

HSS, the FBI, and the Unabomber

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Abstract: In the mid-1990s, efforts to identify the Unabomber brought HSS and the FBI into a brief collaborative relationship until the 1996 arrest of Theodore Kaczynski. This article explores this strange syzygy of organizations and individuals. In doing so, it considers Kaczynski’s own writings about science and technology—most notably, his 1995 manifesto “Industrial Society and Its Future”—and places this against a backdrop of scholarly and popular writings, as well as the so-called Science Wars of that era. While uncomfortable to consider, Kaczynski’s manifesto is one of the most widely read documents about modern science and technology. One might even go so far as to say that Kaczynski was the most-read science and technology studies (STS) author of the 1990s. We also consider HSS’s collaboration with the FBI as well as the social responsibilities of historians of science then and now.

Only three front-page articles in the *New York Times* in the past century mention the History of Science Society.¹ One was a prosaic reference from December 1960. It noted that HSS members would join other professional groups for an upcoming meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Science.² The other two articles were about the Unabomber.

Today, the juxtaposition of an infamous domestic terrorist with the History of Science Society seems inexplicable if not entirely implausible. However, for several months in 1994 and 1995, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was actively investigating HSS and its members. Why? The FBI believed the Unabomber was, as reported on the *Times* front page, “immersed in the most radical interpretations of the history of science.”³ In short: law enforcement agencies believed the person whose explosive devices killed three people and injured twenty-three more was one of us.⁴

A growing sense of desperation hastened the FBI’s conjecture. In 1993, after a long hiatus, the Unabomber resumed his assault using more deadly explosive devices. Two of these attacks were fatal, and, in June 1995, the Unabomber threatened to blow up an airliner. These brazen attacks occurred against the backdrop of a surge in domestic terrorism and civil unrest. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City

¹ Based on a standard ProQuest search for “History of Science Society.” As a more general search term, “history of science” appears many times (over 530 instances) throughout the pages of the *Times* while the much more specific “History of Science Society” occurs about thirty times, often in conjunction with obituaries of Society members.

² Walter Sullivan, “Nation’s Scientists Gather for Week’s Session in City,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1960, 1.

³ William J. Broad, “Esoteric Wedge of Academia Is Roiled by Hunt for Bomber,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1995, A1.

⁴ The literature—books, articles, newspaper accounts, movies, websites, online collections of primary documents, television shows, and podcasts—about the Unabomber is vast and of uneven quality. There is also a massive collection of primary documents at the University of Michigan, where the Ted Kaczynski papers are part of the Joseph A. Labadie Collection. We were able to look at a small selection of this material thanks to the archival prospecting of Roberto Diaz, a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Documents from this collection are hereafter cited as TK/UM. In all cases, copies of documents cited are in the authors’ working files.

was bombed in April 1995, killing 168 people. This domestic terrorist attack followed on the heels of a 1992 siege of a white supremacist’s compound at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, that resulted in several deaths and the 1993 raid by federal agents of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in which seventy-six people died.⁵ The FBI’s interest in the broader science and technology studies (STS) community didn’t end until April 1996 when agents arrested the Unabomber—revealed as former Berkeley mathematics professor Theodore J. Kaczynski—at his remote cabin in western Montana.

This essay follows this tangle of threads and explores how Ted Kaczynski became linked, if only briefly, to HSS. It places Kaczynski’s words and actions against the larger backdrop of scholarly and popular writings about science and technology. The convergence of the HSS, the FBI, and the hunt for the Unabomber was thankfully brief. However, the incident speaks to several topics that should interest historians of science and STS scholars in general. How, for example, should we evaluate Kaczynski’s “Industrial Society and Its Future” as a historical text? This was the 35,000-word essay the *Washington Post* published in September 1995 that ultimately led to his capture.⁶ While awkward to admit, Kaczynski’s manifesto stands as one of the most widely read documents about modern science and technology. One might even go so far as to say that Kaczynski was the most-read STS author of the 1990s. At the same time, the Unabomber saga was how many Americans learned about the existence of that “esoteric wedge of academia” that is the history of science.⁷

There is also the fact that federal authorities approached HSS when the so-called Science Wars of the mid-1990s were raging. These were brainy brawls—which some readers may have personally participated in—about the authority, objectivity, and power of science and scientists. While those battles were waged from conference podiums and in the pages of academic journals, they could often turn poisonous and personal, especially for graduate students and junior scholars.⁸ These academic clashes were concomitant with controversial Republican-led efforts to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities and STS-oriented activities at the National Science Foundation.

⁵ Of the many ways to interpret Kaczynski’s deadly acts, one possibility is to situate them within a larger narrative of what one might call radical (or toxic) white masculinity, a concept that acquired a greater purchase on public discourse in the years following the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the resurgence of white nationalism in the US.

⁶ Kaczynski sent copies to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The *Post* agreed to publish it, as it had the “mechanical ability to distribute a separate section” in copies of its daily, and the two newspapers split the costs. Donald E. Graham and Arthur O. Sulzberger, “Statement by Papers’ Publishers,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 1995, AO7.

⁷ Broad, “Esoteric Wedge.”

⁸ HSS devoted its plenary session at its 1996 annual meeting to the Science Wars via talks and discussion around the topic “Scientists and Historians: What Can We Learn from Each Other?”; see Michael M. Sokal, “The History of Science Society, 1970-1999: From Subscription Agency to Professional Society,” *Isis* 90, no. S2 (1999): S135-S181.

More than one journalist considered whether the Unabomber’s actions represented an escalation of the Science Wars.⁹

While Kaczynski’s possible connection to HSS emerged in the 1990s, he developed his pessimistic perspective about modern science and industrial society at the same time as the professional STS community was first taking shape. Seen this way, Kaczynski emerges as the most famous fugitive of the 1990s but one whose deadly criminal acts were driven by a decades-old loathing of contemporary science. Nonetheless, Kaczynski remained a subject of continued interest in popular culture—witness the various and typically tasteless Unabomber memes—in the decades since he was arrested. In this special issue, which has “hidden labor” as one of its themes, there is no denying that there was something darkly mysterious about the possibility of someone as notorious as Kaczynski hiding among us. This essay explores this history and considers what this relatively brief episode might have to say about HSS and its larger responsibility to society.

All the Rage

Theodore J. Kaczynski (1942–2023) was born in Chicago to a working-class Polish-American family. As a child, he displayed a keen intelligence and interest in mathematics, as well as profound social awkwardness.¹⁰ This alienation deepened when, at 16, he enrolled at Harvard and majored in mathematics. One of the few people Kaczynski remained in semiregular contact with was his younger brother, David, although the two men had a tense and complicated relationship.¹¹

Kaczynski completed his undergraduate degree in 1962 and started graduate studies in mathematics at the University of Michigan, where his dissertation won a prize.¹² In 1967, Kaczynski moved to Berkeley for a temporary position as an assistant professor. A year later, the position was converted into a regular assistant professor post. Despite the seeming success, he received little social acceptance from either his students or faculty colleagues.¹³ At the same time, the huge social upheavals coursing through the campus at that time left the young academic curiously untouched. Kaczynski resigned his professorial appointment effective June 30, 1969.

⁹ This point was suggested in several news reports about the Unabomber, including Keay Davidson, “Esoteric Search for the Unabomber,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 3, 1995, 1.

¹⁰ Background information on Kaczynski comes from a number of sources, including a lengthy profile of him and his family by Robert D. McFadden, “Prisoner of Rage,” *New York Times*, May, 26, 1996, A1.

¹¹ David Kaczynski, *Every Last Tie: The Story of the Unabomber and His Family* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹² For a sample of his research, see T. J. Kaczynski, “Boundary Functions and Sets of Curvilinear Convergence for Continuous Functions,” *Transactions of the American Mathematical Society* 141 (July 1969): 107–25.

¹³ McFadden, “Prisoner of Rage.”

Adrift and living (unhappily) with his parents, Kaczynski passed the time by writing letters to newspapers and magazines denouncing, among other things, overpopulation, modern science, and the ways in which technologies diminished people's enjoyment of nature. One of these missives, written in November 1970, offered a chilling foreshadowing of where Kaczynski's hostility would be directed. The letter called out "ominous scientific developments ... including genetic engineering, electronic surveillance devices, [and] superhuman computers." Furthermore, certain fields of science had reached the point where "further advances only increase the power of huge organizations," including the government and corporations, "at the expense of the individual." The best solution, Kaczynski reasoned, was to eliminate taxpayer-supported funding for scientific research he deemed offensive.¹⁴

A year later, Kaczynski returned to his forebodings about the "chemical and electrical manipulation of the brain" and "superhuman computers" in a lengthy unpublished essay he called "Progress and Liberty." It would soon be possible, he noted, to build computers "capable of creative thought" and with "capabilities far beyond" those possessed by people. Genetic engineering, meanwhile, "will be made compulsory," and parents who didn't comply will be seen as "cruel and irresponsible." The net effect of this "human engineering" would be, Kaczynski wrote, the inevitable "extinction of individual liberty."¹⁵

Read in isolation from Kaczynski's eventual turn to violence, his critiques about the increased computerization of modern society or genetic engineering appear unremarkable for their time. Throughout the 1960s, many people in the US and abroad expressed uncertainty, if not outright pessimism, about the growing power that science and technology (and scientists and engineers) had acquired. Privacy, the growing computerization of society, and developments in recombinant DNA techniques all generated public outcry. This sense of ambivalence helped fuel the creation of interdisciplinary initiatives to explore the intersections and interactions of science, technology, and society at dozens of universities in the 1970s. In another universe, one might imagine an aggrieved but pacifist version of Kaczynski who sought out one of these new programs.

Almost twenty-five years later, the FBI would compare phrases in Kaczynski's "Progress and Liberty" essay with "Industrial Society and Its Future," the longer manifesto he sent to newspapers in 1995. But one can already see the issues—distrust of the government, a fear and loathing of technology, and a special animus toward scien-

¹⁴ T. J. Kaczynski to *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 21, 1970. (Although he provided his real name, Kaczynski asked that it be withheld if the paper printed the letter.) A copy is available online via the Special Collections at the California University of Pennsylvania. These files were donated by James R. Fitzgerald, a retired FBI agent who worked on the Unabomber case. Documents from this collection can be found at <https://harbor.klnpa.org/california/islandora/object/cali%3A885> and are hereafter cited as TK/CALU.

¹⁵ This appears as "Document T-2" in TK/CALU; the documents in this collection are broken up into three main groups: "T" (for Ted), "U" (for Unabomber), and "C" (for documents found in Kaczynski's cabin). A copy of Kaczynski's essay is also in box 65 of the TK/UM collection, with notes added by FBI analysts.

tists working in genetics and computer science—that would eventually drive Kaczynski to start mailing not just letters but bombs.

Cabin Psychology

In June 1971, Kaczynski bought a small plot of land in western Montana. The 1.4 acre parcel, about an hour from the small town of Lincoln, was picturesque, located beneath Stemple Pass along the Blackfoot River. Kaczynski constructed a primitive one-room cabin, followed by two equally rustic outbuildings, one later serving as an ad hoc explosives laboratory. He filled his initial journals with lyrical descriptions of mundane rural life—days spent gathering berries and hunting grouse or the repair of a treasured pocketknife.¹⁶

In the 1970s, Kaczynski was not alone in seeking an alternative existence at the fringe of society. Indeed, Kaczynski's purchase of land in Montana had been anticipated by other participants in the “back to the land” movement. From Drop City to the Farm, communalists attempted to radically break with the larger culture, repurposing the tools of the outside world, from a cybernetic holism to military dome-style architecture, toward ostensibly liberatory ends.¹⁷

Although sharing this impulse toward rural exodus, Kaczynski was disdainful of the hippie counterculture, even if he sympathized with its latent libertarianism. To be sure, few would have mistaken him for a communalist; with his closest neighbors a half-mile away, Kaczynski's existence was consciously solitary. His brother, David, occasionally joined him for backpacking trips, adventures that Kaczynski later scrutinized for evidence of his sibling's failings.¹⁸ Letters (including occasional checks sent by Kaczynski's long-suffering parents) delivered to a nearby post office address remained his main contact with the outside world.

Kaczynski's self-exile represented a deliberate attempt to implement the societal critiques he had written about. While a wide range of technoscientific projects found themselves in his (still rhetorical) crosshairs, degraded forms of mass culture and larger

¹⁶ Kaczynski's journals from the earliest days of the cabin may be found in “Day-to-Day Account of Activities” within TK/CALU C-228; more documentation is within TK/CALU C-229, “Personal experiences, ideas, and quotations.”

¹⁷ Communalism and its lasting effects have captured the imagination of many scholars. See Andrew Blauvet, ed., *Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2015); Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); and essays in David Kaiser and W. Patrick McCray, eds., *Groovy Science: Knowledge, Innovation, and the American Counterculture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁸ TK/CALU C-228 E, entry dated April 1974. The relationship between the brothers was contentious. In a later entry, dated June 29, 1980, in TK/CALU C-229, Ted wrote, “My brother has a weak, flaccid personality and I have no respect for him. His ideology ‘Art’ is based on self-deception and is quite imitative. On the other hand, I have a real affection for him. Thus, my feelings tend to waver between affection and contempt.” For David's side of the story, see David Kaczynski, *Every Last Tie*.

global trends offended Kaczynski's sensibilities. A particular concern was overpopulation and resource depletion, which appeared in his writings as a markedly xenophobic vision of the teeming masses he shared with other commentators in the 1970s, including Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich.¹⁹ Unlike his contemporaries, however, Kaczynski proclaimed self-reliance as the only guarantor of personal liberty against the demands of the crowd. Rugged know-how, not the comforts of "industrial society," would help ensure one's survival. Given the flood of catastrophic thinking into Americans' living rooms, it's not surprising that the 1970s also saw the emergence of survivalism as a distinct cultural trend. Magazines like *Soldier of Fortune* appeared on newsstands just a few years after Kaczynski took up residence in his rural shelter, as did *The Turner Diaries*, a noxious racist and anti-Semitic screed whose protagonist was an elite survivalist.²⁰

Polemics about coming ecological disasters were never far from Kaczynski's mind as he eked out a tenuous existence in Montana. Grumbling journal entries quickly turned from complaints of his own limitations—an inability to fix a broken pickup truck, for example—to the "whole underlying problem" that had been "brought about by organized society" in the first place. He interpreted this as the inevitable result of too many people and too many rules. "Without such society," Kaczynski scrawled, "I'd be living ... the life I want."²¹

In his own mind, Kaczynski fashioned himself as a social critic whose status was legitimated by his geographical—and thus *intellectual*—position outside of society. Solitude of this sort carried considerable weight in the United States. Indeed, many journalists later noted the resemblance between Kaczynski and American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, whose retreat to the Massachusetts woods, it should be noted, was unmarked by a turn toward violence. Despite its privileged place in the American imaginary, solitude has been a technique of self-fashioning since antiquity. If the Old Testament deity communicated directly with lonely desert ascetics, it is precisely the notion that "membership in human society imparted mundane knowledge but only separation from that society yielded heroic knowledge" that Kaczynski's posturing

¹⁹ The Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report appeared, for example, in 1972, while Ehrlich's polemic *The Population Bomb* had appeared four years earlier. Among other factors leading to societal collapse in the (much-critiqued) *Limits* study were pollution and overpopulation. See, e.g., Fernando Elichirigoity, *Planet Management: Limits to Growth, Computer Simulation, and the Emergence of Global Spaces* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Francis Sandbach, "The Rise and Fall of the *Limits to Growth* Debate," *Social Studies of Science* 8, no. 4 (1978): 495–520; and Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), which puts the growth debate in a larger economic context.

²⁰ *Soldier of Fortune* first appeared in 1975; James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1987).

²¹ TK/CALU C-228 E, entry dated October 10, 1974.

replicated.²² This placed the shack in Montana and the traditional hermitage as self-conscious antipodes of the larger social world of which they still resolutely are a part.

Kaczynski's calculated primitivism was matched by his scholarly pretensions. He stacked the walls of his shack with books and read widely. There were scientific and mathematical texts, to be sure, but also "classic" literature in both German and Spanish and, poignantly, a copy of Thomas Harris's 1967 self-help classic *I'm OK—You're OK*. Psychology exerted a darkly seductive pull on Kaczynski. While an undergraduate at Harvard, he had been recruited into an experiment on behavioral modification conducted by psychologist Henry A. Murry.²³ He also informally studied anthropology books, becoming arrogant enough in his autodidacticism to criticize Margaret Mead's methodology.²⁴ Even as he disregarded indigenous peoples, Kaczynski hoped to bolster his theories of modernity's oppressive yoke by collecting evidence from nominally premodern cultures—books on edible plants, wood craft, and foraging were found in his cabin—if not actively engaging with native peoples himself.²⁵ Together, the books Kaczynski surrounded himself with seem to represent an intellect frozen in time, circa 1970, and isolated from the flow of scholarship and popular culture, perhaps not a surprising circumstance given Kaczynski's retreat from society.

Although his abiding interest in the human sciences cast him as an outsider observing society from a distance, Kaczynski soon grew impatient. As many back-to-the-landers discovered, retreat from the world was easier said than done and, for those more radically inclined, often proved insufficient as a political stance. As Shapin notes, solitude is an "ironically public pose," requiring external acknowledgment even as it abjures the outside world.²⁶ In other words, hermitism just doesn't work if no one knows you've been alone. Kaczynski moved to actively remake the outside world from within his cabin. Mailing explosives to individuals he imagined had created the techno-

²² Steven Shapin, "'The Mind Is Its Own Place': Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-Century England," *Science in Context* 4, no. 1 (1991): 191–218. On science and solitude, see also Martin Kusch, "Recluse, Interlocutor, Interrogator: Natural and Social Order in Turn-of-the-Century Psychological Research Schools," *Isis* 86, no. 3 (1995): 419–39; Peder Anker, "The Philosopher's Cabin and the Household of Nature," *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 6, no. 2 (2003): 131–41; and, more generally, Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

²³ There is of course a wealth of conspiratorially minded sources on this. For a comparably even-handed accounting, see Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (New York: Norton, 2003).

²⁴ In the entry for April 19, 1980, in TK/CALU C229, Kaczynski writes, "Maggie Mead only stayed a few months [in Papua New Guinea]. She claims that was enough but one wonders how well she could have really got to know them in that length of time."

²⁵ The 1995 manifesto, for example, referred to Native Americans as "defeated." It's telling that one of the books the FBI found in Kaczynski's cabin was John D. Hunter's *Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes*, first published in 1823, but nothing on the recent history or experiences of native peoples, including those tribes from around the region in which he lived.

²⁶ Shapin, "The Mind Is Its Own Place," 17.

scientific world he scorned would, he later insisted, be an act not of revolution but of revenge.

Bombs

Kaczynski's shift from sending incendiary letters to actual mail bombs occurred in the spring of 1978. Angered by academics' rejection of the proto-manifesto he had written, Kaczynski sent a crudely fashioned pipe bomb, packaged in a carefully constructed wooden box, to an engineering professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. It never reached its intended target but was instead redirected, via its return address, to Northwestern University. Upon examination, it exploded, wounding a campus police officer. Northwestern was struck again a year later when an engineering student found a package on campus and tried to open it. The device exploded, giving the student minor burns and cuts.

In November 1979, Kaczynski raised the stakes higher by placing a bomb on an American Airlines flight. The device exploded midflight, injuring twelve people, but the plane managed to land safely. Six months later, Kaczynski mailed another bomb, secreted inside a book, to the president of United Airlines, which caused the executive serious injuries.²⁷ Evidence found at the scene included the initials "FC" etched on a metal pipe. Investigators speculated on what the initials stood for. Maybe "Fuck Computers"? "Fight Control"?²⁸ But these combined attacks on university and airline targets prompted the FBI to open a file called "UNABOM" (i.e., "University and Airline Bomber"), which it maintained for years to come.

Kaczynski carried out seven more assaults, which injured six people, over the next halfdecade. Then, in December 1985, the Unabomber claimed his first fatality. Hugh Scrutton was killed by a package left in the parking lot of his computer store in Sacramento. Less than two years later, another attack against a computer store—this time in Salt Lake City—injured the store's owner. This also provided the first evidence of what the Unabomber might look like. A store employee's observations resulted in the famous "hoodie and sunglasses" image that the FBI put into circulation (see fig. 1). Perhaps frightened, Kaczynski paused his bombing campaign.

It was during this spasm of attacks in the mid-1980s, however, that the first links between Kaczynski and the history of science emerged. In November 1985, Kaczynski mailed a bomb to James V. McConnell, an animal psychologist at the University of Michigan. McConnell was well-known in the scientific community for his work on the behavior modification and control of animals via chemicals, a research subject that particularly angered Kaczynski. The exploding bomb caused hearing loss to McConnell

²⁷ The book was a 1979 work of fiction called *Ice Brothers*; its author was Sloan Wilson, who also wrote the classic 1955 novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*.

²⁸ Michael Reynolds, "The Scariest Criminal in America?" *Playboy* (November 1994): 120, 122, 128, 146–54.

and also injured the research assistant who opened what turned out to be a bomb disguised as a manuscript.

In a letter accompanying the package, Kaczynski—disguising himself as one “Ralph C. Kloppenburg”—wrote: “I am a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Utah. My field of interest is the history of science, and I am writing my dissertation on the development of the behavioral sciences during the twentieth century.” Kaczynski described how his purported doctoral work would study how “progress in a particular field of research influences the public attitudes toward the field.” Ultimately, this imaginary project would illuminate the “interaction of science and society.”²⁹ In other words, Kaczynski’s ruse described something easily imaginable as a dissertation topic in the history of science or STS, circa 1985.

On getting wind of Kaczynski’s letter, the FBI contacted faculty at the University of Utah and its history department. The most likely person there who might be advising a history of science graduate student was an associate professor named Harold Bauman. Bauman got his PhD in history from the University of Iowa before joining the faculty at Utah in 1965. As he later told a reporter, the FBI asked him about Kaczynski “as if I were interested in political revolution, which offends me because of the implication.” Bauman purportedly told the FBI that the only revolutions he talked to students about were those “started by the likes of Newton, Galileo, and Einstein.”³⁰ Bauman’s protests aside, the history of science, if not the History of Science Society itself, was now on investigators’ radar.

In June 1993, after a six-year break, the Unabomber’s attacks resumed. Kaczynski mailed a bomb that severely wounded Charles Epstein, a geneticist at the University of California, San Francisco. Two days later, the *New York Times* received a letter from “the anarchist group calling ourselves FC” that warned of an “imminent newsworthy event.”³¹ That same day, David Gelernter, a computer science professor at Yale, opened a package that exploded, permanently damaging his right hand and eye. Kaczynski had long held geneticists in low regard while Gelernter likely came to his attention via an opinion piece about technology that appeared in a regional Montana newspaper.³²

²⁹ Theodore Kaczynski, writing as “Ralph C. Kloppenburg,” to James V. McConnell, November 12, 1985; copy available as “Document U-2” at <https://harbor.klnpa.org/california/islandora/object/cali%3A889> (accessed April 15, 2023).

³⁰ Joe Costanzo, “U. Teacher Drawn into Unabom Probe,” *Deseret News*, August 2, 1995; <https://www.deseret.com/1995/8/3/19185761/u-teacher-drawn-into-unabom-probe> (accessed April 15, 2023).

³¹ A copy of this, identified as “Document U-3,” is available at <https://harbor.klnpa.org/california/islandora/object/cali%3A886> (accessed April 15, 2023).

³² David Gelernter, “U.S. Faces Technology Crisis,” *The Missoulian*, February 24, 1992, 4. When the FBI searched Kaczynski’s cabin in Montana, they found newspaper clippings with Gelernter’s article among them. Gelernter reflected on his experience in *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber* (New York: Free Press, 1997), which is, in some places, as intolerant about left-leaning intellectuals and feminists as is Kaczynski’s manifesto.



Figure 1. An initial sketch of the Unabomber which was released by the FBI in early 1987 following the bombing in Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Unabomber's increased pace of bombings, and the fact that the devices were now both more compact and more deadly, prompted the FBI to intensify its investigation. The Bureau soon believed that the Unabomber was, or had been at some point, a historian of science.³³ The FBI came to this conclusion by doing something that we, as researchers, students, and scholars, do all the time. They carefully read and closely analyzed a primary source.

The Manifesto

In April of 1995, writing under the *nom de plume* of “Freedom Club” —the “FC” inscribed on the explosive device that maimed Percy Wood—Kaczynski offered the *New York Times* a deal that would make most academic editors blush. The Unabomber would cease his terror campaign if a “widely read, nationally distributed periodical” would publish the essay he had written. The *Washington Post* made good on this offer a few months later, placing “Industrial Society and Its Future” in a special section.³⁴

“Industrial Society,” deemed by Joan Didion as a “logically reasoned if somewhat hermetic document,” is nonetheless eccentric in the extreme.³⁵ On one hand, it is a treatise, written in the plural first person, which imitates the stylistic conventions of academic writing. But it is also a vicious diatribe attacking a multiplicity of real and imagined targets while holding both the political left and right in contempt. Eschewing citational norms and exchanging the veiled barbs of academic writing for outright name calling, the manifesto is, in essence, a scholarly text, the product of reading and writing by lantern light in a Montana shack. Kaczynski's location outside of and opposed to any formal academic institution marks “Industrial Society” as a “para-academic” text. It treats scholarly conventions as genre markers rather than indications of legitimacy while using history (of a sort) to justify actions.³⁶

However, the text's highly unusual route to publication did not lend itself to careful consideration of Kaczynski's arguments on their own merits. Indeed, its notoriety has all but overshadowed its content. As one scholar of political ideology has noted, the manifesto is often misremembered as a document of radical environmentalism. While

³³ Martin Gottlieb, “Pattern Emerges in Bomber's Tract,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1995, A1.

³⁴ Theodore J. Kaczynski, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” *Washington Post*, September 22, 1995, 61. This text has been reproduced many times: in text files distributed on the early internet, in photocopied editions at anarchist book fairs, and in publications both accompanied by Kaczynski's other writings and alone; e.g., Theodore J. Kaczynski, *Industrial Society and Its Future* (Berkeley: Jolly Roger Press, 1996).

³⁵ Joan Didion, “Varieties of Madness,” *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 1998.

³⁶ On the phrase “para-academic,” see A. James Hodges, “Information Technology, Para-Academic Research Culture, and ‘Post-literary’ Communication Techniques: A Materialist Cultural History of Interdisciplinary Computing (1950–2000)” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2020). Hodges uses the term to refer to psychologist and LSD guru Timothy Leary's strained relationship with Harvard and with the intellectual communities that blossomed around the task of “cracking” commercial software.

Kaczynski was concerned with questions of “wild nature” as an ethical and political category, much of his manifesto was devoted instead to theorizing about technology with, of course, the aim of dismantling it violently.³⁷

Kaczynski presented a hard determinism, insisting that technology had become an autonomous force operating largely outside of human control. The dislocation of agency by the technological system has been fundamentally alienating, both psychologically and biologically, for human beings and was responsible, he claimed, for the woes that have plagued humanity since the nineteenth century. A revolution was thus necessary, aimed not at installing a new political system but at destroying the autonomous system of technology. It would be, Kaczynski wrote in paragraph 179, “better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences.”

One of Kaczynski’s primary influences in his tract—and one the FBI’s investigation focused on—was Jacques Ellul’s book *The Technological Society*. This was originally published in France in 1954 as *La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle* to little notice. However, an English translation a decade later (with a foreword by sociologist of science Robert K. Merton) cemented Ellul’s legacy.³⁸ The lengthy monograph, steeped in rather turgid prose, critiqued a monolithic “Technology” but had little to say about specific technologies. Ellul’s sweeping claims, popular among college students in the mid-1960s, resonated with Kaczynski’s own totalizing predispositions.

After his arrest, FBI analysts identified passages from Kaczynski’s writings that resembled or paraphrased selections from Ellul’s book.³⁹ Naturally, Kaczynski wasn’t keeping up to date with intellectual fashions and was unaware that by 1995 most scholars would not recommend Ellul’s book to students seeking a trenchant critique of modern technologies. By that point, *The Technological Society* stood more as a primary source that spoke to an inchoate antitechnology mind-set of the 1960s, perspectives that nonetheless would give rise to more focused critiques, academic journals, and STS departments.

Given Kaczynski’s scathing critique of technology *qua* Technology, his manifesto was remarkably preoccupied with the human psyche. In Kaczynski’s eyes, the contemporary subject, enveloped by industrial society, was beset by the false comforts of infantilizing “surrogate activities” and the twin stresses of both bureaucracy and overcrowding and thus alternately stressed and repressed. Against this “oversocialization,” Kaczynski advanced a radical notion of freedom based on individual autonomy he termed the “power process.” Cribbing from zoologist Desmond Morris (of *Naked Ape* fame), he

³⁷ Sean Fleming, “The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-tech Radicalism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27, no. 2 (January 1, 2022): 207–25.

³⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964). For the book’s publishing history and reception, see Carl Mitcham, “How *The Technological Society* Became More Important in the United States than in France,” in *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*, ed. Helena M. Jerónimo et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 17–34.

³⁹ James Fitzgerald, “Publications Found in Kaczynski’s Cabin, Volume 2,” 1996 FBI report, available at <https://harbor.klnpa.org/california/islandora/object/cali%3A1856> (accessed June 15, 2023).

embraced individuals' aggressive drives as a means for people to determine their own immediate circumstances.⁴⁰ "Freedom," Kaczynski wrote, "means having power; not the power to control other people but the power to control the circumstances of one's own life."⁴¹ This was of tactical importance: prior revolutionary ideologies had failed not only because they have misidentified the source of contemporary ills—capitalism rather than technology—but because of the psychological deficiencies of ineffective leftists who fundamentally misunderstood the nature of power and were thus trapped within modernity's bondage.

The manifesto was Kaczynski's diagnosis of what he called the "widespread psychological suffering" engendered by industrial society. However, for the FBI, it provided diagnostics of a different kind. As an FBI agent told the *New York Times*, the manuscript has "given us the greatest insight into his personality and education that we've ever had." Pored over by linguists and psychologists, they concluded it quite likely originated from the warped mind of a "student of the history of science."⁴²

HSS Meets the FBI

As the investigation's focus shifted to academia, the FBI's UNABOM team initially reached out to the Social Studies of Science (4S). One of their first contacts was Wesley Shrum, 4S's secretary and a professor of sociology at Louisiana State University. 4S was planning its next meeting, scheduled for mid-October 1994, in New Orleans as a joint gathering with HSS and the Philosophy of Science Association. Shrum had a lengthy conversation with an FBI agent in Baton Rouge and was shown copies of Kaczynski's letters. These included the 1985 letter to James McConnell in which the terrorist had claimed to be a historian of science student.⁴³ Shrum pointed out that Kaczynski's interest in the "interaction of science and society" was a phrase easily found in the upcoming meeting's program. With the FBI's interest piqued, Shrum, after explaining what the "social studies of science" was all about, suggested that investigators consider attending the academic conference.

Shrum then met an FBI agent and a postal inspector in New Orleans just before the joint conference started. Sal Restivo, serving as 4S's president, joined them. There was considerable irony here. Restivo was a professor (of the sociology of mathematics) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where Kaczynski had mailed one of his early bombs. He was also a self-proclaimed anarchist. The FBI decided to subpoena 4S's member roster, something they would also do to HSS.

⁴⁰ On Morris, see esp. Erika L. Milam, *Creatures of Cain: The Hunt for Human Nature in Cold War America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴¹ Kaczynski, "Industrial Society."

⁴² Gottlieb, "Pattern Emerges in Bomber's Tract," A1.

⁴³ Wesley Shrum, "We Were the Unabomber," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 26, no. 1 (2001): 90–101.

The investigators received permission to attend a meeting of the 4S Council.⁴⁴ The two 4S officers also suggested that the Bureau share the Unabomber's writings with the group without revealing the sender's identity.

At the council's meeting, the agents waited in an adjoining room as Shrum passed around copies of the Unabomber's letters. It was, Restivo recalled, "awesome to watch some of our scholarly community's most talented text analysts work on that letter without any hint of context."⁴⁵ But no one noticed "anything especially odd about the letter" besides noting that Kaczynski's make-believe project was "not really cutting edge" in terms of scholarship. No one suggested that the anonymous writer was anyone other than what they claimed: a graduate student in the history of science.⁴⁶ At this point, the agents joined the meeting, described the investigation, and provided copies of a well-researched account of the Unabomber case that had just appeared (of all places) in *Playboy*.⁴⁷

Keith Benson, HSS's executive secretary at the time, was also brought into the conversation.⁴⁸ There was already some discussion at the main *Isis* office, based in Cornell, that perhaps the Unabomber "might hold a grudge" against the journal. Jon Harkness, the managing editor of *Isis*, even contacted the local FBI office to ask about how to spot a letter bomb.⁴⁹ Benson met with Restivo, Shrum, and the federal agents, and together they pored over case documents. As they had with 4S, the agents asked Benson's permission to attend HSS sessions and discreetly talk to members. Ironically, HSS's Distinguished Lecture that year was given by Berkeley's David Hollinger, who spoke about the "interpenetrations of science with society and with culture more broadly."⁵⁰ Throughout the meeting, the two agents attended talks and hung out in the hotel lobby, but there was no obvious drama. "No bombs went off at the Clarion Hotel," Restivo later wrote. "No Science Wars terrorists invaded the lobby to kill or maim social constructionists."⁵¹

Not so in the wider world. Soon after the joint HSS-4S-PSA gathering, the Unabomber launched two more successful attacks. The first, in December 1994, killed Thomas Mosser, an advertising executive. Another, in April 1995, fatally injured

⁴⁴ Sal Restivo, "4S, the FBI, and Anarchy," *Sci. Tech. Hum. Val.* 26, no. 1 (2001): 87–90.

⁴⁵ Restivo, 87–90.

⁴⁶ Shrum, "We Were the Unabomber," 97.

⁴⁷ Reynolds, "The Scariest Criminal in America."

⁴⁸ Keith R. Benson, "The Unabomber and the History of Science," *Sci. Tech. Hum. Val.* 26, no. 1 (2001): 101–5; see also Keith R. Benson (although the individual's last name, harkening back to his Swedish ancestry, is now spelled Bengtsson), personal correspondence with the author (McCray), February 2023.

⁴⁹ Jon M. Harkness email to Keith Benson, October 5, 1995, from "1995 Correspondence" folder, HSS files, unprocessed collection at Science History Institute, Philadelphia, PA; copy provided by Matthew Lavine and in authors' working files.

⁵⁰ Keith Benson et al., "Annual Meeting of the History of Science Society New Orleans, 13–16 October 1994," *Isis* 86, no. 2 (1995): 278–85.

⁵¹ Restivo, "4S," 89.

Gilbert Murray, a lobbyist for the timber industry. Restivo's comment about "Science Wars terrorists," written after Kaczynski's arrest, hinted at deeper feelings of unease lurking in the background.

This sense of discomfort had been stirred by the recent appearance of a controversial book. In the spring of 1994, the Johns Hopkins University Press published *Higher Superstition* by biologist Paul R. Gross and mathematician Norman Levitt.⁵² Subtitled *The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*, Gross and Levitt blasted the sociology of scientific knowledge, social constructivism, feminist critiques of science, and a host of other intellectual approaches that were ascendant in the 1990s. Even as Gross and Levitt called out what they saw as humanists' resentment of scientists, their book served a volatile mixture of "sarcasm, hyperbole, righteous indignation, *ad hominem* devices, and grave warnings."⁵³ Humanists denounced Gross and Levitt (and others with similar views) for misunderstanding *au courant* scholarship that explored social and cultural aspects of science.

A direct line of descent can be traced from attacks on the history of science and STS found in books like *Higher Superstition* to the now-infamous academic hoax by physicist Alan D. Sokal, as revealed in the pages of *Lingua Franca* in the summer of 1996.⁵⁴ But, by this point—even as the Science Wars sputtered on—the Unabomber had been apprehended. Before this happy turn of events, however, the History of Science Society would receive international attention for perhaps harboring an active terrorist in its ranks.

HSS Meets the World

In August 1995, articles in major newspapers linked the Unabomber to the history of science and suggested connections to the History of Science Society. The catalyst for this was Ted Kaczynski's decision to mail his "Industrial Society" manifesto to newspaper editors. The FBI shared it with "dozens of university professors," many of them "experts in the history of science," and came to a tentative deduction.⁵⁵ The Bureau—reported in a front-page *Times* story—concluded that "the bomber is a student of the

⁵² Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

⁵³ For reviews, see Bennett M. Berger, "Taking Arms: Review of *Higher Superstition*," *Science* 264, no. 5161 (1994): 985–86, 989; M. Norton Wise, "The Enemy Without and the Enemy Within," *Isis* 87, no. 2 (1996): 323–27; and Brian Martin, "Social Construction of an 'Attack on Science,'" *Soc. Stud. Sci.* 26, no. 1 (1996): 161–73.

⁵⁴ Alan D. Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca* (May/June 1996), <https://web.archive.org/web/20071005011354/http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9605/sokal.html> (accessed June 15, 2023).

⁵⁵ Joel Achenbach and John Schwartz, "FBI Asks College Professors If UNABOM Text Is Familiar," *Washington Post*, August 2, 1995, A1.

history of science who may have taken classes at or hovered around major university campuses” in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁶

The key source for the article was Terry D. Turchie, identified as a “senior FBI official overseeing the bureau’s wide-ranging investigation.” Turchie noted that the Bureau was “fascinated” by the Unabomber’s “intellectual interest in the history of science” despite it being a “relatively small field” compared to “broader scientific disciplines.” Most academics, the article explained, saw science as “progressive, with its breakthroughs and intellectual triumphs.” (Take that, Gross and Levitt!) But a small subset of scholars “focused on its social ills and unexpected cultural repercussions.” These supposed malcontents could, the article said, “be resolutely anti-science.” (Uh-oh.)

As journalists got wind that the FBI might have a better sense of the Unabomber’s background, HSS slid into the spotlight. Keith Benson, speaking as HSS’s executive secretary, noted that the Unabomber did write “knowledgeably about the history of science.” Another (anonymous) professor found Kaczynski’s writing to be “remarkably coherent” albeit with an “absurd” remedy for society’s ills. Despite the fact that the manifesto “could have stood a lot of editing,” he “liked a good deal of his diagnosis.”⁵⁷ The FBI’s Turchie agreed. Many themes, he said, in Kaczynski’s manuscript “echo this whole idea of the history of science.”⁵⁸

The *San Francisco Examiner* offered the most detailed elaboration connecting the Unabomber to HSS. “The FBI,” it reported, “is delving deep into a highly specialized and increasingly embattled field known as the history of science.”⁵⁹ The reporter, Key Davidson, who would later write a popular biography of astronomer Carl Sagan, interviewed HSS president and University of Wisconsin historian David C. Lindberg as well as Berkeley historians David Hollinger and John Heilbron. (No women scholars appear to have been contacted.) Hollinger and Heilbron noted that historians of science tended to limit their attacks to the pages of book reviews and articles. “Terrorism against scientists and scientific institutions is profoundly alien to the work and culture of professional historians of science,” explained Hollinger. Nonetheless, Davidson pointed out that “far more radical scholars” had emerged since “[Thomas] Kuhn’s heyday,” including “self-proclaimed anarchists” and “feminists” who rejected the “male ideology” of science. These “politically correct, anti-science attitudes” had in turn provoked a “small, angry band” of scientists to counterattack.⁶⁰

The *New York Times* amplified Davidson’s reportage for a larger international audience via a front-page story titled “Esoteric Wedge of Academic Is Roiled by Hunt

⁵⁶ Gottlieb, “Pattern Emerges in Bomber’s Tract,” A1.

⁵⁷ Quotes from Achenbach and Schwartz, “FBI Asks College Professors.”

⁵⁸ Gottlieb, “Pattern Emerges in Bomber’s Tract.”

⁵⁹ Key Davidson, “Esoteric Hunt for the Unabomber,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 3, 1995, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Esoteric-search-for-the-Unabomber-3137418.php> (accessed April 1, 2023).

⁶⁰ Davidson.

for Bomber.”⁶¹ Like Davidson, journalist William Broad drew attention to the radical “undercurrents and factions” that attacked—in print only—the “science establishment.” In years past, for example, members of Science for the People had disrupted meetings of the American Association of the Advancement of Science. A tomato was hurled. A knitting needle brandished. Bad feelings lingered.⁶² This group, Broad explained, was inspired by Lewis Mumford, Theodore Roszak, and Jacques Ellul. This time, historian Hollinger was even more dismissive of the idea that any professional historian of science could be the Unabomber. “It’s like saying an appreciation of Beethoven has something to do with the Nazis,” he told Broad. The terrorist, HSS’s Benson said, was probably a “knowledgeable outcast rather than a mainstream scholar.” Nonetheless, Louis Freeh, the FBI’s director, claimed the Bureau was asking scholars for their analysis of the Unabomber’s manifesto and “its general topic—the history of science.”⁶³

Although attention from the FBI and journalists continued into the autumn, scholars became increasingly dismissive of the Unabomber and his writings. Daniel J. Kevles, writing in the *New Yorker*, noted the hypocrisy of an antitechnology terrorist who nonetheless wanted “his screeds digitally typeset and printed on the high-speed, forest fed, electric-powered presses” of major newspapers.⁶⁴ Kirkpatrick Sale, whose book about Luddism appeared in 1995, called the Unabomber’s manifesto a repetitive and “woodenly written term paper” and dismissed the idea that the Unabomber could be a historian. He was instead more likely to be a “social psychology major with a minor in sociology [with] all the hallmarks of the worst of that academic breed.”⁶⁵

Given the international attention, Benson decided to update HSS members via the Society’s regular newsletter. It was disappointing, he noted, that people were discovering that the history of science even existed via the Unabomber story.⁶⁶ However, HSS’s cooperation in the investigation was something that “should be a source of pride.” The community had provided expert textual analysis as well as intellectual context for the Unabomber’s writings without compromising its principles and values as a scholarly community. Far from existing in some abstract and oft-maligned “ivory tower,” historians of science had successfully managed to explain a “real-world” example of “science and technology in our society.”⁶⁷

While public curiosity about the history of science might have been increasing, the FBI’s interest was waning. In November 1995, the *New York Times* reported that the Bureau had now reversed course. The Unabomber “kills to satisfy an inner psychological

⁶¹ Broad, “Esoteric Wedge,” A1.

⁶² Described in, for example, Walter Sullivan, “AAAS: Disputes That Were Not on the Agenda,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1971, E9; and Richard D. Lyons, “Science Talks Open in Capital; AAAS Scored by Dissidents,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1972, 14.

⁶³ Broad, “Esoteric Wedge.”

⁶⁴ Daniel J. Kevles, “E Pluribus Unabomber,” *New Yorker*, August 14, 1995, 2–3.

⁶⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, “Is There Method in His Madness?” *The Nation*, September 25, 1995, 305–11.

⁶⁶ Keith R. Benson, “History of Science Society and the National Scene,” *HSS Newsletter* 24, no. 4 (October 1995): 1.

⁶⁷ Benson, 1.

need” and was not some disaffected academic “with a political agenda.” The idea that the attacker was someone familiar with “dated graduate-level discourse” had resulted in an “extensive but so far fruitless investigation.” Not all the academics agreed with the FBI’s new assessment. David Lindberg still believed the attacks could be the work of a “frustrated social scientist.”⁶⁸ Just as telling was the article’s observation that the Unabomber’s writings reflected ideas about science and society that were no longer intellectually fashionable. *Sic transit gloria.*

On April 3, 1996, any questions as to the Unabomber’s background and motives were put to rest. Aided by David Kaczynski, who detected similarities between the Unabomber’s published writings and his brother’s personal letters, FBI agents arrested Ted Kaczynski at his ramshackle cabin in Montana. The key to cracking the case—Kaczynski’s lengthy manifesto—was now just referred to as a text possessing “passable but unoriginal ideas about subjects like the history of 69 science.”⁶⁹

Terror’s Long Tail

The interest that law enforcement and journalists showed in HSS (and in science and technology studies in general) appears as a brief episode in HSS’s century-long history.

Nonetheless, it carried significance that transcended front-page news stories and several months of FBI interactions.

First of all, millions of newspaper and magazine readers closely followed the Unabomber story, especially once Kaczynski accelerated the pace and destructiveness of his attacks. The *New York Times* alone mentioned the Unabomber in almost two hundred news stories published between 1993 and 1996. For much of the general public, the Unabomber story was how they learned such a thing as the history of science existed, even if it was just an “esoteric” academic field populated by sometimes-fractious members.

How did our community, broadly seen, respond to this glare of publicity? Wesley Shrum recalled that, after the New Orleans meeting, the STS Listserv was “filled with discussion” about the FBI and the Unabomber. Some people posting messages to the online bulletin board “assumed that the FBI was interested in our scholarship because it was potentially subversive.” A few even suggested that the “intellectual power” of STS had driven Kaczynski to violence. This assertion, Shrum stated, was absurd. The FBI didn’t care about HSS, 4S, SHOT, or any of the scholarly topics that engaged the community’s interest. The Bureau simply wanted to catch a terrorist before he killed

⁶⁸ David Johnston, “Unabom Manifesto Brings New Theories,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1995, A1.

⁶⁹ David Johnston, “Ex-Professor Is Seized in Montana as Suspect in the Unabom Attacks,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1996, A1.

again. “To attribute government interest in STS to the power of our words,” Shrum wrote, is to “commit the sin of pride.”⁷⁰

There is also the Unabomber’s manifesto itself. It was the most widely circulated publication concerning science, technology, and society in the 1990s. Ironically, soon after it was published, Kaczynski’s manifesto appeared online as the internet and the World Wide Web became readily accessible tools for accessing information. Millions of people downloaded it, and Kaczynski was transformed into a folk hero of sorts.⁷¹ Professors assigned it (and some still do) to students in history of science and STS courses.

In 1998, Kaczynski pleaded guilty in a California courthouse, sparing himself the possibility of the death penalty. While serving four consecutive life sentences in Colorado, he maintained exchanges with journalists, students, and supporters and organized his correspondence for archival preservation. The University of Michigan acquired his papers and many other materials from the case. It is one of their most requested collections. Kaczynski died in prison on June 10, 2023, at 81 years old.⁷²

Kaczynski’s manifesto may have been repetitive, ill-argued, and out of date as far as the latest scholarship, but it turned the volume up on debates about science and technology. Technologist Ray Kurzweil critiqued Kaczynski’s antisience stance in his bestselling 1999 book *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. Kurzweil’s uncritical techno-enthusiasm prompted fellow computer engineer Bill Joy to sound a tocsin about technological dystopias and argued—a la Kaczynski—for some form of neo-Luddism in the pages of the highly popular magazine *Wired*.⁷³ However, even as it amplified discussions about the power of science and technology in contemporary society, one could also make the case that Kaczynski’s violent acts actually served to *delegitimize* such critiques. It’s not a good look when a murderous recluse is the most visible spokesperson for your cause.

Today, Kaczynski’s writings still circulate widely on the internet, and edited collections of his work, with titles like *Technological Slavery*, have appeared. These collections have acquired what a book publisher would call a “long tail,” selling books in small but sustained numbers. After the Unabomber case concluded, Sal Restivo dismissed Kaczynski as neither a real neo-Luddite nor an especially articulate technocritic. One can’t argue in good faith for “progressive social change” with someone who is murdering people. But in the years that have passed, new generation of anarchists, eco-warriors,

⁷⁰ Shrum, “We Were the Unabomber,” 99.

⁷¹ Anonymous, “On the Internet, the Unabomber Is a Star,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1996, A8.

⁷² Alex Traub, “Theodore J. Kaczynski, Boy Genius Turned ‘Unabomber,’ Dies at 81,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2023, B5.

⁷³ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); and Bill Joy, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired*, April 2000, 238–62.

preppers, and off-the-gridders have embraced ideas and ideals Kaczynski espoused.⁷⁴ What will become of what one journalist called the “Children of Ted”? Might some of them perhaps be drawn to the history of science or STS? Will one or two of them appear in graduate seminars or at a future HSS meeting?⁷⁵

These questions suggest a counterfactual history. At one point it was not uncommon for people working in STEM fields to pivot professionally toward the histories of science and technology (one of us—WPM—made such a move, in fact). By all accounts, Kaczynski was a talented mathematician. What might have happened if a young Kaczynski had abandoned his original research trajectory but followed his burgeoning critique of science and technology toward a second career path as a historian or STS scholar? It is possible—although perhaps uncomfortable—to imagine a version of Kaczynski as a colleague, even a member of HSS, that brought activism and scholarship together in a peaceful manner, someone akin to scholars like Langdon Winner, Carolyn Merchant, and Sal Restivo. A different person (and a different personality) might have found a more productive way to meld scholarship with activism without the need for murder. This should not imply that activist scholarship is a zero-sum game, a crude spectrum with writing academic papers at one end and sending mail bombs at the other. Rather, we might imagine a constellation of historical conditions and, crucially, personal reactions that Kaczynski might have had to the power of science and technology in modern society, concerns we imagine might be shared by the readers of this special issue.

It is clear that HSS members were—quite understandably—reluctant to see in Kaczynski the dark looking-glass version of themselves. Indeed, as a community, HSS members during this episode displayed and discharged their own responsibility to society, collaborating with the FBI and finding in the public interest a platform for a broader dialogue about science and society. But the context of this matters. The Unabomber case intersected with the HSS community, most notably, in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, an event that posed domestic terrorism as a singular threat to civil society, one that might be credibly combated by the federal government. Another counterfactual history then: in the contemporary era, marked by—to be polite if polemic—the dismantling of civil society in all forms, what might HSS’s responsibility to rogue agents such as Kaczynski be? To be blunt: on a dying planet, in the ruins of the university, and amid genocidal nationalisms, it seems likely that many of us have contemplated drastic measures, perhaps even violence. Indeed, it is certainly possible to imagine circumstances in which our community’s sense of social responsibility might compel some members not to help the state. Perhaps if

⁷⁴ Restivo, “4S,” 90; John H. Richardson, “Children of Ted,” *New York Magazine*, December 11, 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/the-unabomber-ted-kaczynski-new-generation-of-acolytes.html> (accessed March 17, 2023).

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that Richard B. Spencer, a neo-Nazi who spoke at the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, had studied the philosophy of science and intellectual history.

nothing else, the curious connection of the Unabomber and HSS suggests how social responsibility to society presents a moving target.

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The Ted K Archive

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