

Voices from the Collective: The Unabomber

After Ted Kaczynski was arrested as the suspected Unabomber, Bad listmembers began discussing what impact his actions might have.

Bruce Buchan

May 1996

In each issue of *Bad Subjects*, we print an email from an active discussion thread on the *Bad Subjects* electronic mailing list. After Ted Kaczynski was arrested as the suspected Unabomber, listmembers began discussing what impact his actions might have. This posting comes from the middle of that discussion and appears as it did on the list, unedited.

Date: Fri, 12 Apr 1996 11:28:30 +0930
From: Bruce Buchan <bruceb@olis.mtx.net.au>
To: Multiple recipients of <bad@eserver.org>
Subject: Re: Unabomber

The Unabomber will become a focus for public execration for a while ("If only he had used his talents for GOOD!"), while the faceless technocrats, defence contractors, etc. will continue with their work. We will all dwell on the suffering he has caused, and forget the suffering of millions caused by governments and states. His pathological misanthropy will be held up for all to abhor, while ignoring the fact that pathological misanthropy has always been richly rewarded by governments and states.

Do you have any ideas on how to change this attitude? No, this is not a sarcastic-smug question. I have long pondered this idea of why citizens of North America, at least in Canada and the US, have not been able to grasp the idea that what is immediate and obvious is not everything. Do you think this is just a sign of our superficial-materialistic society? Maybe it's ingrained in our culture.. so does the answer lie in re-education?

Hmm, not quite twenty questions, but almost.

As an Australian, I cannot speak for the attitudes of Canadians or North Americans, but I believe that in liberal-capitalist societies, the representation of such figures as the unabomber (and also terrorists, revolutionaries, demonstrators, guerillas, protestors, etc.) in the media is specifically designed to make citizens perceive them as abnormal and threatening, while seeing the forces of law and order as trustworthy, benign, and peaceful. All aggressive societies need an enemy to maintain internal unity. This may sound like a contradiction, but having an enemy makes it easier to achieve unity of purpose in conquest, defence, or merely in defining one's own society and culture. In settler societies, such as the US, Australia, New Zealand, etc., the indigenous population was a convenient enemy. But centralised states have always used warfare in order to establish or extend state power.

Thus, the identification of an enemy, and its consequent demonisation serves important political-ideological functions. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon

in recent times is the demonisation of 'the terrorist'. The media has been the most influential purveyor of this image of the furtive, deranged, or fanatical killer devoid of humanity, honour, or common decency. The terrorist is someone who threatens the established order, brings violence into the heart of 'peaceful society' - and this is the image which the media (in conjunction with the police) appears to be peddling about the unabomber (although perhaps we are missing out on more nuanced coverage in Australia!?).

Of course on one level it is impossible to deny the validity of this message, and I have no wish to mount a defence of the unabomber. The unabomber, like any other terrorist, has caused violence and suffering, and it is in the interest of ordinary citizens that this violence be stopped. But media and other representation of such figures is more sophisticated than this. The point of all this effort is not merely to condemn 'the enemy', but rather, to portray violence as something alien to the established order, and to represent the forces of law and order (and the state in general) as benign and legitimate. It is this message I would wish to challenge, rather than to mount any defence of the unabomber.

Perhaps this does not address your question. If not, let me know.

Best Wishes,
Bruce.

The Ted K Archive

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<web.archive.org/.../bad.eserver.org/issues/1996/26/voices.html>

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