

1999

The Unabomber: Born at the Right Time?

Kristen Todeschini

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-7>

Recommended Citation

Todeschini, Kristen, "The Unabomber: Born at the Right Time?" (1999). *Volume 7 - 1999*. Paper 4.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-7/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lehigh Review at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 7 - 1999 by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.



The Unabomber: Born at the Right Time?

KRISTEN TODESCHINI

Philosophy is philosophy – whatever the philosophy. This is why the “Unabomber Manifesto,” penned by Theodore Kaczynski, is worth examining. He has a well-defined set of values and ideas that he took the time to set down on paper. His entire ideology is aimed at the abolition of industrial society. He calls for a return to nature and the “natural” way of doing things – alluding to the oneness of all things. These ideas of the Unabomber are not unlike those of many ancient philosophers. The similarities might almost be expected, but it is unlikely that the ancients would approve of a man who was willing to kill in order to stop technological progress and return to simpler ways. Hesiod, in *Works and Days*, comments that, “a man out of work, a man with empty hopes and no livelihood, has a mind that runs to mischief” (Hesiod 39). This suggests that Hesiod would be wary of Kaczynski’s methods. Kaczynski might assert that he is justified in his actions by his philosophical principles – he has, after all, “practiced inquiry more than all other men” (McKirahan 1996, 18). Yet the ancients say that, “much learning does not teach insight,” and that he has, “constructed his own wisdom, polymathy, evil trickery” (McKirahan 1996, 18).

One ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, rejects the validity of a personalized belief system. Heraclitus proposes that there is only one wisdom, one law which governs the actions of all men, and from this no man can ever stray. This he calls the Logos. He says that while the Logos is common to all, most people “live as though they have their own private understanding” (Heraclitus 57). For Heraclitus, this is man’s great mistake. The Logos is what connects man to nature, what binds all things and actions together. Nothing escapes the Logos; nothing is above or below it. He urges that, “it is necessary to follow the common [principle]” unfiltered by personal experience (Heraclitus 57). The problem is that humans refuse to follow the universal Logos even after they become aware of it: “men fail to notice what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do when asleep” (Heraclitus 33). For Heraclitus, this failure to incorporate the Logos into everyday life is a sure sign of incomprehension.

Heraclitus also believes that a unity of opposites is the basic component of the Logos. He speaks of there being, "in us living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old" (Heraclitus 135). This makes individual humans reflections of the whole universe, each is a small "logos" inside the bigger system of Logos. In humans and in the universe, "cold things warm themselves, warm cools" (Heraclitus 149). The connection of all things to one another finds its source in this dynamic tension, through opposites working against each other, one half filling any gap the other may vacate. These are the mechanics of the Logos.

The Unabomber would agree with much of Heraclitus's philosophy. Kaczynski would certainly concur with the concept of the Logos and he would no doubt believe that his own views were not marred by any personal bias. He would also believe that these universal truths were unfortunately known to only a few others. He affirms his belief in the natural inter-connection of all things when he blames nearly every problem today on the industrial-technological system. For Kaczynski, technology itself must be connected to all things. All things affect one another and, in this case, he believes that technology only influences most things in the worst possible way. Kaczynski therefore desires to overthrow the industrial-technological system. Only its elimination will bring a halt to the slow destruction of the natural and human world.

Kaczynski also believes in nature's equilibrium, the dynamic tension that balances all things. "Nature takes care of itself" (Kaczynski 1995, 45). Whether or not he believes this is due to the unity of opposites is unclear, as he tends to focus more on the physical, rather than the metaphysical aspects of existence. It is clear, however, that he believes nature to be as close to the truth as one may ever find on this planet. In his condemnation of "the system," he is an active proponent of nature unsullied by machines and a machine heart: "that is, 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" (Kaczynski 1995, 44). For Kaczynski, nature is sacred and should be uncontaminated by human meddling.

Another early philosopher, Antiphon, makes statements concerning nature and the laws that govern it. He compares these natural principles to the laws that men have fashioned for themselves. In doing so, he realizes that, "most of the things that are just according to [human] law are established in a way which is hostile to nature" (McKirahan 1996, 105). He goes on to support this statement with examples of restrictions placed on the person by human law – *e.g.*, what one is allowed to perceive through their various senses. He believes that the written and unwritten laws of man and what psychology today calls "socialization" deter us from using our physical faculties to their full capacity. He even asserts that restrictions are placed upon our thoughts and desires. This results in our great failure to know and conform with the reality of nature: "the things from which the laws deter humans are no more in accord with or suited to nature than the things which they promote" (McKirahan 1996, 106).

Kaczynski would emphatically support Antiphon's beliefs. A large part of his argument is that humans spend too much of their time doing what is actually against their natures. He regards this as unavoidable, since society, as he sees it, is the controlling force. "The system HAS TO force people to behave in ways that are increasingly remote from the natural pattern of human behavior" (Kaczynski 1995, 25); in his mind, this includes physical and psychological pressures inflicted by the system. He accuses society of steering its members in certain destructive directions. He cites examples of young boys being pushed towards math and science at an early age which is against their nature—especially in their youth when they would rather be playing. He also proposes that propaganda infiltrates our lives at a stifling rate and is constantly steering public opinion toward working against its own best interests. It is Kaczynski's belief that, "the system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs" (Kaczynski 1995, 26). Moreover, if we have to modify ourselves to fit into the system, it will not come from nature. And if it does not come from nature, what ends are we serving?

Hesiod is the presocratic philosopher who most closely resembles Theodore Kaczynski. Though the Unabomber would probably dismiss most of Hesiod's mythological concepts as poppycock, their basic attitudes are nearly parallel. Consider their similar views on:

- Child Rearing

"But a man who stands by his word leaves a strong line of kinfolk" (Hesiod 32).

"Revolutionaries should have as many children as they can...as children tend...to hold social attitudes similar to their parents" (Kaczynski 1995, 49).

- Individualized Determination

"Best of all is the man who sees everything for himself, who looks ahead and sees what will be better in the end" (Hesiod 32).

"Propaganda (has) infiltrated the entire system ... some are more susceptible to (it) than others ..." (Kaczynski 1995, 16).

- The Nature of Life

"Work, work, and then work some more" (Hesiod 35).

A paraphrased Unabomber would agree, and add, 'but for no good reason.'

Both philosophers are rather discontent with society and they both seem to believe that they have the formula for living a good life. First, they proclaim what is wrong with the world. "A person hasn't any business wasting time at the market unless he's got a year's supply of food put by..." (Hesiod 24). This is Hesiod's advice for taking care of oneself before worrying about others or the market in general. He views competition, of both the agricultural and commercial variety, as good only when it causes one to get up and get to work. Second, both the ancient Greek and

contemporary American stress what it is important to do. Hesiod's basic belief is that you need to work assiduously in order to be comfortable; and then you must work ever afterwards to maintain this prosperity. There is not a moment to be wasted, so focus on your own situation rather than those of strangers. By promoting the destruction of all technology, Kaczynski is promoting a return to Hesiod's type of lifestyle. He also advises us to mind our own business. The life of a hardworking, self-sustaining farmer allows for little time spent on things that do not need to be done. There would be no room for the "surrogate activities" that Kaczynski discusses and dislikes so much – that is, activities, "directed toward an artificial goal that the individual pursues for the sake of the 'fulfillment' that he gets from pursuing the goal, not because he needs to attain the goal itself" (Kaczynski 1995, 18). One's day would be filled with preparation for events months in the future and a wasted minute would cost dearly. The Unabomber is making a call for the return of our work ethic and the freedom to work creatively and on our own terms. He feels that today, "people live more by virtue of what the system does FOR them or TO them than by virtue of what they do for themselves" (Kaczynski 1995, 14). His is a call for people to start acting on their own again, purely for themselves and for the sake of their dignity.

The similarity between Kaczynski and Hesiod begins to fracture when Hesiod shows us a picture of the natural struggle for power. He tells a fable about birds. A hawk carries a nightingale away in its sharp talons, and to the complaint of the nightingale, the hawk replies, "you're in the grip of real strength now, and you'll go where I take you I'll make a meal of you if I want, or I might let you go. Only a fool struggles against his superiors. He not only gets beat, but humiliated as well" (Hesiod 29). For Hesiod, this was simply a warning not to take on more than you can handle, or aggravate people in power. However, there was also little worry of such a situation in Hesiod's time, as it was the prevailing belief that justice ruled humankind. Unjustness might not even be recognized as such, since that was the way of the animals. It was believed that someone would always speak up and a wrong would be righted.

For the Unabomber, humanity would be cast as Hesiod's nightingale, while scientists, big government, "technophiles," leftists, or any individual or group that attempts to force their own restricted view upon the world, would play the role of the hawk. He feels that man no longer has any control over his life at all. There is no justice. Most of his manifesto is based upon what he calls the "power process," which he sees it as having four parts: "goal, effort, attainment of goal ... and autonomy" (Kaczynski 1995, 8). He sees all of the aforementioned 'hawks' as disrupting this process, and it is as a result of this disruption that many of life's ills appear. Kaczynski asserts that the main intrusion comes "through a deficiency of real goals and a deficiency of autonomy in pursuit of goals" (Kaczynski 1995, 14).

Another area where Kaczynski and Hesiod disagree is in the differences between revolution and reform and the role that violence plays in both of these. Hesiod is very wary of violence. "Violent behavior is bad for a poor man. Even a rich man can't

afford it" (Hesiod 30). He seems to believe that things-will-take-care-of-themselves. This is an attitude that Kaczynski would not tolerate. But for Hesiod, there "is a better road around the other way leading to what's right . . . justice beats out violence" (Hesiod 30).

As we all know, the Unabomber's tactics are more extreme than Hesiod's. In the manifesto, Kaczynski states that the only reason he sent all of those bombs was to compel people to listen to him. I have decided to do him the favor. He claims that reform never works; the only way that the system will ever change is through its gradual weakening culminating in revolutionary activity. He never presents a clear picture, however, of how this revolution will actually take place. As he says, "It may or may not involve physical violence, but it will not be a POLITICAL revolution. Its focus will be on technology and economics, not politics" (Kaczynski 1995, 47). This is as specific as Kaczynski gets, as he asserts earlier that these sorts of things are unpredictable – any well laid plan of revolutionary activity may prove, due to changed circumstances, to be impossible.

However, Kaczynski does maintain that simple political reform is too weak to overthrow a system as well rooted as the industrial-technological system. "Reform is always restrained by the fear of painful consequences if changes go too far" (Kaczynski 1995, 33). It is his view that this fear provokes a near-constant rechecking of any possible negative consequence that may result from establishing a firm standard or law. This never gets anyone anywhere since everyone is afraid of stepping on someone's toes. (He is also not a big fan of "political correctness.") It is his belief that a dominant minority will have to take over forcefully, and enact and enforce their own ideals from the start. The Unabomber believes that the time has come for industry to pass away. Anaximander, another ancient Greek philosopher, justifies this kind of passing by singing: "Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time" (Heidegger 1984, 13). Kaczynski believes in those words, that technology must pass away "according to necessity." Moreover, he sees this necessity so clearly that he has volunteered to help speed the process.

All of Ted Kaczynski's beliefs seem like an urge to return to "authentic" or "real living." It is my opinion, however, that we shall be just as confused with or without technology. Whether we are out in the countryside or in the computer lab all day, the greater questions of life are yet to be answered. While technology may sometimes prevent us from seeing the unity of all things, it may also one day allow us to return to nature. Perhaps technology will develop to the point where people will have large amounts of free time. People could then choose to spend time in a wild natural setting or within sheltered shopping malls. Would this constitute "real" freedom or "real living"?

Works Cited

- Heidegger, Martin. 1984. *Early Greek Thinking*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Heraclitus. *The Cosmic Fragments*. G. S. Kirk, trans. Cambridge: University Press, 1954.
- Hesiod. *Works and Days, Theogony*. Stanley Lombardo, trans. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- Kaczynski, Theodore J. 1995. "Industrial Society and its Future" <ftp://ftp.ai.mit.edu/pub/users/misc/Unabomber> (accessed March 29, 1998).
- McKirahan, Richard D. 1996. *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.