STS and the Unabomber: Personal Essays

Various Authors

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Editorial Introduction

In the articles that follow, members of the STS community write about their personal and professional experiences with the FBI and the search for the Unabomber. Sal Restivo, past president of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) and self-proclaimed anarchist, writes about his mixed feelings in helping the FBI. Sal and Wesley Shrum, long-time secretary of 4S, indicate their complex musings. Keith Benson discusses his fifteen minutes of fame and the ensuing fallout from his colleagues.

4S, the FBI, and Anarchy

> October 31, 1994
>
> Dear Dr. Restivo:
>
> The mission of the UNABOM Task Force is complex and demanding. It is made easier through the assistance of persons like yourself who are concerned about making our society a better place to live.
>
> —The FBI

Early one October morning in 1994, Wes Shrum, the 4S secretary, and I walked into a nondescript diner in New Orleans with A. J., a special agent for the FBI, and T. C., a postal inspector. This was the first of two 4S meetings I would preside over as the 4S president. We were meeting for breakfast across the street from the Clarion Hotel where the annual meeting of the 4S was getting under way. How did it happen that a former adviser to Students for a Democratic Society, *Nation* subscriber, and self-styled anarchist was sitting down to breakfast with the FBI, more or less voluntarily?

A few weeks earlier, Wes had called to tell me that the FBI wanted to attend our conference, and in particular they wanted to meet with our council, the governing body of the society. As Wes told me what little he knew, I began imagining bomb threats and some terrorist group that had targeted 4S for destruction (perhaps led by some deranged vanguard of the Science Wars). Since Wes couldn't tell me why the FBI wanted to meet with us, I told Wes to tell them "No" (Could I do that? Say "No" to the FBI? Well, at least I could ask Wes to say "No" to them; after all, I was the president!). In the end, I agreed to meet with the agents so that they could tell us what was going on and I could decide whether the situation warranted letting the FBI disrupt our meeting. We needed to proceed cautiously because, in my view, the barbarians were at the gates of an intellectual sanctuary. Well, the barbarians turned out to be as civil as you could imagine (if you closed your imagination to the apparatus of power and violence that sustained them), no apparent threat to Greek democracy or the 4S thought collective.

The two agents were members of the UNABOM TASK FORCE. OK, so this was about the Unabomber. They shared the basic facts of the case with us, they showed us charts and clippings, and then we exchanged business cards. I handed my Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) card to the postal inspector sitting beside me. He looked at it, sat back in his chair, and turned to me. "This is where it all started,"

he said. I suddenly felt that I had become a suspect, and decided it would be prudent not to give away any of my anarchist credentials! The RPI story turned out to be a little confusing. Early on, I got the impression that the first bomb was mailed to Professor Edward Smith, an electrical engineering professor at RPI, a little over twenty years ago. The bomb was apparently mailed from Chicago, and never reached Smith. Later, the agent who delivered the Unabomber's manifesto to me in my RPI office told me that the first letter bomb was mailed to Northwestern University with an RPI return address—Professor Edward Smith. Wes and I listened as the agents unfolded the Unabomber story. They were interested in getting a scholarly reaction to a surviving letter, appended to a letter bomb mailed to that worm runner scientist at the University of Michigan. We all remember his planaria worm experiments on cannibalism and memory, don't we? How many of us, though, remember that he founded the *Worm Runner's Digest* and confused scientists by publishing bona fide scientific articles alongside parodies and satires. This created a scandal because readers couldn't tell which was which. It was a nice little exercise in a pre-Sokalian era in the sociology of science for a while.

I decided to allow the agents to present the letter to council, but with as little disruption of our normal business as possible. Wes has given the details of this meeting and the aftermath. It was, incidentally, awesome to watch some of our scholarly community's most talented text analysts work on that letter without any hint of its context.

On our way out of the diner, the postal inspector, musing on whether they were going to catch this guy, said he didn't know, but that if he was ever in the same room with him he would know. A chill ran up my spine. What if I were the Unabomber? Would he know?

No bombs went off at the Clarion, no Science Wars terrorists invaded the lobby to kill and maim social constructionists.

Soon after the manifesto was published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, I received a call from the FBI's Albany, New York office. Special agent N. M. wanted to see me about the Unabomber case. We discussed the RPI connection and I learned that the FBI had been investigating on the RPI campus for nearly twenty years on account of the Edward Smith return address on the first letter bomb. A couple of days later, N. M. delivered the manifesto to me, with the request that I read it in the next couple of days if possible. We would then get together again to discuss my reactions. The agent gave me the clear impression that things were coming to a head and that the Task Force was confident it was closing in on the Unabomber. I was hesitant about reading the manifesto under such a deadline, but I did read it. Just a few pages into the work, I began to get the same sorts of feelings I had gotten when during my undergraduate years I read parts of *Mein Kampf*. Further on, the voice I heard coming from the blue paper in my hands reminded me of the Weatherman taxi driver I regularly rode with in E. Lansing, Michigan during 1968. Onmy short rides from the train or bus station to my apartment, I had to endure the driver's outbursts

about how much he hated his father and how he was getting back at him by bombing banks.

The profile that came into focus for me as I read through the manifesto contradicted some of the statements I had been reading in the papers. I concluded that the writer was trained in computer science, mathematics, or engineering and that it was extremely unlikely that he had had any disciplined exposure to the history and sociology of science. I also concluded that he had had an abusive father who coerced him in his studies. I found it very curious that when T. K. was captured and his story began to emerge that his father was never, to my knowledge, mentioned. Was he dead? Living apart and alienated from the family? Did I actually see him interviewed on a television news program? Was the Unabomber sending bombs to "his father?" The agent I discussed this with had a psychology background and was sympathetic to my (check one) learned insights/wild Freudian speculations.

Sometime later, before T. K. was captured, I was invited to a Unabomber workshop in San Francisco organized by the Task Force. I declined the invitation. Later still, with T. K. now under arrest, I received a call from a law clerk in San Francisco. It wasn't clear whether she was working out of the local FBI office, the offices of the Task Force, or the San Francisco District Attorney's office. She wanted me to tell her about my experiences with the FBI, which agents I had met with, and under what circumstances I had been interviewed or otherwise offered expert testimony to them. I wasn't sure I wanted to, could, or should divulge that information. I told her I wanted to ask the Albany FBI special agent I had discussed the manifesto with what, if anything, I could discuss/divulge. The agent was very upset, said they shouldn't be bothering me, and that she would take care of things. I never heard from the law clerk again.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions of anarchy prominently feature terms like *political disorder* and *lawlessness*. An anarchist is "one who upsets settled order." But they also do some justice to the idea that anarchy is about resisting arbitrary and unwanted Authority, and individual liberty "without the implication of disorder." T. K. was not the neo-Luddite some of us wanted him to be. And his rhetoric notwithstanding, he was not a techno-critic, nor was his primary motivation techno-social criticism in the interest of progressive social change. And strictly speaking, he wasn't an anarchist. He was a mathematician and, as John Allen Paulos put it in an OP-ED piece in *The New York Times*, "Dangerous Abstractions" (7 April 1996): "The Unabomber a mathematician? It figures." Nonetheless, in a 4S banquet speech following the 4S/FBI episode, I thanked my colleagues for electing me president and giving one type of anarchist an opportunity to help the FBI capture another type of anarchist. A sociologist of mathematics? It figures.

—Sal Restivo

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

We Were The Unabomber

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

It is true, for the record, that the FBI came to the Council of the Society for Social Studies of Science to distribute *Playboy* magazine.

I arrived at the office of the FBI in September 1994 a bit worried. I never even knew they had one in Baton Rouge. On the top floor of a building at the outskirts of town, through a security system, I entered a sparse room with a desk and two chairs. No high intensity lamp, thank you. My main thought was that I was going to tell them the complete truth, and deny everything—I simply could not fathom the reason for their interest in me, a law-abiding academic whose vagrancy was purely intellectual, without noticeable social consequences.

The gentleman who ushered me into the room was a Southern agent of the FBI.

"You know about the Unabomber? No? You might have heard there have been a string of mail bombs sent over the years since the late 1970s and we think they all come from the same individual. Recently he's become active again."[1]

"I think I remember reading something in *The New York Times* about that. He's the one who sends bombs to professors? Some computer guy at Yale?" I'm OK now. It's not me they're after.

"Yes. That's him. The FBI has been trying to track this bomber for about sixteen years and we have very few leads."

"It must be near impossible to catch someone who sends bombs in the mail, when your evidence explodes." This is foolish. Don't kid around with the FBI.

"Not typically, but in this case, yes. Most people who send explosives through the postal system are revenge-minded. So the recipients usually have an idea who's sent them the package. There's evidence lying around. When you're out to get someone there's part of you wants 'em to know who sent it. We usually catch these guys. But this Unabomber is different. It's hard to see the pattern here. There's not an obvious revenge motive. The victims don't have much in common with each other. It seems like he's moved from the Chicago and Northeast areas to the West Coast, but we don't have much to go on except the hardware."

[1] After a period of six years without an incident, a bomb in a padded manila envelope injured Dr. Charles Epstein in California on June 22, 1993. Two days later David Gelernter, a Yale computer scientist, was injured in the same fashion. The joint meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science, the History of Science Society, and the Philosophy of Science Association was held in New Orleans, Louisiana, October 12–16, 1994. On December 10, 1994, Thomas Mosser, an advertising executive, was killed at home in New Jersey by a package bomb.

"The hardware?"

"Yes, the bombs themselves. And they're getting better."

"How do you mean?"

"They're getting smaller and more powerful. I've studied some of the technology myself and taken courses in explosives. He makes most of the parts by hand—he doesn't buy them off the shelf. He really spends a lot of time, painstakingly making each piece and fitting them together. I can tell you this. I wouldn't want to try to defuse one myself. They're good. He's getting more dangerous."

"So how are you going to catch this guy at all? What can you tell about him just from the bombs?" I'm excited, though a bit surprised. Who would have thought that the FBI knew about the encoding of social identity in technological products? They probably have sophisticated criminological routines to decipher the residues of humans in hardware, and maybe even the symbolic traces of social status. This is going to be really good.

"He leaves initials in all his bombs: 'FC.' It might be his initials, but probably he wouldn't do something that obvious. Some people think it means 'Fuck Computers.'"

"That's what you have to go on? Just 'FC?'" I didn't see how they were going to catch a bomber with that.

"That and two letters he sent with the bombs. We'd like you to take a look at the letters."

"How do you have letters when the packages blew up?"

"They might have been sent separately, or they could be attached to the outside of the package so the victims would open up the packages themselves. These people weren't killed—he's only killed one person so far—they were injured. We don't really know if he intends to kill or just maim the recipients. But as I say, it may be that he just didn't know how to put a very powerful explosive in a letter. Now he does."

"I have to admit I'm curious why you're asking *me* to read the letters."

"Look. We've talked to a lot of people. We're kind of at a loss. The main team of investigators is out in California and somehow they got your name from someone. Do you know Harriet Zuckerman? She said you might be able to help."

"Of course. She used to be president of the Society for Social Studies of Science. You think it has something to do with us?"

"We don't know. We've talked to thousands of people by this time. We may have even talked to the Unabomber already. Just read these and tell me your impression of the letters."

The first letter was short. It had been mailed in June 1980 to Percy Wood, president of United Airlines, in Lake Forest, Illinois. It served as an enticement to open a package containing the novel *Ice Brothers* by Sloan Wilson. The bomb that injured Mr. Wood was inside the book. The deconstructionists at the FBI had begun to wonder about environmental symbolism.

There was simply no denying the excitement. A murder case and the FBI wants your help? This was not textual analysis for the social study of science. This was important.

Much as I wanted to devour the novel and solve the mystery, I supposed the FBI had read it. And they would be better at the clues thing. Plus, I was at a loss with the Wood letter. The perpetrator is violent and builds intricate bombs. So it's a guy. A radical of some sort that hates corporate bigwigs? That narrows it down to a few million.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's a very short letter. It's hard to tell much, isn't it?"

He handed me the second letter. Less than a page long, it contained five paragraphs, three substantial. The letter was attached to a package, again a lure, in this case to open what the writer claimed was a dissertation. It was, in fact, a ream of paper hollowed out to conceal a bomb. On delivery it injured a research assistant to Dr. James McConnell at the University of Michigan. McConnell—was it the infamous wormcutter?[2] The FBI agent said he didn't know—but the man was a well-known writer of psychology textbooks, emeritus now.

"What we know is this McConnell was working on the latest revision of his book just a few weeks before he got the bomb. He had a long list of people who had used it, folks who he wanted to read it before he sent it off to the publisher. That could be important, because when he sent his book to these people he sent a letter with it. Some of them in California think the language in this letter is similar to what's in the letter to McConnell. The bomb came not long afterward."

"You think it's one of these people on McConnell's list?"

"We don't know. We've talked to them, more than once."

As I began to read the letter to McConnell, I smiled— "I am a doctoral candidate ... field ... history of science ... development of behavioral science ... more than a collection of facts." I quickly stifled the smile. How is an FBI consultant supposed to act? A smile would not do for a sleuth, and this was a crime of murder. Besides, I thought, now that I'm an insider in this investigation, I've got to learn the ropes. Of course, I wasn't an insider, as it transpired, but a suspect, like everyone else. Still, suspects help with the investigation, as any fan of Columbo knows.

As I continued reading I couldn't conceal it. I began to chuckle. Maybe I even laughed as I read.

> I am attempting to analyse the factors in society at large that tend to promote vigorous development in a given area of science, and especially I am attempting to shed light on the way in which progress in a particular field of research influences public attitudes toward that field in such a manner as to further accelerate its development, as through research grants, increased interest on the part of students, and so forth.

A bad run-on, but never mind. He's interested in the reciprocal effects of discovery reports and public support of scientific research? Too weird.

[2] The letter and package mailed from Salt Lake City, Utah, were addressed to the Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of James McConnell. It was opened by Nick Suino, an assistant to McConnell.

> I have selected the behavioral sciences for study because I believe that they illustrate particularly well my hypotheses concerning the interaction of science and society.

The *interaction of science and society*? I looked up at the agent.

"Maybe you already know this. This paragraph of the letter sounds like some kind of abstract for one of our annual meetings. Nothing particularly good, mind you." Like I'm going to admit an interest to an FBI agent investigating a murder?

He seemed to brighten. "An abstract?"

"It's a kind of brief summary of something, like an article or book."

"It sounds like something at one of your meetings?"

"Well, not necessarily, but it could be. It's the kind of stuff people in our field are interested in. The 'interaction of science and society' is what the field is all about. And he does claim he's into the history of science. I should say, it's called the 'society for social studies of science,' but people are equally interested in technology." Always take the opportunity to witness, when you have it.

"Technology and science. And society. What kinds of technology?"

"All kinds of technology." It dawns on me. "Not explosives."

"Why not explosives?"

"OK. Someone could be studying that, but I don't know of anyone. It's not a very common thing to study, at any rate." Of course, we were preparing to give the Fleck Prize to the author of a book on nuclear missiles, but no need to mention that just at the present time.

"Who are these people?"

"See, these are mostly academics. There are people from the private sector, and from government, and other places. But mostly academics. We study science and technology, particularly their social aspects. Some people study what goes on in laboratories. Some people study the careers of scientists. Some study science and engineering organizations. Some study what effects technology has on society. I've spent the summer in Africa, looking at the way scientific research is organized in developing countries. Just a whole bunch of things. The thing about it is, these are not generally the kind of people who could make a bomb. Me, for instance, I couldn't make a bomb if I had to. I can't even do the wiring in my own house. Absolutely inept when it comes to technology. I just study it." Maybe I was overdoing it bit.

"You just study technology. You don't build anything."

"Not at all. Mostly these are sociologists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists. Some philosophers, but mostly social scientists."

"So nobody who could build a bomb?"

"There's an exception to this. Some people in the field—I couldn't say how many—are ex-scientists. That is, they got their degree in some scientific or technological field, maybe they worked as a physicist or something, then they got interested in social

aspects of science. So those people could build a bomb, I guess. How hard are they to make?"

"Not that hard. Some are real easy in fact. But you do need to be fairly skilled to make the kind of thing we're talking about here. Now what about the language the Unabomber uses? Is it similar to what McConnell wrote to people when he gave them his textbook?" He handed me the earlier letter.

"There are some similar phrases. But they're pretty common. They wouldn't have to be copied from the earlier letter. You just tend to say phrases like this when you send someone a draft. You have to ask them to read it, right?"

"So you don't think it might be from one of these folks in your group? Maybe a professor-type?"

"I suppose it could be. I'm not going to rule it out. But analyzing this isn't really my specialty. Are you interested mainly in the similarities between the two letters? That would be what we call 'textual analysis,' or 'discourse analysis.' We have quite a few people who are good at that. You could talk to them. Or are you interested in people who study the history of behavioral science in the twentieth century? That would be a different group. You think this guy could really be some kind of academic who studies science and society?"

"We don't know. I don't think we've talked to anyone about it, but I'm really not central to the investigation. Maybe we need to get some people down and talk more about this letter."

"They should come soon, because we're having a big joint meeting of the professional societies in New Orleans. It's the first one in eight years, and it starts in two weeks. You have historians of science, philosophers of science, people at 4S from a lot of different fields who look at science and society issues. You should come if you want to get in touch with a lot of people very quickly."

"Someone will be there. I'll call California to arrange it. We'll be in touch."

That will teach SHOT to miss our joint meeting, I thought.[3]

The agent would not let me take copies of the letters from the office. He did, however, write down the names of the alleged senders of the two letters: Enoch W. Fischer (to Wood) and Ralph C. Kloppenburg (to McConnell). Kloppenburg. Can't place it.

I returned to my Louisiana State University (LSU) office and sat. Just sat. This is too exciting to work. What do I do? Should I call Harriet Zuckerman? Should I call Sal Restivo, the current president? Should I tell someone? No. An FBI consultant plays it close to the vest. I'll try to work.

No luck.

I'll go to lunch.

I got up to leave, passing a file cabinet next to the door. On it were several books for the library. I hadn't read them but they were overdue. You know how it is.

[3] SHOT is the acronym for the Society for the History of Technology.

At the sight of the top book I stopped, amazed. *First the Seed: The Political Economy of Plant Biotechnology* . Published in 1988, and winner of the Merton Prize given by the Science, Knowledge, and Technology (SKAT) section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Written by Jack Ralph Kloppenburg, Jr.

Whoa. Now be cool. Am I lucky, or what?

I called the number I had been given for the California office. "Postal inspector's office," said the voice on the other end.

"Postal inspector?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"Oh. Sure. 'Postal Inspector.' Right. May I speak to postal inspector X?"

For the next couple of weeks I thought it was a cover.

New Orleans

In New Orleans, I met with the postal inspector—who was, in fact, a postal inspector—and a young agent of the FBI. It was two days before the meeting began at the old Clarion Hotel on Canal Street, near the French Quarter. They would be at the hotel much of the week. Since one of them had never been to New Orleans before, I advised them to arrive early. Would I like to have dinner on them and discuss their strategy for the week? Certainly. Perhaps they would like to dine at the Palace Cafe, an elegant but inexpensive city restaurant. OK. Not too inexpensive.

The agents were friendly and knowledgeable. One of them had been working on the case for all these years. It was as if he had spent half of his professional career chasing one guy, a modern Moriarty. They asked what they needed to do to attend the conference. Should they use their real names?

"You don't have to," I said. "But you have to pay the registration fee."

The next day they asked me about the letter again, and I learned that the FBI was going to subpoena the 4S membership roster, as they would later do for History of Science Society (HSS). Did they really want to do that? It seemed silly. After all, we have a directory that is available. It's to protect you, as well as the Society, they said—just in case you wind up as the subject of a lawsuit. It seemed to me this whole thing was going in the wrong direction.

On the day of the council meeting we met for breakfast with Sal Restivo. Noted anarchist. Then president of 4S. The agents' main objectives, so far as we could tell, were to follow up any leads that might arise regarding the letter, to find out whether science and technology studies had anything to do with the case, to meet people. They continued to be interested in both the similarities with the McConnell letter and the potential clues in the Unabomber letter itself. We could introduce them to a variety of people, true. But what of the council meeting? It might be interesting to try an experiment.

The idea was simple, but to their knowledge it had not been tried. We reasoned that during the course of the inquiry they had shown the letter to many people, but never shown it blind. That is, the context was always a variant of, "we're investigating a serial bomber and we'd like to show you something he wrote." While such an approach undoubtedly generates interest—as well as anxiety—it seemed to us that it might not be the only way of approaching people. Especially if the question concerned the occupational identity of the author. Something new might be learned by showing the letter without declaring the identity of the author in advance. Simply show it, and ask about the author. The 4S Council might be good for the purpose. After all, they know something about science and society. Collectively they are acquainted with a large number of people. Moreover, they were all going to be in one place. The agents agreed.

I did, of course, take the minutes as usual, but cannot report this last agenda item, as my notes left the room with the agents and did not return. But others can testify to that meeting.

Sal andI distributed the McConnell letter to the members of council at the end of the meeting. Such behavior was mildly unusual in context, eliciting curiosity, but also a useful discussion of the letter. What struck me was that no one thought there was anything especially odd about the letter. No one ventured that the identity of the writer was anyone other than who he claimed to be—a graduate student at the University of Utah, interested in the history of behavioral science. This, in the course of a number of substantive remarks about the project: "it's not really cutting edge"; "it doesn't seem like this person is really very well connected to the rest of the field"; "the student is not really up on what has been happening in the field during the past few years"; "I wonder who the advisor is?"

The agents waited in a bedroom adjoining the council meeting room—without listening devices, to my knowledge. They entered the room after most of the discussion had taken place, introduced the case, and passed out samples from McConnell's prior letter requesting comments on his text from previous adopters. The consensus on this point was clear. Although similar phrasing did appear in both letters, it seemed to occur in ways that could easily be matters of chance—the normal talk of someone asking for a favor. In the opinion of those present, there was little reason to believe that the subsequent text was modeled on the earlier one.

Sal and I had asked if, for the debriefing, the agents could provide any information about the Unabomber, so council would know how we fit into the investigation. Sure, they said. A lot of this has been in the media—even on *America's Most Wanted*, the crime show. But the best overall account had just been published in the November issue of *Playboy*. They would be happy to provide copies to council. But we could not keep the letter, and we swore not to discuss the case. Sure. The FBI may get to know academics better if they hang around awhile.

I saw the investigators again at the New Orleans meeting, but never at length. They stayed through at least two days of the full program. They sat in the sessions

and listened. They were introduced to people. They introduced themselves. At all times they were friendly and courteous, very professional. An interesting pair, these two—the older gentleman, with a masterly knowledge of the Unabomber investigation but slightly apprehensive among so many professors; the fresh, young FBI agent, like a keen graduate student with his charming enthusiasm to learn something about STS in the service of his case.

As I said goodbye to the inspector—it was the last I saw him until his appearance on television after the arrest—I had to ask, "So what do you think? You've been working on this case a long time. Will you catch him?"

He paused before answering. From the look on his face he was no longer an investigator, but just a man who had been working on one thing for a very long time. "Well, I think if by chance or fate I ever wound up in the same room with him, I would know him. But as far as catching him, I don't know," he said. "I'd like to be optimistic, but sometimes ... I really don't think so. We could go on forever this way."

He turned to leave. "Unless he makes a mistake."

Of course, Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, eventually made a mistake. He made it, in part, because in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, he was no longer able to remain invisible, to stay silent after sending his bombs. Those terrorists had, for the moment, usurped his role as the best bomber on the block. He made the mistake of beginning his correspondence with *The New York Times*. Why? Owing to the desire for recognition, to use an old theory from the sociology of science, for the right to publish in the best journal of them all.[4] He made it, in the words of the FBI agent, because "there's part of you wants 'em to know who sent it." To put it simply, he made the mistake out of pride.

And so it came to pass that the FBI—not forgetting the Postal Inspector's Office—presented the Unabomber investigation at the 4S Council. In New Orleans, where all things can happen, and many do.

When word got out that the FBI had been poking around in New Orleans, the question for many people was, "Why are they here?" In retrospect, the question should have been, "What took them so long?" They had interviewed thousands of people. They had talked to everyone on McConnell's list, some of them three times. They had nosed around Utah, and Michigan, and many other campuses where bombs were sent. But the package to McConnell was sent in November of 1985. It had been close to *nine years* from that bombing to the New Orleans meeting of scholars interested, in the words of the Unabomber, in the "interaction of science and society." And they had long suspected it might be someone with an academic background.

Before long, the STS Listserv was filled with discussion of the FBI in New Orleans. The reason for this interest is telling. It was assumed that the FBI was interested in our

[4] It should also be noted that the Manifesto was refereed more extensively than any scholarly manuscript in history. I was myself against publication, but it really gets to me that the Unabomber was not even subjected to a revise and resubmit.

scholarship because it was potentially subversive, because its intellectual power had driven a madman to violent acts against the industrial-technological society. That could not be further from the truth. The FBI does not care about the writings of our "esoteric wedge of academia."[5] They know that few people read our treatises. Certainly, there is no evidence that the Unabomber did, though he may have. To attribute government interest in STS to the power of our words is also to commit the sin of pride.

The reason for the FBI's interest was simple. The letter to McConnell was the most extensive written document prior to the final period in which the Unabomber began to communicate regularly with the *Times* and eventually submitted his Manifesto for publication. Not simply by virtue of its intended recipient, but by virtue of content, it introduces themes later articulated fully in the Manifesto.

It is somewhat disconcerting to realize that the Manifesto is the most widely circulated writing in the field of science, technology, and society, first by joint publication in a special section of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and then over the Web, where it was placed immediately upon publication in 1995, the most important period of the Web's initial growth. The Manifesto itself is not my favorite essay, but it is reasoned and clear. I am inclined to agree with James Q. Wilson, one of the few people mentioned therein by name, who wrote in *The New York Times* that "the argument is subtle and carefully developed ... something that a very good graduate student might have written based on his own reading rather than the course assignments" (January 15, 1998). When I assigned parts ofitto a first year university course in STS, they judged it the best reading of the semester—far better than *Soul of a New Machine* or *The Double Helix*! Perhaps it is just the story. The Unabomber is already a cult hero. That much is clear. Of course he is a madman, guilty by reason of insanity.

What is disappointing about Ted Kaczynski is that to a point, he is someone to be admired. Wittgenstein believed that the goal of philosophy was to clarify the mistaken notions behind senseless questions, so that one could stop doing philosophy. He did not stop doing it. Kaczynski, for reasons we can well imagine, quit a plum job at Berkeley at the outset of a promising career. He did not just talk about it—he went to the woods and withdrew from participation in a system he despised. But in the end, like Wittgenstein, he could not bear the consequences of his conclusions.

Instead of remaining hermetic, he continued to read and analyze the system with quite limited resources. He continued to mull over its pernicious consequences. He drew on radical activist models available in the late 1960s, concluding (erroneously) that resistance demanded violence. Rather than live an isolated existence, he was fully engaged with what he took to be the important issue—the organization of society rather than the ephemeral circumstances of politics. Rather than hole up in his cabin, Kaczynski was absorbed with the personal consequences of social structures. He never withdrew from activism, albeit in the form of terrorism. Most important, he was unable

[5] *The New York Times*, August 5, 1995.

to resist the urge to publish. STS had no impact on Kaczynski, but the world of academia, a principal target of his deadly parcels, socialized him well.

There have been comparisons between the practices of the Unabomber and the Luddites. Some have called him a modern day Luddite because of their passion for smashing machines that put them out of work. The Unabomber bears virtually no resemblance to the Luddites. His fascination arises from the fact that he is a combination of modern day romantic and countercultural revolutionary. As a romantic he is successor to the German poets and artists, in the grip of raw nature, opponents of industrialization and machines. As successor to Thoreau, he is less a writer but more a lover of solitude. But as well he is—unfortunately—a successor of the revolutionaries, a latter-day Symbionese Liberationist who absorbed the 1960s without understanding their meaning and the transformation of society that the counterculture wrought with age, not violence.[6]

—Wesley Shrum

Louisiana State University

[6] This was written before it was made public that Kaczynski had requested a change in lawyers to Tony Serra, who represented the Black Panthers and Symbionese Liberation Army.

The Unabomber and the History of Science

Since I knew little about the Unabomber case apart from the general concern expressed by universities and colleges in the United States about the number of incidents aimed at these institutions, I was completely unprepared for the news that my 4S colleagues had been briefed by the FBI. Certainly, a direct tie between the Unabomber investigation and the History of Science Society was the furthest thought from my mind as I prepared myself mentally to begin the 1994 meeting of the HSS, Philosophy of Science Association (PSA), and 4S in New Orleans.

Then came the ominous phone call. In retrospect, it appeared to have been scripted for a television drama. "Hello, Keith? This is Wes, here in New Orleans with Sal Restivo, and two gentlemen from the FBI and the postal inspector's office. It seems as if they would like us all to get together for a conversation."

Clearly, this was not an invitation that could be easily declined. My mind began to race. Had HSS committed mail fraud by sending out receipts for reservations at the annual meeting? Had I failed to disclose our tax-exempt status, thereby incurring a huge and now unpaid tax burden? Did the federal agents need to talk to me about carrying excess baggage aboard an airplane? All kinds of petty, imagined, and actual misdemeanors rushed through my head.

A few long minutes later, the door to my room received a pronounced knocking thud. My time of reckoning had arrived. Not since the days of protest in the 1960s had I been faced with such fear.

When I opened the door, I recognized Wes. While I had not previously met Sal, I easily recognized him as a fellow traveler. The other two men were clearly not academics—more like federal agents direct from central casting.

The five of us gathered around the large conference table in my room. Soon all kinds of evidence about the Unabomber began to materialize, including the soon-to-be familiar silhouette, the never-published McConnell letter, information about many of the bombs, several different names for the bomber (all of Germanic origin), the clue from *The New York Times* ("Call Nate R."), and other tidbits from almost seventeen years of sleuthing. But all in all, no real clue about the bomber's real identity.

Since our collective forensic expertise fell short of "junior detective," we failed to produce the breakthrough tip. But that did not stop us from almost involuntarily blurting forth information that unconsciously implicated several of our colleagues—we were soon to learn that many of these folks were later contacted by the FBI. They

were leaving no stone unturned. I noted the names of two graduate school colleagues who had received MA degrees in history at the University of Utah, the same graduate program mentioned in one of the Unabomber letters. Of course, our interlocutors had already quizzed them.

When told of the arduous task of searching for all the "Nate R." names in the United States (there are approximately 10,000), I quickly wondered allowed if Nate Reingold had been contacted. Now here was a new clue—a Nate R. with expertise in the relevant areas! They eagerly jotted down his name. About a year later, Nate told me that he had had an interesting afternoon with the same agents, since not only was his name of interest, but he had a son who is a computer engineer!

Toward the end of our visit, the investigators served us with a subpoena requiring us to provide the FBI with all the records (registration and directories) associated with the membership of the societies as well as those who were actually attending the New Orleans meeting. In addition, the three of us were required to sign a "gag" order, forbidding us from discussing the meeting with anyone. Finally, they requested registration materials to gain access to the meeting as undercover agents—I informed them that since it was beyond the cut off date, they would be required to pay the late fee! And for the next two days, I continually spotted these most unusual "independent scholars" in the STS community.

Little did I know, however, that my involvement with this case would continue long after the New Orleans meeting had ended. Like any sane individual, Wes took an unscheduled sabbatical to the Netherlands and left a message on his answering machine: "If this is about the Unabomber investigation, call Keith Benson."

My first reminder came during a late December flight to Europe. I sat next to a gentleman who, when filling out his customs form, identified his profession as "postal inspector." Too curious to suppress myself (and still eager to get the "junior detective" badge!), I asked him if he knew the inspector who was in New Orleans. Not only did he know him, but he was a member of the task force investigating the Unabomber. And he seemed to know a great deal about me.

Then, as the Republican-dominated Congress took clear aim at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the "Science War" broke out in the spring of 1995. At about the same time, the Unabomber sent his famous Manifesto to *The New York Times*, although the press refused to publish the work initially. Almost immediately, the FBI called my office to ask if I would read the manifesto and provide names of colleagues who might have some insight into the type of person who would compose such a document. Thus, more members of the history of science community became involved with the case. At the same time, I assured the FBI that I would not be a great evaluator of the Manifesto, since my own background was in the history of the life sciences, a field far removed from the subject matter of the Unabomber.

All these contacts were made with the understanding of confidence. However, after the Unabomber had killed two more individuals (an advertising executive in New

Jersey and a wood products administrator in California, both in late 1994), the FBI decided to make public all the information they had gathered on the case. Obviously, they concluded, the secret investigation was not providing them with the leads they needed.

By the summer of 1995, arguments continued over the wisdom of publishing the Manifesto while academics poured over its contents. On 31 July, I received a call from a reporter at *The Washington Post*. He had received information that I had been cooperating with the FBI since the fall of 1994 and wanted to discuss this involvement. I told him that I could not discuss anything without first contacting the FBI, but after talking with the San Francisco office, I was assured that it was fine to discuss the issue with the press. I began my "fifteen minutes of fame."

The article appeared in the next morning's issue of the *Post*. At the same time the paper hit the streets on the east coast, my telephone began to ring in Seattle. Calls poured in that day from *The New York Times*, NBC, "Good Morning America," National Public Radio, all the print and television news venues in Seattle and Tacoma, *The Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and every other urban newspaper in the country with any purported connection to this lengthy case. Dave Lindberg, the HSS president, was also contacted. We agreed that we should cooperate with the press as much as possible, especially since we were anxious to distance the history of science profession from the supposition that the Unabomber may have been one of us. Out standard answer became, "Sure, the Manifesto is interesting, but it was not written by a graduate student in the history of science."

For the remainder of the summer and well into the fall, interest in the Unabomber case remained extremely high. I was frequently called by one individual who wanted to provide me with anonymous tips about the "suspect," usually a suspicious relative or a local political activist. In fact, it was amazing how many people were willing to implicate others, with little reliable evidence. A few letters also found their way to the office with additional information. I turned all this "evidence" over to the FBI.

Of course, as I was to later learn, there was one bona fide eyewitness to the actual bombing (the FBI told me that these individuals surround every case). A young man identified himself as an engineering student at the University of Utah who was in a laboratory room where a bomb was found, allegedly manufactured by the Unabomber. He told me that he was arrested by the FBI under suspicion that he might have planted the bomb, and he claimed this was directly related to his Iranian ethnic origin. When he contacted me he lived in Seattle and claimed to know who the Unabomber was, but refused to provide the information to the FBI until the organization gave him one million dollars. Since this was the size of the reward, I told him simply to call the FBI. But he assured me that the agency would trick him and, therefore, he asked me to be his intermediary. When I called the agent in San Francisco, he knew exactly who the individual was. Surprisingly, he encouraged me to maintain contact with him, assuring me that he had little reliable information and was harmless. Nevertheless, he expressed some hope that some information might result ... it never did.

Then there was the reaction of my department. When the news of my involvement first broke, a close friend in the administration called me to assure me that the office of risk assessment was available, that the University of Washington police would provide protection if I needed it, and that the University mail delivery service would monitor my mail. At the same time, he thanked me for participating in the investigation. Therefore, I was stunned when I was confronted by the acting chair of my department and was profanely accused of "recklessly endangering the lives of the faculty and staff" in my department. Despite all my attempts to assure my colleagues of the protection from the University and despite the assurance from the FBI that no one was in any increased danger (all universities and colleges were under increased watch after the bomber struck a Yale University computing lab), my colleagues refused to talk with me or to treat me in a civil manner. I might add that, since this was summer, essentially none of them were in the office! Nevertheless, at the end of August I was asked to attend a faculty meeting at which time each and every faculty member vented their anger at me for endangering their lives or, as they attempted to respond to the factual realities of the situation, how they "perceived" they were in danger and, therefore, experienced great discomfort. I was simply stunned! While I did not say a word, I wondered about our commitment to academic honesty and to our desire for rational discourse. After all, are we not in the profession of attempting to help our students develop critical faculties? And how can we profess to assist our students in their development when we fail to practice the exercise of rational discourse in our personal lives? Needless to say, my own stock in the department fell precipitously, but not nearly as steeply as my loss of respect for my colleagues.

On a more positive note, I well remember the late summer potluck party to which I was invited by two former students, where I met the niece of one of the Unabomber's victims. Fortunately, he was not killed, but he was severely wounded in an attack on his laboratory in the San Francisco Bay area. His niece thanked me profusely for taking part in the investigation, assuring me that the family had been touched by the willingness of many members of the academic community to become involved in this most troubling and difficult case.

Of course, I do not have the hubris to claim that my own involvement, the involvement of my colleagues, or the involvement of the academic community played the pivotal role in the eventual identity and arrest of the Unabomber. But I do think it is instructive to note that for seventeen years the FBI attempted to solve the case without releasing any information about what it had learned during this period. Once much of this information was released in early 1995, followed later that year by the publication of his Manifesto, Theodore Kaczynski was arrested and charged with the crimes of the Unabomber. If the ends ever justify the means, then this would indicate the importance of citizen involvement. Since many of us in the STS community discuss the social responsibility of scientists, it may behoove us to reflect on our own social responsibility to society.

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