

# **In Search of the Unabomber**

Laure Akai

1997

If much discussion has been devoted to the terror tactics used by the so-called Unabomber, then the manifesto produced by FC should spawn a debate much larger; it no doubt is an important work (in the fact that many people read it, not because of any pretense to originality) full of questions for anarchists, anti-authoritarians, anarchoids, anarcho-syndicalists, primitivists and leftists to mull over and argue. Yet too many people are quick to dismiss FC as a right-wing kook or some generic primitivist; this is a very convenient position especially for collective-powerists and moralist ideologues who seek to create ideologically pure movements with themselves at helm; they can use their moral disgust with FC's violence to dismiss or avoid discussion of ideas which may be critical of their brand of politics or their vision of revolution. (Actually, the ideas expressed by FC are sometimes remarkably similar to the ideas of many revolutionary individualists, "primitivists," wild anti-authoritarians and others who have also met with much intolerance from people such as the leftist/authoritarian flank of the anarchist movement, not to mention society as a whole. So, long overdo on the agenda for discussion is not really the use of violence, but the embracing of industrial/technological civilization and the focus on collective rule over individual responsibility in different segments of the anti-statist milieu.)

The Unabomber Manifesto contains a wealth of ideas but is also somewhat poorly organized and somewhat contradictory. This is a shame because it becomes its most cohesive about a third of the way through; many readers will have no doubt given up on the tract before then. Although FC claims to be anarchist, it understands that many anarchists will reject its vision of anarchy, if due to nothing more than its reliance on violence to get its message out. Many anarchists will likely reject the manifesto because of the belief that technological society may be reformed on a libertarian model. (An unquestioning attitude towards technology is dominant.) But FC's critique of technology and its infringement on freedom should not confine it to the lunatic fringe any more than should the traditional anarchist correlation of the state with various forms of human misery.

First, left me start off by saying that I'm not going to try to give the work an anarchist seal of approval; I don't want to say an anarchist should think this, this and that, do X, Y and Z or they are not an anarchist because that's the game of movementists and not free-thinking individuals. I've never met a self-professed anarchist who was free of contradiction, least of all those who think they are; I'd rather agree or disagree with individual points of philosophy or action than to beat an ideology into the shape I want it to be. There are, undoubtedly, parts of the Unabomber Manifesto that are clearly anarchist and other parts that echo sentiments of a truly anti-authoritarian nature. There are also parts which I find somewhat suspect or weak. We can begin by looking at some of the clearly anarchist positions and some ideas which deserve more attention by truly freedom-loving individuals.

UB (FC) spends a great deal of time examining the artificial needs created by our society. Whether or not you agree that all activity above the primal activity of providing food, shelter and clothing should be considered surrogate activity, it is very

clear that many of the needs of modern man are artificial, created to serve some other purpose. Take the artificial needs and desires as dictated by advertising and marketing. UB rightly points out that although society proffers up all these artificial needs, many people feel unsatisfied; even after attaining what we think we need, we may feel unfulfilled because we are not aware of what we really need, that is, to be autonomous, free individuals. UB's insistence that the need to be free and to control one's life is real while other needs are largely artificial is also a classic anarchist idea.

The ideas about attaining fulfillment that UB develops of course are radically different than those of enlightenment-inspired classical anarchists. Whereas many have attributed to man the never-ending urge to go forward and to build ever more complex civilizations, UB maintains that people's real goals are much simpler. He writes about the "power process," part of which is the attainment of goals. This, he claims, is a fundamental part of human nature. Can this, however, be a biological instinct? We cannot answer that question, but it is clear that the goals we set for ourselves are a product of our environment. Goals can be as fundamental as obtaining food and shelter, but here we can see the instinct for survival, for physical satisfaction as opposed to a need for psychological satisfaction. As the real need to fulfill our requirements for survival become, I would argue not easier, because wage slavery is not easy, but different, those for whom survival is more effortless than not must set up "artificial goals."

To what extent, however, can we say these goals are artificial? Obviously there is a difference between someone whose goal is to collect as many samples of Elvis memorabilia as possible and someone whose goal is to build a house or to learn to play a musical instrument. The need to have leisure activities is ancient and at some point people decided to do something besides frolic. The author is not claiming, as some unsavvy readers have figured, that human life should be a struggle for survival; the point is that society sets up goals upon which a person's psychological well-being may even depend. How many people have gone into depression because their house doesn't look the way it should-how many yuppies in waiting have lost it learning they didn't get into the right college? Even though the rules for survival have been radically altered in post-industrial society, these goals are not really fundamentally important to our being. (I guess they have never thought that the society that has abolished every adventure makes the greatest adventure the abolition of that society.)

The term "surrogate activity," however, seems far too universal to be disparaged.

Activity may have no "goal" other than enjoyment, or may be goal-oriented. It may seriously affect the psyche or be part of one's character armor. Or it may be participated in rather disinterestedly. It may be "useful" or not (this is another discussion). Thus human activity, if it truly is human activity (and not animal activity) cannot so easily be divided into "primal activity" and "surrogate activity" if we are to assume, as UB does, that goal-oriented activity is a part of "human nature." First, there is much evidence that primitive peoples spent far less time at this "primal activity" than modern man spends working, which would mean that for a very long time people have had to fill their time with surrogate activity. If there exists a biological imperative for

fulfilling needs other than the primal, then where do we draw the line between “psychologically necessary” and “psychosocially unnecessary”? Although such discussions cannot be treated in such a short manifesto, and although the point is appreciated, the terms given seem too absolute.

(Perhaps as a helpless product of civilization, I cannot help feeling that the multitude of experiences available in modern society is a benefit to my psychic health. I know many people—whose lives consist of getting married, having kids and dying—who are “fulfilled.” But I’d rather have a wider range of experience. I must be sick, like the consumer who must try 100 different brands of toothpaste. This is a difficult part of UB’s philosophy. Even more difficult are people who would radically alter the way we spend our time. While many people may be willing to give up certain comfort for the greater benefit of the environment or give up certain comforts for greater autonomy, few people will be convinced to narrow their range of fulfilling activities to the simplest. It is not at all clear that such a life can be filled with pleasure and not monotony.)

UB examines some methods of social control and if one thinks about it, it is easy to see how certain technologies necessitate strict control and others severely impede people’s freedoms. Yet the technophile, even the technoceptive, maintain that technology can be reformed. This is where UB’s philosophy will differ radically from many. I believe that UB is correct in concluding that the industrial system cannot be radically changed to offer the individual maximum participation in his or her life and freedom from its long-range effects. Production requires a certain sacrifice of individual freedom if one is to participate in it. (Many anarchists of the liberal ilk would naively argue that nobody would coerce people to participate in an industrial system under anarchy, yet no doubt there would be forces to convince them to give up some of their absolute freedom for the work of society, and where those forces are, there are apt to be more.) The UB argues that even in a workers’ democracy of the syndicalist model, large organizations would have to regulate the running of many industries, utilities, etc.. The organizations, if they don’t run the danger of becoming de facto power structures, still minimize, by necessity, the role of the individual. “Technological societies,” UB argues, “cannot be broken down into small, autonomous communities, because production depends on the cooperation of very large numbers of people. When a decision affects, say, a million people, then each of the affected individuals has, on the average, only a one-millionth share in making the decision.” Without individual autonomy in decision making, a person might find new problems with the governance of work.

I can hear the collectivists screaming, “But the individual will must be subjected to the collective good!” (Actually that’s my next door neighbor the Stalinist.) Herein lies one of the most fundamental anarchist bags of worms. We know that no collective opinion is better than an individual opinion simply because it is held by more people. Who, then, gets to define the collective good, except of course the majority. Maybe the majority will have ideas I agree with—maybe they won’t. Maybe future generations will simply agree with the future majority. “You go off and live on your land and we’ll live on ours. We promise not to go coal mining on your land, unless of course, we run

out of coal on ours.” I see possibilities for the creation of new forms of hierarchy, for the continued expansion of technology and the environmental destruction necessary to maintain it, and for the negation of minority views by the majority. I’m not saying that this would be worse than at present, or that I wouldn’t take part in such collectivist folly, it’s just that few people seem to realize that large governing bodies, as opposed to small autonomous groupings, are part and parcel of a highly complex, industrialized society and that there are alternatives to this which are no doubt more conducive to local organizing. The organization of industrial society is an impediment to small-scale self-organization. Either industry must be scaled down to a pre-industrial level or the collectivists should come up with a more detailed description of how they envision technology and collectivism to work allowing for maximum freedom. I say that they should come up with this description, because if they really believe in their vision, they should be able to defend it against criticism; of course this is all the realm of theory; we never can know what would really happen “if.”

Many people cringe at the implications of such discussion. Whereas the Marxoid left may place the destruction of capitalism as the first order on the agenda, and some anarchists the smashing of the state, of capitalism, etc., FC places the destruction of technology on top of the list. As a matter of fact, not only does it top the list, FC advises that it should be the only real concern of the revolutionist. Do all social problems stem from civilization? (That reminds me of one of Marx’s main flaws.) Well, UB does hold the opinion that most of them do. (Although admitting that certain primitive people had a “problem” with cross-dressing. Oh, we mustn’t get our genders confused. [What an aberration.]) Although I don’t necessarily agree with the primacy of UB’s advice, I do understand that the use of technology deserves an extremely important place in the discussion of social revolution; those who choose to disregard its importance are sticking their heads in the sand.

UB is obviously not a person who just needed a convenient label to pin upon himself; this is more than I can say about some of the people I’ve heard who have disowned and denounced him. UB has given some thought to his vision of anarchy and what is necessary to achieve it. This, however, is far from enough for some, and even infuriates others. How could this terrorist blemish the shining image of anarchism? Perhaps even worse than being a terrorist is the fact that UB is not an anarchist of the join and change variety; he does not say: organize to overthrow oppression, you’ll be the moral majority one day! In fact he sees identification with political movements as substitutes for the power process. He does not eschew revolutionary organization, nor does he disavow the desire to organize for change as a legitimate effort to take back power, but the implications of this idea is that joining a movement, may, in some cases, have more to do with personal than societal change, although it is understood that some personal change can only occur when society is transformed. Further along, UB not only criticizes leftists, but accuses leftist movements of being so rife with power hungry, compromising, would-be leaders that it is better off not to go near them. The problem that many anarchoids seem to have with this is that his description of leftists is too

ambiguous and too close to their descriptions of themselves. Too many people still see politics in terms of left wing and right wing agendas. Here is where the left flank can pick up fuel for its arsenal; leftists will claim that if he is not left, he is right. Furthermore, they may take his seeming dismissal of gay rights, feminist and other movements as proof of this point. Although UB later clarifies this point (in a footnote) and claims that it is the movements that are fucked, not individuals who care about these issues, I find this somewhat ingenuous.

Why is the Psychology of Modern Leftism the introductory issue after the main thesis? The position of this question in the work is rather strange. There are three very possible ideas to consider: a. that the Unabomber cannot organize his immense ideas well; b. that the Unabomber has some hang ups and is not entirely comfortable with certain (liberal) ideas; c. the Unabomber is constantly in a predominantly leftist milieu and thus these issues are immediately relevant to his everyday life.

Especially revealing about the Unabomber is point number 14 which gives extremely brief treatment to feminists and uses three words that give the author away as carrying stereotypes: desperate, anxious and nag. (He writes "Feminists are desperately anxious to prove that women are as strong and as capable as men. Clearly they are nagged by a fear that women may not be as strong and as capable as men.") As anybody who has been stereotyped due to their gender knows, it is annoying to have assumptions made about your abilities. Any woman who has gone to a political function with a man who was greeted, handed a flier and spoken to while she was ignored, anybody who was laughed at in school when she said she wants to try out for the soccer team, anybody who has been pushed aside by a man saying "let me handle that" when the car breaks down may indeed want to, or even need to, prove that she is as strong or as capable as a man. This is not the same as being nagged by a fear of being inferior.

UB is so off the mark on the feminist issue that we are tempted to conclude that either he is in the company of exclusively weak-charactered feminists or that he is a man who cannot understand women and probably does not get laid as often as he wants and is thus resentful. (The second option could explain why he has the space to make bombs without being discovered.)

While we are questioning the personal politics of UB-the idea that the pursuit of sex and love is not a surrogate activity may be true, but why does the author(s) add the seemingly unnecessary and biologically untrue words "with a member of the opposite sex" to "most people... would feel deprived if they passed their lives without ever having a relationship"? Is it that the author is a heterosexual who just wrote without thinking or was he really thinking about the "majority" of people, who seemingly really are more heterosexual than not? Or do we have someone here who views pansexuality and homosexuality as aberrations? I cannot answer that question, obviously, but I'm sure that most readers have met individuals who both assume all sexuality to be heterosexual and don't take women activists seriously and have noticed that they often have some similar psychological aspects. (It is worth pointing out that since the sixties, there have been many variations on "back to nature" ideology, from "low

impact” communitarian ideologies to deep ecology and that amongst these ideologies’ adherents one may find neo-Malthusians, fascists of different sorts, race separatists, strength supremacists (read male dominants) and homophobes. One might suppose that the total rejection of current civilization is a pose that allows such types to go by easier than they could pass, say in mainstream leftist politics, at least in America. I will not make, I cannot make, any judgement about the real lived social politics of this individual (and I tend to think it is an individual), but I am rather curious. Of course the answers would not change the overall perceptiveness of the manifesto, but, it is important to understand the psychology of individuals who may espouse a certain philosophy, if only to understand what can be compatible with what and where lies room for contradictions or philosophical shortsightedness.)

There are some other telling comments. In section 219 UB complains that (in leftist society) no one can be allowed to have a negative attitude towards homosexuals, disabled people, fat people, old people, ugly people and so on. While UB may have been saying that no individual person can have a negative attitude towards another individual who happens to be a member of an oppressed group without being labelled a racist, sexist, homophobe or so on, my gut feeling is that he could have been clearer if that was what he was saying and that this is the irrational side of the MAN behind FC. (You Tarzan, me Jane. Men were born to be wild, not to wear lipstick and make quiche.) In another words, we got a good, old fashioned, as-nature-intended guy. (People were born hetero to procreate, the disabled would die out of the gene pool, women should do as nature intended, the races were born separate for a reason, fat people are fat because they watch too much TV, etc..) Also, check out the idea about having as many kids as you can. (You all thought it was a gag when I wrote about “The Society for the Procreation of the Anarchist Race.”) Yeah, he gets the fun part of that deal; I wonder if he’d be so high on the idea if he got morning sickness and swollen nipples. Yuck-I don’t care if there is an extended family-I’m not going to primitive-land if I have to get knocked up every time I get laid. (I’m just poking fun. Actually primitive people knew quite a lot about birth control and they didn’t have to worry about procreating to make a social revolution!)

While UB makes some clear arguments against thinking you can organize a revolution based on leftist reform movements, he also seems to make some overly broad statements on leftist psychology. (His closing arguments against leftism being so much stronger than the opening ones, he should have used them first.) It does not help that the language used is similar to the rhetoric of the far right. Does the leftist hate America and the West because they are strong and successful? It is true that many leftists champion the underdog and this means that they have done such crazy things as take Iraq’s side in the war, supported petty commie dictators and the like. But identifying with the weak and their right not to be bullied by the strong is not the same as disliking America because it is “successful.” What, exactly, is America successful at? At being a democracy? This is a very strange adjective to describe America and sounds more apt to come out of the mouth of a nationalist of some sort than anybody interested

in smashing the state. It is not clear that American leftists hate America for reasons other than what they say: that there is social injustice in the country, because it is imperialist. Yes, many leftists do have a double standard, but it seems that UB is a bit defensive on this issue. Why?

Why also does UB mention nazis and militiamen in his examples of refusal? I am not arguing that these aren't examples of refusal of some sort, but they are also examples of acceptance. They certainly would not be among the first examples of refusal I would mention.

UB is obviously an individualist of sorts, but there are different types of individualists. There are individualists who espouse "moralism," who believe, to a certain extent in social responsibility while wanting to be free from socializing forces. They would argue that certain impositions on absolute personal freedom are necessary if one is to respect the freedom of others. And there are others for whom these issues of coexistence are perhaps secondary. There is no reason to believe that UB's brand of individualism is highly developed and not of the infantile kind.

First, we see several instances of how UB places the primacy of his own reactions over the psychological welfare of people with whom he may interact. He is seemingly defending a parent's right to spank a child, and although I might agree that violence in some cases may be clearer than words, one must also think of the consequences of one's actions on other people. Similarly, if UB is defending people's right to have negative reactions to, say, gay people (although this is not totally clear), then he is ignoring real issues in socialization, such as the fact that negative reactions are usually learned responses and that people who are unfortunate enough to have to live through such reaction often have difficulties adjusting. UB also seems to favor the view that people are naturally competitive or that there is nothing wrong with being competitive. Of course there is something wrong with being competitive when society awards certain higher status to the "winners": a social hierarchy can only result.

Fuck tech.

It is significant that UB makes repeated use of the words successful, inferior and superior. "Overly socialized" people are generally antagonistic to people being labelled as "inferior" or "superior" due to the fact that these values are most often not scientific and are loaded with many consequences. Take for example the supposed genetic links being IQ and intelligence. (UB criticizes leftists for disavowing genetic theories.) Of course genetics do play some part in intelligence, but certain types of intelligence are not accurately measured in IQ tests and people may be average in some areas but gifted in others. There certainly is enough evidence to suggest that certain spheres of intelligence can be improved and that environment does play a major part in the acquisition of different types of knowledge. (It is also a fact that certain types of intelligence are more highly valued by society than others.) If a person is "inferior" (and this is really a loaded term for anybody to use) it cannot be his "fault" if he is genetically programmed to be that way. "Fault" can only be implied if a person is not as smart as he or she should, genetically, be (which of course is impossible to predict),

at which point the fault can either be attributed to the person, his surroundings, or a combination of both. If UB is supporting a genetic view of intelligence, then the word fault should be removed from his vocabulary; if not he should give the leftists more due for their suspicions about genetic theory. In any case section 18 is not well thought out and smacks of the influences of right wing radicals which can often be found in EF! or Loompanics circles. (And apparently other places—I admit that I don't know much about these bozos except that they exist.)

One could thus argue that the UB manifesto does not attempt to impart any visions of harmonic society because it is basically anti-social.

It is important to be more precise when examining the problems of humans as social beings versus humans as socialized beings, for this may present a major difference in perceptions of what it means to exercise one's freedom. Although I may agree with many of UB's observations, I feel myself in a different camp than FC because of such social issues. This does not mean that I should try to distance myself from his ideas as much as possible, that I should panic about my brand of individualism being forever discredited by the bourgeoisie and the left, and engage in some of the tactics of denunciation others seem to be using. The fact is that we must understand that technology is an odious thing; who could blame a person for trying to strike out against it? It all seems to come down to the fact that people feel like they have to worry about the impact of FC on their own ideologies because they themselves have not managed to make them into strong, living practices. What does it really say about ideologues that cannot stand a plurality of views, that must place ideas into such absolute camps as good and bad, anarchist and not-anarchist instead of intelligently examining their different facets?

UB's views on leftism should not be assumed to be simply reactionary; he does understand something of the mass psychology of leftism. Particularly the search for strength in the collective rather than oneself. UB also stands for the rights of minorities to make change, which is contradictory to the hypocritical democratic values of many leftists. The section on leftist tactics is also worthy of discussion. UB realizes that many have a martyr instinct and often prefer masochistic tactics. This may be in part self-hatred, as UB contends, but more likely is the attitude that love=death, 'that giving up one's life (or safety) is the extreme proof of caring or commitment. The instinct to be recognized as "good" by others (through the sacrifice mode) is stronger than the instinct to recognize oneself as good and to preserve oneself intact. The leftist/collectivist is more highly social than the (left?)/individualist in the fact of constantly needing validation from moral judges. And also needing more approval, which tends to explain why many conform to sheepish political behavior. On the other hand, it would not be fair to neglect to scrutinize individualists with similar candor; many of the so-called individualist ilk pick on leftists because it is too hard to change one's behavior and thus flaunt their refusal to be PC as a radical political statement. By this I am speaking of the sexists and homophobes who make a career out of attacking feminism, while behind such a radical posture they are obscuring part of their real psychological/political

agenda (i.e. putting women back in their place as intellectually inferior creatures by dismissing many valid critiques as emotional hysterics). I am speaking of the substance abusers who refuse to face up to the possible social consequences of their actions, and of other habit-ridden individuals who refuse to scrutinize their own behavior but are all too happy to make asinine statements about, say, the connection between violence and vegetarianism. We can find these types not only throughout regular society, but also in places like the “anarchist” milieu, often turning up in the pages of *Anarchy* where individualists of the hypersensitive ego mix with sensitive egoists all the time.

In point 21 the Unabomber tends to give more credence to the irrational fears of the white majority (a term, I needn't remind, which is preferred by racists and usually shunned by anti-racists) than to white leftists who support affirmative action. This ignores the fact that the staunchest supporters of affirmative action are minorities themselves, not, white male leftists. Obviously, UB contends, it would be more “productive” in the reformist sense to pander to stupid white people who don't understand class politics and real economics. If we are to take this line of reasoning, we can conclude that it is always more “productive” to reason with the people ‘in power and their hirelings, to smile with them and try to find a compromise. We can also conclude that it is more “productive” to be nice to scientists so as not to alienate sympathizers who might be put off by people sending letter bombs. So what does the Unabomber advocate? Sometimes taking a conciliatory approach and sometimes blowing people up or always taking a conciliatory approach, or always blowing people up? The message he is sending, of course, is mixed. But it is a message that he identifies with white working class people who feel threatened and who dislike leftists. Why else would he feel that these people deserve concessions (which is obviously the conclusion one must draw) while others deserve bombs?

UB's claims that hostility against the white majority intensifies racial hatred seemingly lessens its own responsibility for racial tensions. (Note there are none of the typical self-apologetic disclaimers there as in other sections of the manifesto.)

Point 40 of the manifesto also may provide an interesting insight as to who the Unabomber is. Many people would disagree that “in modern industrial society only minimal effort is necessary to satisfy one's physical needs.” Obviously people from poorer countries or social backgrounds may feel that satisfying one's needs is a major effort. Although UB admits that there is an underclass, he speaks of mainstream society where jobs are apparently available for those who go through training programs. The effort to keep them, furthermore, is labelled “modest.” This is a rather alien reality for me; almost all my blue collar relatives have lost their jobs and the white collar workers that I know also are getting the can. Of course we are not from the WASP suburban middle class, which really seems to be the only non-professional caste that can “live well” with little effort. Again I feel that there is evidence to suggest UB's high affinity with white America. Further down in the paragraph he makes the assumption that when white activists work for the rights of non-white minorities, they are addressing issues that are not important for them personally. I know many people who are white,

for whom it is personally very important that racial tolerance exist, if only because they are tired of listening to racists around them. There also may exist a certain amount of human empathy by which people become very interested in seeing justice for others. While we all may know the guilty white liberal who simultaneously patronizes non-whites and pretends to champion their causes. I am not entirely convinced that is what UB is talking about.

The Ted K Archive

Laure Akai  
In Search of the Unabomber  
1997

Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, Issue 43 (Vol 15, No 1, Spring/Summer 1997).  
<[archive.org/details/ajoda-43](http://archive.org/details/ajoda-43)>

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**