18] Joe Klein, "The Unabomber and the Left," *op. cit.,* p. 39

taneous creation, humans once coexisted with nature without doing any damage to it, only industrial societies really devastate nature (¶184). Most, if not all of these points cannot be defended because they are by-products of skewed misinterpretations. Yet, within this utopia, the Unabomber draws his certitudes for a new social order constrained materially by this prime directive: nature's attributes make it necessary to destroy technology so that small groups of autonomous individuals can coexist with it in ways that do not devastate nature, and thereby let it take care of itself. Clearly, this image is appealing, but it also necessitates the destruction of a global web of interrelated, complex organization-dependent technologies that provide a vital habitat for billions of people. Without such technologies, nature will take care of itself, and let these immense populations die to the extent that their members cannot live autonomously like primitive man, or "find and prepare edible roots . . . track game and take it with homemade weapons . . . protect himself from heat, cold, rain, dangerous animals, etc." (¶198).

Maybe Kaczynski began to approach this ecological ideal in Montana, but unlike primitive man he also received a money allowance from his aged mother and perplexed brother. Many of his tools (a bicycle, his shack, the typewriters, various explosives, etc.) were also artifacts salvaged from industrial society. Moreover, mail-bombing computer store owners, timber industry lobbyists, or research university professors will not contribute to the collapse of a vast social machine that sustains billions of human beings. Living autonomously in small groups might turn out well on the level of Rousseau's noble savages, but it also could turn sour on the scale of the Road Warrior's ceaseless quest for petrol.

Basically, the Unabomber's manifesto is an essay on the origins of inhumanity, inequality, and insensitivity. The compounding of architecture/engineering/ utility/ transportation/communication infrastructures with natural environments are now such circumambient constraints on human beings that second nature is actively selecting autonomy, power processes, and small group intimacy out of the human species.[19][20] The industrial system is not animated by conventional political ideologies, "but by technical necessity" (¶119). The survival of mechanical networks of human and inhuman actors in these vast arcologies rob once free individuals of their autonomy and power, because the individual's fate now "MUST depend on decisions that he personally cannot influence to any great extent. . . . Because production depends on the cooperation of very large numbers of people" (¶117). These biopowered populations accept their daily disciplinary directives. Plainly, the autonomy of local communities disappears as these formations "become more enmeshed with and dependent on large-scale systems like public utilities, computer networks, highway systems, the mass communications media, the modern health care system" as it becomes more obvious "that technology applied in one location often affects people at other locations far away" (¶118).

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[19] Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1970).
[20] Tim Luke, "The Politics of Arcological Utopia," in *Telos* 101 (Fall 1994), pp. 55-78.

Here the Unabomber grasps a key populist complaint: the colonization of everyday life by industrial society is becoming virtually irresistible and irreversible as New Class symbolic analysts rob everyone of their autonomous power potential.[21] Inasmuch as each new technical device appears to advance life in a desirable fashion, technological systems "as a WHOLE narrow our sphere of freedom" (¶128) and success in resisting it "can be hoped for only by fighting the technological system as a whole; but that is revolution, not reform" (¶130). The Unabomber sees reform as the existing regime's most false promise, that all efforts to make any room for "a sense of purpose and for autonomy within the system are no better than a joke" (¶120). Reformers ask how personal freedom and small group autonomy might be mixed with the benefits of high technology. The needs of the technical order, however, will eventually overrule any true efforts to make reforms as the system's demands impose inhumane consequences.[22] Ultimately, the existing order works much better without the uncertainties or lack of focus humane values would introduce into its operations. As the Unabomber fears, "it is NOT in the interest of the system to preserve freedom or small-group autonomy. On the contrary, it is in the interest of the system to bring human behavior under control to the greatest possible extent" (¶39).

At one level, Kaczynski's reading of technology and industrial society might be interpreted as a crude misinterpretation of Marcuse's "great refusal," being carried on as a real revolution by a true "outsider." Indeed, his rehash of Cai-Berkeley activists assailing "the system" at times sounds like the 1968 *Zeitgeist* echoing back from the Montana Rockies. Fearing absorption by modern technological civilization, Kaczynski simply dropped out, refusing to cooperate with most of the high technology systems that have transformed everyday life since the 1880s. Living in a ten by twelve foot shack with no indoor plumbing, electricity, telephone connection, gas, or municipal services, he eked out an intentionally frugal existence, his level of technological sophistication not exceeding 1896. A woodstove for heat, a bicycle for transport, game animals for food, a manual typewriter for communication, and local library books for entertainment, the Unabomber appears to have met his "single overriding goal ... the elimination of modern technology" (¶7) in his own daily existence. Yet, few would forsake their surrogate activities in today's world and the ultimate convenience of modern living to accept growing and eating their own turnips outside a shack in the woods as their version of an authentic power process.

One need not condone what Kaczynski has done to comprehend the logic of his actions. As marginalized as he was throughout his own life, much of what he did after leaving Berkeley in 1968 amounts to a one-man resistance movement. In a society that celebrates group conformity on the job and at home, he militantly chose a strictly feral existence. He does not claim that the end of industrial society is near; indeed,

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[21] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (London: Harvester Wheatsleaf, 1993).

[22] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995).

it can persist for many more decades simply racking up greater levels of ecological destruction and social anomie. Industrial society has a future, albeit a bleak one that offers solitary, nasty, brutish, and short lives. So Kaczynski attempted to capitalize on its bleakness to leverage a revolution among subjects who can still act and think on their own.

The conditions of association which bring human beings into coexistence with machines are rarely, if ever, discussed. The Unabomber's manifesto focuses on this concern. Just as Gramsci asked how "Fordism" combined capital, technology, labor, markets and culture in a determinate new social assembly line — "Americanism"[23] — so too does the Unabomber ask how this industrial system is forging a new psycho-physical nexus for power, science, freedom, and organization that is dehumanizing, disempowering, and decommunalizing everyday life. The answer he provides — technical necessity or organizational momentum — is not always all-inclusive. Other forces also structure the conditions of association. But because the Unabomber is so averse to "modem leftism," he neglects such additional factors as market rationality, class bias, ideological expectations or bureaucratic imperatives in his examination of how collectives of people and machines actually become associated.

Telos has considered these questions in the past, and it continues its lines of investigation into the present.[24] In many ways, the phenomenon of populism is the political problematic that most directly focuses on questions of "who, whom" in organization-dependent, large-scale technology. Believing that new associations of autonomous individuals on a more than local, but less than national level can work as viable alternatives to the surrogates of industrial democracy, militarized nationalism, and personal consumption within the industrial system of developed nation-states, populists — old and new — advance their visions for alternative conditions of associating ordinary people with new arrangements of machines, which would accentuate personal competencies, familial cohesion, and communal ecologies. These modes of forging technical collectives also could stand against industrial society and for sane environmental practices, but they do not stand for going "back to the future" to revitalize the power process with neolithic hunting-and-gathering lifestyles.

In fact, even the Unabomber admits that power processes in societies as developed as those of 19th century America most likely were quite satisfying (¶56-57). Hence, there may be no need to eradicate those forms of industrial metabolism simply to abolish the hypertrophied disorder of corporate consumerism and warfare/welfare statism as it has evolved since the 1880s. Myths of living in/for "wild nature" cannot eliminate the docile domination of existing arcologies' second nature; instead, its organization-dependent, large-scale systems with all of their surrogate activities and technological

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[23] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), pp. 272-318.

[24] See *Telos* 103 (Spring 1995): Paul Piccone, "Postmodern Populism," pp. 45-86; Tim Luke, "Postmodern Populism and Ecology," pp. 87-110; and Emory Roe, "Critical Theory, Sustainable Development and Populism," pp. 149-165.

controls need to be transformed from within to create workable populist communities. What is amiss here is not technologies which create domination, but rather inhumane systems of corporate control and statist domination that misinform and disorganize technologies. Populist thinkers such as Lasch or Lovins have attempted to disembed these insights from their current conditions of inarticulation and to derive answers from knowledge available in their own communities, economies, and technologies.[25] Because of these face-to-face or small group modes of economic interaction, even the Unabomber could envision frontier societies in 19th century America as ones in which the power process worked well: "the 19th century frontiersman had the sense (also largely justified) that he created change himself, by his own choice. Thus a pioneer settled on a piece of land of his own choosing and made into a farm through his own effort. . . participated as a member of a relatively small group in the creation of a new, ordered community ... it satisfied the pioneer's need for the power process" (¶57). Bearing in mind the associated but unaddressed questions of dispossessing Mexican and Native American communities in the process, as a result, "19th century American society had an optimistic and self-confident tone, quite unlike today's society" (¶56). These are the traces America's 19th century populists struggled to keep, and what contemporary populists aspire to regain.

Real autonomy for the Unabomber comes from broadening human freedom. By "freedom," he means "the opportunity to go through the power process, with real rather than artificial goals of surrogate activities, and without interference, manipulation or supervision from anyone, especially from any large organization" (¶93). Reiterating *Telos* ' articulation of the authentic message of populism, "freedom means being in control (either as an individual or as a member of a SMALL group) of the life-and-death issues of one's existence; food, clothing, shelter and defense against whatever threats there may be in one's environment" (¶93). Freedom is not the meaningless freedom of consumer choice. It means, rather, "having power; not the power to control other people but the power to control the circumstances of one's own life," because as most savvy populists observe with regard to big business and big government "one does not have freedom if anyone else (especially a large organization) has power over one, no matter how benevolently, tolerantly and permissively that power may be exercised" (¶93). The "freedom to choose," as celebrated in advertising, is merely "an element of a social machine and has only a certain set of prescribed and delimited freedoms; freedoms that are designed to serve the needs of the social machine more than those of the individual" (¶97). Autonomy is more than political rights, economic discretion, or cultural liberation; it is also an ecological condition in which someone has the ability and latitude to determine the totality of their material interconnections in both nature and society.

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[25] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991); and Amory B. Lovins, *Soft Energy Paths: Toward a Durable Peace* (San Francisco: Ballinger, 1977).

Despite the Unabomber's celebration of 19th century simplicities, his remarkably bleak reading of industrial society suggests no appreciation for the communities of that time. While many of his insights parallel those of populism, his lack of any grounding in community life are reflected in his angry loner analyses of the power process. In the wastelands of postwar suburbia, the Cold War research university and backwoods Montana, Kaczynski missed the rootedness and direction provided by close cooperative and conflictual community life. It is not too surprising, therefore, that the Unabomber manifesto calls for a return to small groups of humans struggling with nature red-in-tooth-and-claw to revitalize feelings of individual identity, authentic autonomy or close community. Populism must be integrated within the community life of those groups seeking to create workable conditions for their cultural, economic and political freedom. Most importantly, these groups need a much keener sense of culture than the narrow, almost crabbed sociological aberration of culture permeating the manifesto. Without the cultural particularity of an aesthetics or ethics grounded in stable communities, populism makes no sense. Culture is much more than "leftist psychology" or "surrogate activities in the industrial-technological system." Seeing culture, as the Unabomber does, only as the conduits of oversocialized bondage washes away all of the exciting contradictions and cross-purposes of living communities.

Kaczynski never led a "normal life," and his personal experiences with the system appear to have done much to aid and abet his slide into socially abnormal ways. The subtext of media reporting on these tendencies is that his own arrogance and intelligence got in the way of "fitting in," so he opted out, and finally decided to strike back. This is Kaczynski's key point: the routines of existing society are the heart of its inhumane reproduction. Strike at them successfully, and destabilization of everything in industrial society will be realized. His life seems to have been one of scholarly promise, followed by a consciously embraced internal exile. Yet, his manifesto makes so many valid criticisms against industrial society that it cannot be ignored. Simply dismissing this philosophical statement with all of its flaws as a demented screed from a wacko exprofessor who turned to terrorism and a hermit's life to cope with his failures as a human being, which has been the mass media's recurring spin on Kaczynski since his arrest on April 3, 1996, dodges all of the interesting issues of this sad affair.

The Ted K Archive

Tim Luke
Re-Reading the Unabomber Manifesto
Spring 1996

Telos 107 (Spring 1996), pp. 81–94.
<journal.telospress.com/content/1996/107/81.abstract>

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