Whose Unabomber?

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Technogogues and technopaths we have had with us for some time. The Artificial Intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky, for instance, was well-known in the early 1980's for his description of the human brain as "a 3 pound computer made of meat." He was featured in the December 1983 issue of *Psychology Today*, occasioning the following letter:

> Marvin Minsky: With the wholly uncritical treatment — nay, giddy embrace — of high technology, even to such excrescences as machine "emotions" which you develop and promote, *Psychology Today* has at least made it publicly plain what's intended for social life. Your dehumanizing work is a prime contribution to high tech's accelerating motion toward an ever more artificial, de-individuated, empty landscape. I believe I am not alone in the opinion that vermin such as you will one day be considered among the worst criminals this century has produced.
>
> (Signed) In Revulsion,
> John Zerzan

A dozen years later the number of those actively engaged in the desolation of the soul and the murder of nature has probably risen; but support for the entire framework of such activity has undoubtedly eroded.

Enter the Unabomber (he/she/they) with a critique, in acts as well as words, of our sad, perverse, and increasingly bereft technological existence. Unabomber calls for a return to "wild nature" via "the complete and permanent destruction of modern industrial society in every part of the world," and the replacement of that impersonal, unfree, and alienated society by that of small, face-to-face social groupings. He has killed three and wounded 23 in the service of this profoundly radical vision.

There are two somewhat obvious objections to this theory and practice. For one thing, a return to undomesticated autonomous ways of living would not be achieved by the removal of industrialism alone. Such removal would still leave the domination of nature, subjugation of women, war, religion, the state, and division of labor, to cite some basic social pathologies. It is civilization itself that must be undone to go where Unabomber wants to go. In other words, the wrong turn for humanity was the Agricultural Revolution, much more fundamentally than the Industrial Revolution.

In terms of practice, the mailing of explosive devices intended for the agents who are engineering the present catastrophe is too random. Children, mail carriers and others could easily be killed. Even if one granted the legitimacy of striking at the high-tech horror show by terrorizing its indispensable architects, collateral harm is not justifiable.

Meanwhile, Unabomber operates in a context of massive psychic immiseration and loss of faith in all of the system's institutions. How many moviegoers, to be more specific, took issue with *Terminator 2* and its equating of science and technology with death and destruction? Keay Davidson's "A Rage Against Science" (*San Francisco Examiner*, 4/30/95) observed that Unabomber's "avowed hatred of science and technological trends reflects growing popular disillusionment with science."

A noteworthy example of the resonance that his sweeping critique of the modern world enjoys is "The Evolution of Despair" by Robert Wright, cover story of *Time* for August 28. The long article discusses the Unabomber's indictment soberly and sympathetically in an effort to plumb "the source of our pervasive sense of discontent."

At the same time, not surprisingly, other commentators have sought to minimize the possible impact of such ideas. "Unabomber Manifesto Not Particularly Unique" is the dismissive summary John Schwartz provided for the August 20 Washington Post. Schwartz found professors who would loftily attest to the unoriginality of fundamental questioning of society, as if anything like that goes on in classrooms. Ellul, Juenger and others with a negative view of technology are far from old hat; they are unknown, not part of accepted, respectable discourse. The cowardice and dishonesty typical of professors and journalists could hardly be more clearly represented.

Also easily predictable has been the antipathy to Unabomber-type ideas from the liberal-left. "Unabummer" was Alexander Cockburn's near-hysterical denunciation in *The Nation*, August 28/September 4. This pseudo-critic of U.S. capitalism rants about the Unabomber's "homicidal political nuttiness," the fruit of an "irrational" American Anarchist tradition. Cockburn says that Unabomber represents a "rotted-out romanticism of the individual and of nature," that nature is gone forever and we'd better accept its extinction. In reply to this effort to vilify and marginalize both Unabomber and anarchism, Bob Black points out (unpublished letter to the editor) the worldwide resurgence of anarchism and finds Unabomber expressing "the best and the predominant thinking in contemporary North American anarchism, which has mostly gotten over the workerism and productivism which it too often used to share with Marxism."

In Spring '95 Earth First! spokesperson Judy Bari labeled Unabomber "a sociopath," going on to declare, definitively but mistakenly, that "there is no one in the radical environmental movement who is calling for violence." This is not the place to adequately discuss the politics of radical environmentalism, but Bari's pontificating sounds like the voice of the many anarcho-liberals and anarcho-pacifists who wish to go no further in defense of the wild than tired, ineffective civil disobedience, and who brandish such timid and compromised slogans as "no deforestation without representation."

The Summer '95 issue of *Slingshot*, tabloid of politically correct Berkeley militants, contained a brief editorial trashing the Unabomber for creating "the real danger of government repression" of the radical milieu. The fear that misplaces blame on Unabomber overlooks the simple fact that any real blows against the Megamachine will invite responses from our enemies. The specter of repression is most effectively banished by doing nothing.

For their part, the "anarchists" of *Love and Rage* (August/September) have also joined the anti-Unabomber leftist chorus. Wayne Price's "Is the Unabomber an Anarchist?" concedes, with Bob

Black, that "most anarchists today do not regard the current development of industrial technology as 'progressive' or even 'neutral,' as do Marxists and liberals." But after giving this guarded lip-service to the ascendancy of Unabomber-like ideas, Price virulently decries Unabomber as "a murderer dragging noble ideas through the mud" and withholds even such political and legal support that he would accord authoritarian leftists targeted by the state. *Love and Rage* is defined by a heavy-handed manipulative organize-the-masses ideology; approaches that are more honest and more radical are either ignored or condemned by these politicians.

But this selective mini-survey of opposition to Unabomber does not by any means exhaust the range of responses. There are other perspectives, which have mainly, for obvious reasons, been expressed only privately. Some of us, for one thing, have found a glint of hope in the public appearance, at last, of a challenge to the fundamentals of a depraved landscape. In distinction to the widespread feeling that everything outside of the self is beyond our control, the monopoly of lies has been broken. It might be said that Unabomber's (media) impact is here today, only to be forgotten tomorrow. But at least a few will have been able to understand and remember. The irony, of course, is that lethal bombings were necessary for an alternative to planetary and individual destruction to be allowed to be heard.

The concept of justice should not be overlooked in considering the Unabomber phenomenon. In fact, except for his targets, when have the many little Eichmanns who are preparing the Brave New World ever been called to account? Where is any elementary personal responsibility when the planners of our daily and global death march act with complete impunity?

The ruling order rewards such destroyers and tries to polish their image. The May 21 *New York Times Magazine*'s "Unabomber and David Gelernter" humanizes the latter, injured by a Unabomber bomb at Yale, as a likable computer visionary preparing a "Renaissance of the human spirit." From no other source than the article itself, however, it is clear that Gelernter is helping to usher in an authoritarian dystopia based on all the latest high-tech vistas, like genetic engineering.

Is it unethical to try to stop those whose contributions are bringing an unprecedented assault on life? Or is it unethical to just accept our passive roles in the current zeitgeist of postmodern cynicism and know-nothingism? As a friend in California put it recently, when justice is against the law, only outlaws can effect justice.

The lengthy Unabomber manuscript will go undiscussed here; its strengths and weaknesses deserve separate scrutiny. These remarks mainly shed light on some of the various, mostly negative commentary rather than directly on their object. It is often the case that one can most readily learn about society by watching its reactions, across the spectrum, to those who would challenge it.

"Well, I believe in FC/Unabomber — it's all over the country…his ideas are, as the situationists said, 'in everyone's heads'; it's just a matter of listening to yer own rage," from a Midwesterner in the know. Or as Anne Eisenberg, from Polytechnic University in Brooklyn, admitted, "Scratch most people and you'll get a Luddite."

And from the *Boulder Weekly*, Robert Perkinson's July 6, '95 column sagely concluded: "Amidst the overwhelming madness of unbridled economic growth and postmodern disintegration, is such nostalgia, or even such rage, really crazy? For many, especially those who scrape by in unfulfilling jobs and peer longing toward stars obscured by beaming street lights, the answer is probably no. And for them, the Unabomber may not be a psychopathic demon. They may wish FC the best of luck."

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<insurgentdesire.org.uk/whoseunabomber.htm>
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