

Is the Unabomber an Anarchist?

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The “Unabomber” claims to be an anarchist. For 17 years, the person who has been called the Unabomber has been attacking people with bombs, without making an explanation. The bomb targets have included some rich and powerful individuals, such as the April killing of a lobbyist for a logging association. But the main targets have been college professors (of genetics and computer science) and owners of computer stores. “Unintended” injuries have happened to others, including students, a secretary, and passengers on an airplane. In six bombings, there have been three deaths and 22 injuries.

Now he has written a letter declaring his politics to be “anarchist and radical environmentalist.” (Although the Unabomber claims to be “the terrorist group FC,” I use “he,” since the evidence suggests one person and the politics suggests a male.) The Oklahoma bombing by a few fascists is widely seen as reflecting the political culture of a broader far-right movement. The question is sure to be raised: Should the bombings by this “anarchist” similarly be seen as reflecting the politics of the anarchist and radical environmental movements? My answer: No, and Maybe.

To be sure, the Unabomber (or “FC”) was bombing for years before raising the anarchist banner. However, his aim was anti-technological from the first. Whether or not they originally inspired him, there is no reason to doubt that he has come to agree with anarchist ecological views. His opinions are close enough to certain widespread views within the anti-authoritarian movement to be worth discussing.

His Anarchist Vision

His letter to the *New York Times* (4/26/95) states, “We call ourselves anarchist because we would like, ideally, to break down all society into very small, completely autonomous units.” It is true that anarchists have generally been decentralists, because participatory democracy is only possible in human-scale communities where people can meet face-to-face. This may include villages, factory councils, city neighborhoods, social clubs, or whatever. However, many anarchists have also advocated for a federation from the bottom-up, so that local groups are in a network of voluntary associations covering regions, continents, and the world.

His vision includes complete destruction of the “industrial-technological system” worldwide. Again, most anarchists today do not regard the current development of industrial technology as “progressive” or even “neutral,” as do Marxists and liberals. Capitalism and the state have developed this technology for their own purposes of exploitation, profit and war. A new society will not be able to simply use these machines just as they are.

However there is a dispute within the anti-authoritarian/ecological movement. Some believe that a new society should use technological knowledge to create a new type of industry, bountiful but non-exploitative and ecological. Others advocate going back to pre-industrial society, to medieval technology, or hunting and gathering.

Like the Unabomber, these people seem to forget that pre-industrial society was often highly oppressive, including monarchist, mass slavery, feudalism, war, and the oppression of women before class society even developed. In any case, pre-industrial society evolved into industrial society; out of that came this. Just as industrial machinery is not automatically liberatory, neither is the absence of industrial technology automatically liberatory.

His Strategy

The Unabomber admits to having no strategy for anarchism. “We don’t see any clear road to this goal, so we leave it for the indefinite future.” Instead, “our more immediate goal, which we think may be attainable during the next several decades, is the destruction of the worldwide industrial system.”

There are many other anarchists who have no idea how anarchism might come. And neither I nor anyone else has a crystal ball or a fully worked-out analysis. But it is possible to begin to work toward a modern analysis and strategy for an anarchist revolution. This requires developing both our theory and our activity. We need to analyze the social system (using tools from various sources such as feminism, classical Marxism, historical anarchism, ecological theory, etc.). We need to look for the weaknesses in the system, the nature of the developing crisis, the social forces likely to struggle. Especially, we need to participate in the popular struggles, in dialogue with other viewpoints. We need to develop an organization that can help us do these things without tying us down. Instead, the Unabomber proposes to blow up individuals. In a letter to one of his victims, he wrote, “If there were no computer scientists, there would be no progress in computer science.” Clearly he thinks of the enemy as individuals rather than a social system — a social system that can create computer scientists faster than he can kill them. Similarly he blames the technology, not the society which requires it. He also hopes to “propagate anti-industrial ideas” by his bombing. But bombs (or assassination or kidnapping), when not a close part of a popular struggle, are seen by most people as one more evil of the social system, not as part of the solution. If anything, it leads people to support the establishment against those who seem to want pointless destruction. He is trying to spread ideas by a book. If it is published and publicized by the media, he promises to stop bombing people, and only target buildings in the future. As if the rulers care about the deaths of professors or computer-store owners!

Violence

Like most people, I am not a pacifist. The existence of widespread police brutality and the growth of the fascist “militias” show that popular movements will have to defend themselves. The state will never allow a non-violent, democratic revolution.

However, the use of violence exacts a price. It makes revolutionaries less sensitive, less morally keen, less like people of the new world. Violence is only justifiable in a revolutionary situation or in defense of a popular struggle (for example, the Black Panther Party at its height). When revolutionaries, isolated from most people, set out to strike at even the most vicious oppressors, the results are invariably bad. Bystanders get injured, the revolutionaries become more isolated from the people, they get killed or jailed, and the state gets a popular excuse for greater repression.

As a general rule, I would give political and legal support to such revolutionaries when arrested by the state, despite my disagreements. In the case of the Unabomber, he is a murderer dragging noble ideas through the mud.

His Authoritarianism

Anarchism has a popular image of bomb-throwing, based on a real trend in anarchist history. But there are other historical trends in anarchism, including organizing mass labor struggles (anarcho-syndicalist, the IWW), mass military forces (Makhno, Durruti), and even a pacifist trend (Tolstoy, Goodman). There is nothing inevitably “terrorist” about anarchism.

In our time most, “terrorism” has been carried out by Marxist-Leninists, nationalists, and other statists, not anarchists. (Of course, such violence has always been small potatoes compared to the massive terror used by the military and police forces of the states.) For example, the Weatherpeople of the ‘60s were admirers of Stalin and Charles Manson.

This sort of small group “terrorism” is inevitably authoritarian. The Unabomber, who admits to having no strategy for popular struggle, seeks to overthrow industrial society virtually single-handedly. He will force people to live in non-industrial, totally decentralized society? What if they do not want to live in such a society? And they do not; the vast majority support the existing system, more or less. Rather than trying to persuade them, he intends to blow up their society.

Anarchists are against the vanguardism of the Leninists but they are often unclear about just what vanguardism is. Many think that they avoid vanguardism by being against the self-organization of anarchists. In my opinion, vanguardism is not the belief that a small group may be right and the majority wrong. Few believe in revolutionary anarchism while the vast majority supports statist capitalism; we have every right to organize ourselves to try to persuade the majority of our viewpoint, always acknowledging that we have much to learn from others.

No, vanguardism is the belief that the correct minority has the right to impose its views on the majority. When the minority seeks to rule over the people, to act for them, to be political in their place, then it is vanguardist and authoritarian, no matter how “anti-authoritarian” is its ideology — as is the case of the Unabomber.

The Unabomber and Anarchism

To return to the original question: are the Unabomber’s murders connected to the politics of anarchism? First, I answer “No.” His views have nothing in common with my views on anarchism. And even the most misguided anarchist bomb-throwers and assassins of the past would not have killed professors and students.

But I also say “Maybe.” His views are similar to those of many anarchists: the lack of interest in developing a strategy for popular revolution; the belief that the enemy is industrial technology; not building an organization; not participating in popular struggles, but acting as an elite above the people; the worship of violence, abstracted from popular struggle; a willingness to impose their views on the people, even while denouncing as vanguardist those who try to persuade people. Perhaps I could add: an ambiguity about democracy, seeing anarchism as for freedom versus democracy, rather than as the most extreme form of democracy. All these concepts are reflected in the Unabomber’s letters and actions and are also held by various trends within the anti-authoritarian movements. No doubt the Unabomber will be used as an excuse for denouncing anarchism. The movement would be wise to prepare by having open discussion about him and his methods.

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