

## *Antimodernism*

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Looking back over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and North America, one can see the emerging patterns of antimodernism beneath or within modernity. The emergence of antimodernism during this period is important because it is not restricted only to this or that obscure figure, but is a fundamental theme implicit or explicit within the works of many major figures—indeed, in many respects antimodernism is a leitmotif for the defining figures of the modern period. What are we to make of this seeming paradox: that so many modernist figures are in fact antimodernist by inclination? This is a complex subject, and as we will see, it has many facets. Still, it is possible to make a single overarching observation at the outset of our inquiry, and that is this: antimodernism is fundamental to the creative impulse in modernity. Modern industrial society in its very nature calls forth antimodernism in the creative individual.

Of course, we have to begin by considering what we mean by the terms “modern” and “modernity.” The word “modern” in its more or less contemporary English usage began to appear in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For example, in 1609 Ben Jonson uses the term to draw a contrast with the “ancients,” such as Seneca; in 1676, Etherege refers to a man who “thinks himself the Pattern of modern Gallantry”; and so forth.<sup>1</sup> The word “modern” in such usage means “contemporary” or “present,” and also carries with it the underlying etymological root-mean-

1. See Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), p. 109: “Tut, he must have Seneca read to him, and Plutarch, and the ancients; the moderns are not for this disease.” See also George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, in *The Plays of George Etherege*, ed. Michael Corder (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982),

ing “measure.” Thus the word “modern” also carries with it the implicit judgment of the past by the present; it bears within it an historical comparison, and the sense of progress or evolution to the present, which is by implication both consequent upon and perhaps superior to the past. In Shakespeare, the word “modern” is frequently used in the sense of merely “commonplace” or “ordinary,” but this meaning has become obsolete.

With the advent of “modernity” as an historical concept during this same period—the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the nature of history itself as a concept began to change. “Modernity” and that which is “modern” came about in large part as a function of the printed word. Reading books meant that one could have unprecedented access to the panorama of history in libraries, both personal and university, and in other collections. This access to history is itself modern by comparison to a past of manuscripts and monastic collections—and it is also increasingly a function of industrial-technological processes. The more “modern,” the more technologically and industrially sophisticated the means by which information is stored and disseminated; and so access to history, with ever greater specificity and breadth, is a modern phenomenon that replicates in itself the notion of progress. In what follows, “modernity” is practically speaking synonymous with the mass consumerist society that is ascendant in the latter half of the twentieth century, and that places its primary faith in technological and historical progress.

Antimodernism, by contrast, has at its core the awareness of decline. If the essence of “modernism” is progress, a belief that technological development means socio-economic improvement, the heart of antimodernism is a realization that “progress” has an underbelly—that technological-industrial development has destructive consequences in three primary and intertwined areas: nature, culture, and religion. When we look at the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when more comprehensive antimodernisms began to appear—along the lines forecast, in the nineteenth century, by Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin, William Morris, and Orestes Brownson; and in the twentieth century, by T. S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and W. B. Yeats—we find a growing recognition of cultural disintegration as a direct consequence of industrial modernity. But these authors offer, by and large, diagnoses of *cultural* decline in modernity;

p. 233: “He thinks himself the Pattern of modern Gallantry.” For an extensive reiteration of such examples, see the *Oxford English Dictionary* entries for “modern.”

they reveal the cultural confusion and disintegration that seems inevitably to accompany the development of “modernity”—which is to say, industrial-technological society.

It is not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that we see a more general acknowledgement of pervasive, all-encompassing decline in all three areas of nature, culture, and religion. Narratives of cultural decline are of course implicit in many major literary works of the twentieth century; but one finds far more comprehensive indictments of modernity in the works of such Traditionalist authors as René Guénon or Martin Lings, who belong to the early and middle twentieth century. And we find a recognition of broad ecological decline explicit in writings by figures like Theodore Kaczynski and by groups like the Earth Liberation Front; just as we find an awareness of religious decay in writings by figures like Thomas Molnar from a Catholic viewpoint, or Philip Sherrard from the perspective of Greek Orthodoxy. But all of these are twentieth-century antimodernists. By the twenty-first century, we find works like Oliver Bennett’s *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (2001), which analyzes the widespread sense of comprehensive environmental, cultural, and moral decline that no longer belongs to particular groups or individuals, but that pervades the whole of social criticism within what loosely might be called “the West.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the very word “postmodern” (a term so nebulous that it hardly means anything at all in itself) began to appear in the last quarter of the twentieth century with increasing frequency because of an intensifying sense among intellectuals that the “dark side” of modernity—the destruction of nature, the fragmentation, the cultural dissolution, the recognition that even in religion “the center cannot hold”—was catching up to and surpassing more optimistic notions of the beneficence of material progress.<sup>3</sup> Cheery notions of “progress,” T. J. Lears pointed out, “survive among real estate developers, corporate planners, and unreconstructed Keynesian economists,” but social critics like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and others on the left, as well as Patrick Buchanan and Alain de Benoist on the right, offered more or less extensive critiques of social decay that gave the word “postmodern” a slightly ominous quality.

2. Oliver Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2001).

3. See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 7.

The truth is that the word “postmodern,” as it is often used, is actually a description of what Marcuse called “advanced industrial society” in its more highly technological phase. We can see quite clearly, when we look at the history of the twentieth century in particular, that there is in general a direct relationship between the development of technological-industrial and corporate complexity or gigantism on the one hand, and a sense of ecological, cultural, and religious decline on the other. The more of one, the more of the other—and hence one may expect that this polarity will continue to intensify. The rather unfortunate neologism “postmodern” describes the nature of this polarization, the resulting fragmentation, the sense of individual powerlessness, and the sense that the individual does not exist at all except as a collection of economic desires.

In fact, a better term than “postmodern” would be “hypermodern,” since that is what we actually see when we look at what John Lukacs calls “late modernity.” Unfortunately, “late modernity” shares with “postmodern” the fact that it is grammatically speaking a temporal self-contradiction inasmuch as by definition “modernity” is always “now” and cannot be “after now.” Thus “hypermodernity” and “hypermodern” make better sense, since what we are really talking about is the “speeding up,” the intensification, of what we previously called “modern,” but what from a contemporary perspective seems irredeemably ancient. How far away are the 1920s, for example! Or the 1950s, or the 1980s, or last year. They may as well have been late antiquity as far as contemporary students are concerned. Why? Because those students live in “hypermodernity,” generated by the technological sophistication of information processing and instantaneous communication. In such a world, time itself (as René Guénon recognized already in the middle of the twentieth century) appears to be accelerating. A world in which time appears to be accelerating is perhaps best described as “hypermodern,” for it is not at all “postmodern” (though really, as one thinks about it, both are slightly ridiculous words). The truth is that “hypermodern,” “postmodern,” and “late modern” all merely describe aspects of the modernist spectrum.

### ***Soft Antimodernism***

Of course, there is also a spectrum from “soft” to “hard” antimodernism. Hard antimodernists seek to leave modernity behind or to overthrow it, whereas those closer to the “soft” antimodernists only criticize it or, if they

are a bit stronger in aim, hope to transform modernity into something else. Much of what we will discuss under the general heading of antimodernism, particularly in the forms it took in the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, was more along the lines of reformist efforts or critiques. Certainly that is the case beginning with Thoreau and Brownson; and it is also the pattern visible in major twentieth century religious antimodernists like Chesterton or Belloc. These are all non-violent—from soft through hard antimoderns—and to be firmly distinguished from violent antimoderns who through terrorism seek political or social power.

Soft antimodernism is visible in cultural antimodernists like the early T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. A critique of cultural fragmentation and of the pernicious influences of greed as a primary social value is explicit in such masterworks as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as well as in the popular works of figures like Sinclair Lewis during roughly the same period. In other words, cultural antimodernism during much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tends toward critique and efforts at reform or social transformation—toward what I term “soft antimodernism.” Abandonment of modernity, for the most part, was not yet perceived as an option by socio-cultural critics. Instead, critics sought to create a safe haven, a refuge away from the depredations of modernity in works of art.

We see this soft antimodern tendency in the emergence of the craft movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris. Driven by a strong anti-industrialism, Ruskin, Morris, and other less well-known English figures encouraged a movement toward handwork and cottage industries, toward printing and woodworking and textile manufacture, in a way that was consciously opposed to mass production. They imagined a new non-industrialism that could be based on quality of life, not quantity of production. This movement was exported to America during the early twentieth century, and there it took on a wide range of apostles. T. J. Jackson Lears, in his book *No Place of Grace*, tellingly observed that American “Arts and Crafts ideologues . . . usually came from among the business and professional people who felt most cut off from ‘real life’ and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration.”<sup>4</sup> As we will see, however, the movement tended ultimately to offer the illusion of escape rather than any authentic transformation of society. It came to exemplify what I call “soft antimodernism.”

4. Ibid., p. 61.

The American craft movement had its origins in part with Charles Eliot Norton, a professor of fine arts at Harvard and a friend of Ruskin, but it soon became quite widespread among the upper or professional classes. In 1897, an elderly Norton helped found the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, which then published the magazine *Handicraft*. In the same year, University of Chicago faculty were instrumental in founding the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society. And by 1911, the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts held a candlelit dinner that “most faithfully reproduced the spirit of a by-gone age; there was, for instance, a Princess of France wearing her coat of arms with royal dignity; and a Prioress who might have stepped straight from the pages of an illuminated missal.” Most important, according to the report of the time, was “*above all, the complete absence of any touch of modernity, any ‘spectators,’ who ‘just came to look on.’*”<sup>5</sup> In such a form, the craft movement quite clearly revealed itself as an imaginative attempt, by those most affected by modern alienation and fragmentation, to enter into a quasi-medieval world—a longing that continues right into the twenty-first century with such groups as the Society for Creative Anachronism and its medievalist recreations in suburban America.

In other words, art was perceived as way to create a sub-world—or as Tolkien put it, a “sub-creation”—that could exist outside modernity and offer imaginative freedom from it without altering the actual conditions of society as a whole. This is what I mean by the word “trajectory.” The natural trajectory of those who love nature and loathe its depredation by corporations is to leave society behind and go off into the wild; just as the natural trajectory of those who despise the alienation and shoddiness of modern industrialism is to attempt to create “sub-worlds” or creative realms (manifested in novels like Tolkien’s great *Lord of the Rings* series, in films, in music, and in “virtual reality”). There, modernity has no hold—even if modernity and industrial technology alone provide the means for these virtual realms. In some respects, then, cultural antimodernist trajectories play into and even support the modern industrial-technological enterprise because they offer “escapes” from it rather than a transformation of it. This was the paradoxical nature of the early twentieth-century arts and crafts movement, and it was a cultural pattern that continued throughout the modern period under a wide range of guises.

Something similar, but more sweeping, is at work in a religious context, especially in the United States, which has a long history as a venue

5. Ibid., p. 78 (my emphasis).

for experiments in religious utopian communities. Some of these communities, like Brook Farm and its various contemporary complements, were not inspired by a particular organized religious tradition but rather came out of Transcendentalism as a modern form of religious universalism.<sup>6</sup> Yet most American efforts at utopian communities—the Ephrata community in Pennsylvania, the Harmony Society of George Rapp, the Oneida community, or Thomas Lake Harris’s “Brotherhood of the New Life,” which explicitly intended to bring about “the reorganization of the industrial world,” not to mention groups like the Amish or other Anabaptist antimodern Christian groups—were definitely sectarian in origin and inclination.<sup>7</sup> What is more, virtually all of these utopian communities not only were assimilated into modern industrialism, but in fact became synonymous with it. Here one thinks of the extraordinary economic success of the Harmony Society, or of the Oneida silverware company, which emerged from the original communal society.

The same is true of mid- to late twentieth-century new religious movements that sought to establish antimodern communal societies of various kinds. One thinks here of the Rajneesh commune in Oregon, and of the charismatic guru Rajneesh’s notorious collection of Rolls Royces, and of the group’s effort to take over local government; or again of Scientology’s campaign against the IRS, its tremendous wealth and corporate structure; or again of other new religious movements based upon charismatic leaders, such as Elizabeth Clare Prophet, whose new age books represented a kind of industry in themselves. The point here is that the same general pattern we see in the nineteenth century—more or less antimodern communal societies end up themselves becoming corporate in structure and eminently modern and industrial—holds true to a considerable degree in the twentieth century in new religious movements.

Such new religious movements often appear to represent a religious trajectory out of modernity, and into a cult-like “womb” that protects adherents from the alienation and destructiveness of modernity. Indeed, I strongly suspect that antimodernism is not just one reason among many for the proliferation of new religious movements and of what some term

6. On this question, see Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), especially the final chapter, which places Transcendentalism in the larger context of modern religious universalism.

7. For more on Harris and other utopianists more or less inspired by Western esotericism, see Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), pp. 59ff.

“cults,” but rather is arguably the major appeal of such movements. To enter into the cult of a charismatic leader is to enter a world in which the alienation endemic to modernity seems to have been overthrown. Like the play-acting of the Society for Creative Anachronism in the late twentieth century, or, for that matter, of the Detroit Arts and Crafts Society of the early twentieth century, such groups by and large present only the illusion of refuge—and eventually reveal themselves to be in fact variants within the larger context of modernity itself. The socio-economic conditions of modernity are not called into question by these groups. If anything, their leaders, with their wealth and power, tend to reflect what we might call an intensified version of modernity with its social stratification into rich and poor, haves and have-nots.

We find very much the same phenomenon in evangelical Christian circles, most notably in those common in Christian televangelism and popular evangelical crusades at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. The “prosperity theology” of figures like Creflo Dollar, Paul Crouch, Rod Parsley, Benny Hinn, John Hagee, and James Robison deplored, in one form or another, what they perceived as moral decay in society. Yet in actuality, they not only made their fortunes through the industrialization of evangelical Christianity—as produced and reproduced through such avenues as the Trinity Christian Television network and its affiliated films, books, videos, and arena appearances—but they also gained much of their popularity by offering God’s blessing through them in order to make their adherents rich. Creflo Dollar’s great wealth and popularity came about to a significant degree by offering magical “prosperity anointings” to poor and middle-class black people; but he is only one instance among many such figures. In short, these televangelical Christians appear to deplore modern immorality, but in reality they are thoroughly imbued with modern industrial, corporate, and technological values.<sup>8</sup>

8. Thus, one could hardly be surprised to find the *Wall Street Journal* reporting on the progress of Paul Crouch’s giant multimillion-dollar California mansion, with its elevators and wine cellars; or investigative television shows reporting on Benny Hinn’s manager carrying bags of cash away from crusade evenings, and on Hinn’s ministry’s own gigantic mansion under construction in Florida. These examples are only illustrative of a much larger subject, obviously. My point is simply that Christian televangelism is in fact industrial-technological and corporate modernity in one of its most extreme forms, and that it only pays lip service to even soft antimodernism.

One also finds soft antimodernism in various forms of political reform movements. For instance, in Canada one can offer the instructive case of Hugh Segal, the title of whose book *Beyond Greed: A Traditional Conservative Confronts Neoconservative Excess* (1997) clearly outlines what even by the end of the twentieth century was visible as a widening breach between corporatist neoconservatives and conservatism of a somewhat more traditional kind. Segal attacked the extremism of neoconservative pro-corporatism along the lines of then reigning Republican partisans in the United States, and sought to restore a “moderate, democratic, and tolerant conservatism” in the face of “the arrogance of assuming that there can be only one way on social or economic policy.”<sup>9</sup> One sees in the Western Canadian Progressive Conservative leader David Orchard an even stronger opposition to neoconservative programs like so-called “free trade” globalism or to genetically engineered crops or animals.<sup>10</sup> But Orchard’s positions and analysis are far less sweeping than that of hard antimodernism. The assumption of Segal and even of Orchard is that the system as a whole is sustainable; it only needs readjustment to a more traditional form of conservative Toryism.

### *Hard Antimodernism*

In contrast to its soft cousins, hard antimodernism is propelled by the “hard critics” of modernity: those who uncompromisingly oppose, and seek to go beyond or to destroy, the whole of the modern industrial-technological system. Taking a trajectory that seems to lead “outside” modernity but that soon turns out to have been coopted by it is in some sense much easier than standing one’s ground and working for the fundamental transformation of society as a whole or for a new society beyond modernity. Of course, such an attempt at social transformation may be a futile task, insofar as it seeks to overcome the most fundamental social and economic patterns of more than three hundred years in the West, chiefly in Europe and North America. But our focus now must be on the strongest and most explicit critics of modern technological industrialism.

Broadly speaking, hard antimodernism may be divided into three primary categories: opposition from within or without; abandonment

9. Hugh Segal, *Beyond Greed: A Traditional Conservative Confronts Neoconservative Excess* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1997), pp. 7, 6.

10. See David Orchard’s website at <http://www.davidorchard.com> for more information on his policies and positions.

or rejection; and direct attack, including violence. Most antimodernists belong to the category of opposition, with some including elements of the second category, rejection. But very few of the antimodernists belong to the third category, direct attack. For the most part, those who endorse direct attacks on what they perceive as the most destructive aspects of modernity belong either to extreme ecological antimodernism (like the Earth Liberation Front) or to Islamic extremism, along the lines laid out by Sayyid Qutb in the mid-twentieth century and brought into action by groups like al-Qaeda in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Indeed, Islamic antimodernism is the test that proves the more general rule, since Islamic antimodernism originated chiefly as a reaction against the Western and particularly American extension of power and influence into the Middle East and Southern Asia. The general rule, historically, is that in the West one does not find too many twentieth-century cases of religious antimodernism turned violent—which is one major reason why Islamic extremist terrorism came as such a shock and also as something alien to Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The primary exceptions here are certain anti-abortion individuals and groups, as well as those associated with “Christian Identity” movements, such as Eric Rudolph and other anti-abortion extremists. For the most part, those relatively limited instances of violent antimodernism, associated for instance with the Symbionese Liberation Army or with various anarchist, nationalist, or Marxist-inspired factions in Europe and North America, tended to belong to two primary categories: ecological antimodernism or extreme political antimodernism.

That one can list on one’s fingers the instances of violent antimodernism that emerged in the last half of the twentieth century in turn points toward the conditions that give birth to violent antimodernism. For the most part, violent radicalism comes about only when those who engage in it cannot see any other way to make their voices heard and to effect social change. Violent radicalism is an admission of self-perceived powerlessness: it comes about because its adherents see no alternative, no other way of combating a monolithic system that continues on without them. In the twentieth century, especially in Europe and North America, political systems tended to provide “vents” to release the social pressures that otherwise might have resulted in violence: environmentalists could form a Green Party, for example. Yet one did see ecological antimodernist vio-

lence in the United States, where the Green Party remained politically powerless throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. Strong convictions combined with self-perceived powerlessness tend to result in violent radicalism.

Whereas the forms of antimodernism we discuss here only occasionally resulted in violent radicalism, and then only in relatively limited instances, emerging socio-economic conditions will increasingly favor the rise of violent antimodernism within the modern world itself. Clearly, the pattern of economic and political centralization and bureaucratization in both Europe and the United States— but also more generally, with the advent of globalist corporate power extending into the furthest reaches of the Third World, and with the increasing divisions between the corporate-political elite and the growing masses in comparative poverty—will inevitably result in an increasing sense of powerlessness for many people and especially for those intellectuals who do not identify themselves with the prevailing corporate-political powers.

The increasing military-industrial bureaucracy and centralized governmental power brought about in the United States by (ironically) the Republican majority in the early twenty-first century, combined with the increasingly intrusive power of corporate-controlled semi-secret globalist forces like the World Trade Organization, and combined as well with the bureaucratization of Europe in the European Union—all bound up with the increasing gigantism of globalist corporations that are beholden only to their own profit margins—will inevitably increase the sense of powerlessness among those ordinary people whose lives are not improving under the corporate-military-industrial global regimes, and who inevitably will feel that their voices are not being heard. Under conditions like these, the word “democracy” has a hollow ring indeed, and sooner or later one can expect the emergence of more radical forms of antimodernism.

But for now, we must look more carefully at two pivotal instances of ecological antimodernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, instances that, far from being isolated examples, in fact represent one of the primary themes of modernity itself. Antimodernism could well be described as the most characteristic and, in many respects, the most creative aspect of modernity. Intimately bound up with a modern sense of alienation, loss, and fragmentation is the antimodern reaction to that sense. This reaction is at the heart of antimodernism.

### ***Ecological Antimodernism***

When we look at the various forms of radicalism, without doubt the most sweeping in its indictment of modernity is ecological antimodernism. One can understand this indictment rather easily when one recognizes the extent and magnitude of industrial society's destruction of nature. Consider, for instance, the annihilation of entire mountaintops in coal regions of the eastern United States. In the early twenty-first century, it has become common practice for large corporations to simply blow up the tops of mountains, extract the exposed coal, and, in the place of green mountaintops, generate devastated lunar landscapes whose detritus and lack of vegetation mean that sometimes thousands of people are driven from their homes, rivers flood and wash away whole valleys, and so forth. In the face of these practices, and the general incapacity of ordinary people to effectively oppose such destruction, one can understand how ecological radicalism would develop.

As is well known, ecological radicalism in North America during the late twentieth century has as a significant predecessor Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1974), whose protagonists undertake acts of vandalism in order to stop a large dam from being built in a pristine wilderness area. Damaging the engines of heavy equipment, pulling out or moving survey stakes: these practices became known as "monkey-wrenching," from the factory term for someone who throws a "monkey wrench" into the machinery of production in order to stop a factory line and force a break. The term is apt because the dam, the coal strip mine, and the factory line are all manifestations of an industrial system for which the natural world merely furnishes "raw materials," and in which nature has little or no intrinsic worth beyond its "production" value.

The perspective of ecological radicalism, then, is a fundamentally dualistic one: industrialism is functionally opposed to the preservation of nature. If one is with the industrial system, one is by definition among the destroyers of nature; if on the other hand, one is against industrialism, then one is among the preservers of nature. In this dualistic worldview, there is ultimately little room for compromise, since the two positions are so starkly opposed to one another. It was this perspective that gave rise to such groups as Earth First! founded by Dave Foreman and others. Earth First! was, at least in the beginning, a group that endorsed direct action like vandalism against, for example, clear-cut forest loggers.

After the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, however, many of the more well-known environmentalist groups and individuals moved toward what we might call a “compromise” position that is more or less sympathetic to the necessities of industrialism and corporations. This compromise position came to be known as “sustainable development” and took a host of different forms. Some—for example, individuals like Paul Hawken—argued that the industrial or competitive-market system would itself necessarily become a “green” economic system because of market pressures. Others—for example, groups like the Sierra Club—argued vociferously for the preservation of wilderness and for more pollution control, even while promoting what might be called a cottage industry of ecological tourism. In extreme forms, the “sustainable development” forms of environmentalism came to include actual industry spokesmen who insisted that industrialism itself was environmentalist in nature, and that the best thing for the world at large was the extension of industrialism to every corner of the globe. Such an extension, they argued, would eliminate human poverty and thereby preserve nature from, say, the depredations of people who, desperate for firewood, denude a mountain in the process of obtaining it.

By the second Earth Summit, held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, the entire conference was dedicated to the topic of “sustainable development”—a less environmentally radical term, although still too ecological for the second Bush administration. Whereas an “Earth Summit” can be construed as having environmental concerns at its center, a world conference on “sustainable development” places the primary emphasis on “development.” The implied agreement is that “development” is a given good, and that the only questions are whether or how to make “development”—by which one may assume forms of industrialism—“sustainable.” Even this was too much for the Bush, Jr., administration, which opposed any and all forms of environmentalism; but it was far from enough for most radical environmentalists.

While the most organized and public or mainstream environmentalist groups, such as the Sierra Club, took generally moderate environmentalist positions, the more moderate that the mainstream ecological advocacy organizations became, the more that radical groups and individuals felt impelled toward what we might call extremes of intellectual perspective and of action. If the mainstream groups are inherently compromised by

their comparatively moderate positions in favor of “sustainable development,” and if the mainstream dichotomy is only between such positions and the voracious appetite of industrialism, then the radical environmentalists feel that they have no voice and must resort to violence in order to make themselves heard. This is precisely what happened: to use a characteristically American expression, they took the law into their own hands.

Whatever one may think of radical environmentalist groups and individuals, they do represent a very characteristically American tradition. The American Revolution itself was a violation of British law, but when the law is unjust and tyrannical, one is obliged to break it in order to affirm a higher moral law. This is precisely the argument of Henry David Thoreau, not only in his well-known “Civil Disobedience,” but also in his lesser-known “Plea for Captain John Brown,” in which he endorses Brown’s brutal violence against slaveholders. The law may allow slavery, but moral law does not, and so one must break the technical law in order to uphold a higher moral law. The law, in this longest-standing of American traditions, should not enforce obedience to that which is against one’s conscience, and Thoreau, like the colonists who revolted against the British, endorsed violent radicalism if it is in the service of a higher moral position.

### *Theodore Kaczynski*

This brings us to Theodore Kaczynski, most widely known by his FBI file name, the Unabomber, who in his manifesto bluntly remarks that in order to make his radical environmentalist perspective widely known, he “had to kill some people.” This expresses, as directly as possible, the fundamental position of extreme violent radicalism, in which a given moral position is taken so far that it becomes a kind of *carte blanche* for murder. Such extremism in the case of the Unabomber is perhaps an extension of his mathematical training, which emphasized the abstract over the concrete, and in his case led to his insistence upon principle (i.e., the principle of protecting the earth from industrial depredation) at any cost.

The history of the Unabomber, eventually identified as Theodore Kaczynski, is well known, so I will only briefly sketch it here. Kaczynski was born in a suburb of Chicago, Evergreen Park, Illinois, on May 22, 1942. As a boy, he and his brother were taught wilderness survival by his father, and he grew up with a special aptitude for mathematics, as well as a considerable interest in small explosives. In 1962, he graduated from Harvard

University and undertook graduate study in mathematics at the University of Michigan. In the autumn of 1967, he took a highly desirable teaching position at the University of California, Berkeley, but in 1969, he resigned the post without explanation. He and his brother, David, purchased some land near Lincoln, Montana, where Kaczynski later built his small cabin. From 1979 to 1996, Kaczynski lived in his cabin as a hermit, hunting rabbits and growing his own vegetables, surviving on small amounts of money sent to him by members of his family. On April 3, 1996, Kaczynski was arrested at his cabin after his brother gave his name as a Unabomber suspect to the FBI, and on January 21, 1998, Kaczynski agreed to a plea bargain with the government and began to serve a life sentence in federal prison.

Behind this outward history of Kaczynski's life was another, hidden history: that of the Unabomber and his explosive packages. The first of these explosive packages was found in the parking lot at the University of Illinois in May 1978, and slightly injured the security officer who opened it. In June 1980, United Airlines President Percy Wood was injured by a package bomb, and the initials "FC" were found etched on a remaining piece of the metal bomb casing. Further bombs went off at Vanderbilt University and the University of California, Berkeley, in 1982, with more damaging injuries to victims; and by 1985, the Unabomber claimed his first death, a computer store owner in Sacramento, California. In June 1993, the Unabomber struck again, severely injuring Charles Epstein, a world-renowned geneticist at the University of California, San Francisco, and a couple of days later, David Gelernter, a computer science professor at Yale University, lost part of his right hand, sight in one eye, and hearing in one ear when he opened a package mailed to his office. By 1994 and 1995, the Unabomber's devices were fatal: he killed public relations executive Thomas Mosser (whose public relations firm represented Exxon after the tanker oil spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound); and Gilbert Murray, president of the California Forestry Association.

In April 1995, the *New York Times* published, after much understandable editorial angst, a large treatise by the Unabomber because he claimed that in return he would not send any further bombs. Or rather, as he put it, "FC" (for "Freedom Club") would not send any further bombs, since he wanted to bolster the belief that more than one individual was involved. Kaczynski's brother David recognized the content and style of the treatise

as his brother's, and reluctantly provided his name and location to the FBI, who subsequently arrested him at his Montana cabin. There, they found the typewriter upon which the treatise *Industrial Society and Its Future* had been typed. In 1996, Kaczynski pleaded guilty in order to avoid examination by psychiatrists. He did not want his ideas discredited by a more or less official diagnosis of sociopathy.

One of the most widely distributed documents on the Internet, *Industrial Society and Its Future* is possibly the most extensive antimodern terrorist treatise ever written. Certainly it is one of the clearest. Whatever one thinks of his arguments, the fact remains that Kaczynski's worldview is developed and internally coherent. Kaczynski begins his manifesto in the following, uncompromising way:

1. The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in "advanced" countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. The continued development of technology will worsen the situation. It will certainly subject human beings to greater indignities and inflict greater damage on the natural world, it will probably lead to greater social disruption and psychological suffering, and it may lead to increased physical suffering even in "advanced" countries.

2. The industrial-technological system may survive or it may break down. If it survives, it MAY eventually achieve a low level of physical and psychological suffering, but only after passing through a long and very painful period of adjustment and only at the cost of permanently reducing human beings and many other living organisms to engineered products and mere cogs in the social machine. Furthermore, if the system survives, the consequences will be inevitable: There is no way of reforming or modifying the system so as to prevent it from depriving people of dignity and autonomy.

3. If the system breaks down the consequences will still be very painful. But the bigger the system grows, the more disastrous the results of its breakdown will be, so if it is to break down it had best break down sooner rather than later.

4. We therefore advocate a revolution against the industrial system. This revolution may or may not make use of violence: it may be sudden or

it may be a relatively gradual process spanning a few decades. We can't predict any of that. But we do outline in a very general way the measures that those who hate the industrial system should take in order to prepare the way for a revolution against that form of society. This is not to be a POLITICAL revolution. Its object will be to overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society.<sup>11</sup>

What strikes one first about this beginning is its coldly analytical quality. It is reminiscent, in fact, of the tone one finds in eugenically based critiques of modernity. Kaczynski's rhetoric is dissociated from humanity: like the eugenicists, he analyzes humanity from the outside.

This distance from humanity, this cold neutrality, perhaps explains more than anything else how Kaczynski was psychologically able to maim and murder people using mostly mail bombs. He is not interested in the individuals, whom he sees as fundamentally guilty in any case; he looks beyond them to the abstractions of nature and humanity. His is a mathematical mind, accustomed to the abstract. For him, the world becomes a demonstration or a field in which abstract principles are manifested in social phenomena that he seeks to alter decisively and fundamentally. Thus he writes of "the system" and of overthrowing "the economic and technological basis of the present society." He is, it would seem, without much compassion and is certainly not interested in religious or spiritual life. In essence, he is a hypermodern sociopath, whose writing, like his life, is marked by his total lack of affect.

That said, however, one is compelled to recognize that his arguments are logically ordered. It is a mistake to dismiss Kaczynski's treatise out of hand with an *ad hominem* remark. In the fashion of some European scholars, he numbers his paragraphs; he divides his treatise into sections; and each section follows in a more or less logical progression from one to the next. Kaczynski also takes care to develop his themes in subsections that form a larger pattern: he begins with an attack on leftism, and he comes back to this theme again at the end. In between, he develops his concepts of "oversocialization" and "surrogate activities" as ways in which people mistakenly seek to adjust to destructive modernity; he analyzes how technological progress inevitably means the loss of individual freedom; and he outlines the necessity of bringing down the entire modern superstructure.

11. Theodore Kaczynski, *Industrial Society and Its Future* (April 1995), pars. 1–4, available online at <http://www.unabombertrial.com/manifesto/index.html>.

In his view, reform of the existing consumerist-technological system is out of the question.

We might wonder why Kaczynski devotes a significant part of his treatise to an attack on leftism. While one might suggest that he “doth protest too much,” and that in fact he may be a leftist trying to disguise that fact, such an accusation does not hold up under scrutiny. Clearly Kaczynski is by nature and by principle opposed to centralized power; he wants to bring about the destruction of the industrial system and the collectivism it automatically generates. Leftism, he writes, is by definition “totalitarian force”; it is collectivism that, however noble its apparent ideals or goals, results in the loss of individual autonomy and the enforcement of particular politically correct goals.<sup>12</sup> In other words, leftism in his view tends to reinforce through collective and totalistic means the very industrial-technological system that it purportedly critiques. Marx, for example, critiqued modern capitalism, but Marxism certainly led to much worse forms of totalitarianism that merely gave lip service to anti-capitalism even as they were embracing industrial-technological militarism.

What does Kaczynski imagine as a possible human future? On the one hand, he foresees the continued application of technology to humanity and nature in order to manipulate them into ever more socially useful forms. The wealthy will manipulate their children to enhance them genetically; the poor will be manipulated to make them docile and servile functionaries without too many criminal inclinations.<sup>13</sup> It will become increasingly possible to manipulate human behavior through surveillance, drugs, and other means. In short, Kaczynski expects a totalitarian future enforced through technological means. On the other hand, he envisions a better world if the industrial system is destroyed and people return to pre-industrial ways of living. He writes:

We distinguish between two kinds of technology, which we will call small-scale technology and organization-dependent technology. Small-scale technology is technology that can be used by small-scale communities without outside assistance. Organization-dependent technology is technology that depends on large-scale social organization. We are aware of no significant cases of regression in small-scale technology.

12. *Ibid.*, par. 219.

13. *Ibid.*, pars. 154, 163.

But organization-dependent technology DOES regress when the social organization on which it depends breaks down.<sup>14</sup>

In other words: absent an industrial system to support them, refrigerators (for instance) will cease to be repairable and consequently they will be discarded. People will then return to icehouses or other forms of sustainable technology.

But the bulk of Kaczynski's treatise is negative: he offers very little in the way of an affirmative vision for an attractive future. Clearly, he despises industrialism and the intensifying centralization of power, and in fact his critique of technological progress makes some legitimate and effective points. Indeed, he is probably right when he observes that were a Green party to gain power, the kinds of social changes it would have to make in order to restore ecological balance would inevitably drive it from power and into disgrace. But he takes his thesis to the extreme as a result: he endorses the total overthrow of the industrial system as a whole, and he even advocates such destructive socio-economic policies as "free trade" in order to hasten this systemic collapse. As a strategist, Kaczynski encourages systemic breakdown, but one is left wondering: What then? A remnant of society living on nuts and berries and sleeping in caves?

The weakest point of Kaczynski's treatise lies in his dismissal of religion and, by extension, of culture and traditional communal life.<sup>15</sup> There is, in the whole treatise, no hint of human community or of the fundamental religious impulse, no sign of compassion or kindness or love. Like the mathematician that he was, Kaczynski simply elaborates the logical premises and consequences of his argument, and so one is only somewhat startled when he casually observes that "[i]n order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people."<sup>16</sup> In order to make this treatise public, he needed publicity, and so the deaths and maimings of his victims became merely instrumental in the larger logical design. Here, as in the totalitarianism he despises, the ends justify the means. In his coldly logical analysis of modernity's sickness, there is no room for a religious or cultural remedy,

14. *Ibid.*, par. 208.

15. See *ibid.*, par. 137n23, in which Kaczynski remarks that "self-interest" can appear not only in pursuit of material goods, but also in one's "ideology or religion."

16. *Ibid.*, par. 96.

only a prophetic analysis drawn by extrapolating from the defects inherent in the technological-industrial apparatus of progress.

Yet with all this said, the fact remains that Kaczynski's treatise is the chief late twentieth-century statement of radical antimodernist antipathy to the emerging globalist-consumerist totalism. It would be a serious mistake to ignore or disparage this treatise's impact: its distribution was so widespread and its heirs so evident that one must acknowledge its historical importance. Perhaps no other work makes it so clear that modernity carries within it the seeds of its own opposition, which in fact may well take an emotionless, cultureless, unrooted, and irreligious hypermodern form. Whereas nearly all the forms of twentieth-century antimodernism were rooted in a vision of the past and of traditions that modern consumerism was destroying, Kaczynski signaled a new kind of antimodernism that looked forward only to the destruction of the industrial-technological machine, and that did not emerge out of any regional or religious culture, but only out of an abstract opposition to the abstraction of modernity. In this respect, Kaczynski's treatise represents the beginning of twenty-first century antimodernism.

Who are Kaczynski's heirs? These tend to fall into two camps: those who look forward to a primitive future, and those who seek to tear down the industrial-technological machinery of contemporary society. Certainly one heir is the primitivist John Zerzan, who visited Kaczynski in prison, and whose work extols the virtues of hunter-gatherer society prior to agriculture (even if he couldn't bring himself to actually live the primitive life that Kaczynski did). Zerzan fleshes out a vision for a primitivist human future free from the destructiveness of modernity, but he does not publicly endorse the terrorist means that Kaczynski embraced and encouraged. This latter course is followed by such groups as the Earth Liberation Front, which explicitly encourages arson as a weapon against real estate subdivisions, genetic engineering facilities, and the like. We will have more to say about the Earth Liberation Front shortly.

But neither of these groups fully follow the course laid out by Kaczynski in his treatise and amplified in subsequent writings. In an essay entitled "Hit Where It Hurts," published in 2002 in the journal *Green Anarchy*, Kaczynski admonished his fellow radical environmentalists for concerning themselves with peripheral issues like cruelty to animals.<sup>17</sup> Ending cruelty

17. Theodore Kaczynski, "Hit Where It Hurts," *Green Anarchy* 8 (Spring 2002), <http://www.greenanarchy.org/zine/GA08/hit.php>.

to animals, he writes, is a noble enough cause, but pursuing it will not end the industrial-technological system. That end can only come through hitting the system where it hurts—e.g., in the electrical power grid, in computer systems, in advertising propaganda, or in biotechnology. Attacking biotechnology at its source in corporations like Monsanto is the most reasonable course for radical environmentalists, he argues. He concludes his essay as follows:

It is open to argument whether I am right in thinking that biotechnology is the best issue on which to attack the system politically. But it is beyond argument that radicals today are wasting much of their energy on issues that have little or no relevance to the survival of the technological system. And even when they do address the right issues, radicals do not hit where it hurts. So instead of trotting off to the next world trade summit to have temper tantrums over globalization, radicals ought to put in some time thinking [about] how to hit the system where it really hurts. By legal means, of course.<sup>18</sup>

The Earth Liberation Front did burn down this or that facility, but their arson had at best only a minor effect on the course of biotechnology, lumbering, and urban-suburban sprawl.

Hence at some point a group, perhaps organized along the lines of the Earth Liberation Front (or perhaps that group itself), probably will follow the course set by Kaczynski, and begin to strike at larger, more vital parts of the industrial-technological system, in the process significantly raising their public profile in order to make their radical antimodernist voices heard amid the din of consumerism and state propaganda. Such a development is virtually inevitable because of the very nature of modernity itself. While Islamic terrorism is undoubtedly a significant threat to people and only secondarily a threat to the industrial-corporate-military system, radical environmentalism may pose a potentially greater threat to the system as a whole because it emerges from inside modernity itself and is in fact a form of hypermodernity. If modernity is destructive to nature and to traditional human cultures and communities, hypermodernity is a far more intense, globalized form of this destructiveness. Radical environmentalism in the line of Kaczynski belongs fundamentally to, and arises out of antipathy

18. *Ibid.*

toward, the global-corporate hypermodernity that it seeks to destroy. Both are rootless, ruthless, and locked together like Siamese twins.

But let us turn at this point to consider the Earth Liberation Front.

### ***Earth Liberation Front***

While the word “terrorist” does describe reasonably well the ecologically motivated mail bombing campaign of the Unabomber—he killed and maimed people more or less at random, even if with an ideological agenda—the term “terrorist” is more problematic in the case of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Without question, the ELF, which began its public campaign of arson in the late twentieth century, is an organization whose members are willing to break the law and to destroy property. But the word “terrorism” describes those who deliberately spread terror in a population through murder in order to achieve their ends. The ELF, however, explicitly eschews violence against people or even against animals; it is more accurately described as an organization of saboteurs. It represents an extremist form of ecosaboteur antimodernism that would seem bound to continue developing.

From its very beginning, the ELF was effective in maintaining anonymity because it embraced the same decentralized cell structure that was so effective for organizations like al-Qaeda. There is no organizational hierarchy, no leadership, no national or international communication among members—only the ideological agenda to bind the decentralized autonomous groups. This emphasis on decentralized autonomy carries with it the danger that violence against people might be attributed to the group as a whole. However, the ELF established a “National Press Office” in order to communicate the aims of the group and to disavow any actions falsely attributed to them. They also published a clear set of goals and guidelines that make it quite clear what they accepted as organizational goals and actions, and what they rejected. Violence against the property of corporations engaged in environmental destruction is acceptable, in their view; violence against individuals is not.

Although some environmentalists criticized the ELF’s policy of decentralization and anonymity as cowardly, the ELF itself responded that “[t]he idea is not for the members to be rotting away in prisons but rather to be free each and every day to continue their heroic actions.”<sup>19</sup> The group’s primary communiqué goes on to remark:

19. North American Earth Liberation Front Press Office, *Frequently Asked Questions About Earth Liberation Front* (2003), p. 24.

At this point in time there exists the immediate need for individuals to step outside of societal law and work to directly stop the destruction of life. By any means necessary. . . . The decision not to take public responsibility for each action is purely a strategic one. Why would anyone want to be caught and unjustly locked up when they could be free to continue destroying that which is killing life?<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, ELF members recognized that the legal system in the United States became strongly stacked against ecosaboteurs—the very term “ecoterrorist” reveals an implicit charge, and in the wake of the al-Qaeda attacks in the United States, anti-terrorism laws became quite draconian. Taking credit for individual actions would require trust in the legal system. But “the ELF understands that [the American legal system] is part of the same system of . . . westernized world domination that is causing the death of all life. It can never be trusted and ultimately needs to be abolished.”<sup>21</sup>

By this point, it is clear that ELF members have spent considerable time thinking through their ideological positions and expressing them as clearly as possible. This is to be expected, since the ELF exists entirely on the basis of ideology. This alone is what binds the organization. “If an individual believes in the ideology and follows a certain set of guidelines she or he can perform actions and become a part of the ELF,” reads the group’s statement of principles.<sup>22</sup> This leads us naturally to ask what the main points of the group’s ideology are. At heart, the ELF works “to remove the profit motive from killing the earth and all life on it.” And furthermore: “The ELF recognizes that the popular environmental movement has failed miserably in its attempts to bring about the protection needed to stop the killing of life on this planet.” Consequently, “[m]atters must be taken into the hands of the people, who need to more and more step outside of this societal law to enforce natural law.”<sup>23</sup>

As may be expected, the group is adamantly critical of the “state structure, big business, and consumer society” that work together “for the destruction of life on the planet for the sake of profit.” Instead, they endorse “natural law,” which is to say, the basic right of people for clean air, clean water, and clean soil. “Particularly with the advent of the industrial revolution, the westernized way of life has been in complete violation

20. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

of natural law,” the ELF continues, echoing the sentiments of the *Hau de no sau nee Address to the Western World*.<sup>24</sup> The quest for money at the expense of nature leads not to happiness but to depression, illness, the destruction of family and community structures, and various social atrocities like “numerous school shootings.” The “profit motive, caused and reinforced by capitalist society, is destroying all life on this planet,” they write, and the only way to stop that destruction is “by any means necessary take the profit motive out of killing.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the ideology of the ELF is largely negative—that is to say, opposed to the destruction of nature and life as a whole through ecotage—it does have an affirmative dimension. The ELF in particular affirms “good health, a strong community, . . . knowing the history of your people and your place in the world, . . . living a life of realism, having a sense of what it means to be alive and living a life that is not irreversibly harmful to other life forms or the natural environment.”<sup>26</sup> What is perhaps most interesting about such passages is that they seem traditionally conservative, not only in the emphasis on family and community, but also in the opposition to centralized state or corporate power. But in contrast to traditional conservatism, clearly missing both from Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and Its Future* and from ELF publications is any interest in religion. In some respects, life itself, the basic nature of life lived close to the earth, has been substituted for religious “otherworldly” values in this current of ecological antimodernism.

Still, the ELF is most well known not for its ideology, but for its actions. Its targets include those “individuals, businesses, governmental and non-governmental organizations” that “aid in directly destroying life and/or the spread of the destructive propaganda of the American Dream.”<sup>27</sup> Specifically, it targets those who profit from “deforestation,” “urban sprawl, genetic engineering, natural habitat and ecosystem destruction, [and] the use of slave labor by corporations.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, on October 18, 1998, it burned down a ski resort expansion by Vail Resorts, Inc., into one of the last remaining habitats for the Canadian lynx in the United States, causing a claimed \$12 million to \$16 million damage. Several months later, the ELF

24. *Ibid.*, p. 6. See the section on indigenous forms of antimodernism.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

28. *Ibid.*

set fire to the corporate headquarters of U.S. Forest Industries, in Medford, Oregon. On December 15, 1999, it burned the northwest regional headquarters of Boise Cascade because the forestry company was planning to log the virgin forests of Chile. And on New Year's Eve, 1999, the ELF set fire to the third floor of Agricultural Hall at Michigan State University in order to protest research on the genetic engineering of crops. Subsequent cases of arson included car dealerships, suburban sprawl housing tracts, and various other targets.

One aspect of the ELF that separates it somewhat from the humorless Kaczynski is the tongue-in-cheek nature of its communiqués concerning its activities. Its members sometimes refer to themselves as “elves” and write missives like this: “To celebrate the holidays we decided on a bonfire. Unfortunately for U.S. Forest Industries it was at their corporate headquarters office. . . . This was in retribution for all the wild forests and animals lost to feed the wallets of greedy fucks like Jerry Bramwell, U.S.F.I. president. . . and it is a warning to all others responsible.”<sup>29</sup> As is evident here, the ELF communiqués also have a vengeful side. The same dynamic (first a humorous note, then a vengeful punch line) is evident in the communiqué concerning the Boise Cascade arson on Christmas, 1999: “Boise Cascade has been very naughty. . . . Early Christmas morning, elves left coal in Boise Cascade’s stocking. Four buckets of diesel and gas with kitchen timer delay destroyed their regional headquarters. . . . Let this be a lesson to all greedy multinational corporations who don’t respect their ecosystems. The elves are watching.”<sup>30</sup>

The larger question, and one hotly debated in environmentalist circles, is whether such ELF actions help or hurt the environmentalist movement as a whole. The argument against the ELF and its arson campaign is that it gives environmentalism a bad name, and actually hardens people against green causes. The ELF rejoinder is that its tactics are only one possibility among a “variety of tactics to stop the destruction of life.”<sup>31</sup> They wish to see environmentalism as a global movement representing a spectrum of actions, some legal, others not. Moreover, they continue,

no one in their right mind can honestly state that the popular environmental movement using state sanctioned tactics has been successful. It

29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

is very obvious something more is needed. There is no tolerable excuse for an individual or organization that claims to be a part of the movement to protect all life on the planet to come out publicly against the actions of ELF.<sup>32</sup>

This argument—that “state sanctioned” environmentalism failed—is actually a fairly strong one, but it does not answer the objection that ecosabotage ultimately sets back rather than advances the cause of environmentalism

And in fact, one finds a number of points at which the ELF seems to go well beyond its stated goal of protection of life. For instance, when it proposes the Statue of Liberty or Mount Rushmore as possible targets, one immediately wonders what on earth these national monuments could possibly have to do with environmentalist causes. And even if they *did* somehow represent a multinational corporation (which of course they do not), why include in one’s list “targets” that are bound to alienate virtually every American citizen who hears of them as “targets”? This sort of gratuitous anti-Americanism seems to be motivated by something other than the “protection of life.” Or again, when the group refers to the “wallets of greedy fucks,” it reveals a kind of vengeful fury that seems coarse and likely to backfire. The ELF, in short, occasionally seems motivated by something other than environmental concerns.

All of this said, however, the fact remains that the ELF represents an ideologically developed form of ecological antimodernism. One may dislike or even despise the group, but one has to admit that they have thought through their responses to their critics and have developed their ideology well enough to provide a strong foundation for action. In this regard, they no more belong to the mainstream current of late twentieth-century leftism than does Theodore Kaczynski, for it is absolutely clear that they have not renounced “metanarrative,” as Jean-François Lyotard urged, nor have they entered into the cul-de-sacs of Richard Rorty’s anti-foundationalism or Jacques Derrida’s nihilism. The ELF represents itself straightforwardly as heroic defenders of nature against the evil empire of rapacious globalist corporations, and this is a drama that everyone can understand and perhaps even in some sense secretly identify with.

### *Some Conclusions*

First, we must recognize that antimodernism is not going to disappear. It cannot, because, as we have seen, it is bound up intimately, indissolubly,

32. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

with modernity itself. As soon as industrialism was introduced, one saw Luddites; as soon as computers were introduced, one saw critics of computer technology. What is more, opposition to mechanized social structures is a necessary corrective, because without such opposition society is inclined to go very far, no doubt too far, in a particular direction. Environmental activists clearly had an effect in slowing pollution of air and water by industry in the United States, for example. Antimodernism is an intrinsic part of modernity itself: it represents an instinctive reaction against the mechanization and bureaucratization of life, against the destruction of the natural world, against the destruction of traditional cultures, and against the destruction of the quality of human life. At heart, antimodernism in all its various forms is an affirmation of normal human life in the face of industrialization, bureaucratization, and social and environmental decay and destruction.

By its very nature, antimodernism is conservative in impulse. Its adherents seek cultural and religious stability, and gradual rather than sudden socio-economic change. Thus the majority of antimodernists are in fact explicitly conservative, as we can see in such seminal figures as T. S. Eliot (especially in his later prose work, which has never received much scholarly attention), or in the works of Chesterton, Belloc, Molnar, and the Tradition, Family, Property movement—indeed, in the whole lineage of Catholic antimodernists of various kinds. But as we have seen, even radical environmentalists in the lineage of Theodore Kaczynski and the Earth Liberation Front—including related organizations like the Animal Liberation Front whose members are steadfastly opposed to genetic engineering of crops and animals and to the industrialization of agriculture—are in fundamental respects conservative. It is no accident that Kaczynski begins and concludes his major treatise, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, with diatribes against leftism. Much as conservatives might like to disavow him, Kaczynski is fundamentally conservative in inclination.

Indeed, even those who are often termed “leftists” or “anarchists” share a great deal with what is often termed the “far right,” so much so that I think it more sensible to use the term “autonomist” to describe all those antimodernists, of both the putative left and the putative right, who oppose the centralization, mechanization, bureaucratization, and technologization of life. It is hardly an accident that major anarchist figures like Peter Lamborn Wilson (under his pseudonym Hakim Bey), Bob Black, John Zerzan, and David Watson all seek to affirm individual and local autonomy in the

face of what Watson, following Mumford, terms the “megamachine” of technological society. Wilson’s “temporary autonomous zones” (his name for areas or spheres that can be temporarily free from centralized authority) itself reminds us rather strongly of traditional conservative insistence throughout the twentieth century on local and regional autonomy, and even, in a more distant way, of “state’s rights” based upon an extension of the same principle. Without a doubt, late twentieth-century anarchism belonged to the autonomist end of the political spectrum.

While obviously these various groups and individuals represent a broad spectrum of views (and do not agree with one another on questions like the centrality of religion for human life), when it comes to antimodernism, the themes of their works are very much in harmony. For this reason, Alain de Benoist in particular and much of the European New Right in general explicitly seek a “red-black” or “green-conservative” alliance to cut across political boundaries that are often claimed to be impermeable, but that in fact are not only artificial but also misleading and even illusory. Benoist is quite right in this regard: there really is a fundamental area of unanimity that the theme of antimodernism reveals, and that area of unanimity joins together what once was called “left” and “right.” It is hardly a coincidence that the antimodernism of Noam Chomsky, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Alain Joxe, and many others is at least partially in harmony with the antimodernism of Patrick Buchanan, Alain de Benoist, and even to some extent that new Rasputin, Alexander Dugin. They all, from various perspectives, share a profound distrust of American imperialism, of the corporatization and bureaucratization of modern life, and of the superficiality of what is often termed the “consumerist” society of the spectacle, of “entertainment.”

Hence my first prediction: some antimodernists will join together from across these previously “fixed” political barriers under the banner of antimodernism itself. The stronger the bureaucratization and technologization of society, the more unidimensional society appears to be via technological means of transparent communication, the more divisions there are between the wealthiest elite or the oligopolies and monopolies of titanic corporations on the one hand and the excluded masses on the other, the more ecological destruction becomes evident around the world, the stronger will be the impulses to oppose these forces. Traditional conservatives and anarchists are not necessarily in agreement about the kind of future societies they wish to encourage, but they are in agreement about the

excesses of modernity. What they are opposed to will serve to unite them in inclinations and perhaps in common action despite their differences.<sup>33</sup> And this new union of antimodernist forces will become influential, even if it is not immediately effective in changing society as a whole.

This brings us to my second prediction: some antimodernists will feel compelled to ever more extreme means of action if they believe that their voices cannot otherwise be heard. Antimodernism becomes more severe, more radical, the more its adherents believe that they are incapable of making changes in society, and that the forces they deplore cannot be stopped by any conventional political or social means. Here we will continue to see a serious divide between two major currents of antimodernism: one strand (broadly speaking) will remain non-violent, but another may be increasingly inclined not only toward violence against objects, along the lines of Earth Liberation Front and its burning of ski lifts or subdivisions, but also toward targeted violence against people, along the lines of the Unabomber or Timothy McVeigh.<sup>34</sup> Violent radicalism always emerges because its adherents have completely lost faith in the political system that supports the status quo, and the more that the system closes itself off against antimodernism, in favor of globalist corporatism and those who speak for it, the more antimodernists will feel compelled to turn to violence.

But not all antimodernists will turn to violence—only a few. Hence my third prediction: autonomous, separatist communities will continue to appear. While some will feel compelled to turn against the system, to “hit them where it hurts,” as Kaczynski put it, others will be repelled by violence and will find themselves much more inclined toward reclusion, toward creating autonomous zones where they are no longer subject to the bureaucratic-technological system of mass society. We have already seen numerous examples of this tendency in the latter half of the twentieth century, beginning with the communes of the 1960s, not to mention the

33. This prediction has some evidence on its side. See, for instance, Bill Kaufman, “Free Vermont,” *The American Conservative*, December 19, 2005, pp. 16–19. Kaufman writes that at the Vermont Independence Convention in 2005, “I heard much talk of the need for libertarian conservatives and anti-globalist leftists to work together. There is a sense that the old categories, the old straitjackets, must be shed.” Kaufman, more or less traditionally conservative, drove to the meeting with Kirkpatrick Sale, a “good-natured anarchist.”

34. Just as the harbinger American farm crisis of the Reagan-era 1980s resulted in militia groups and a “harvest of rage,” so too American de-industrialization in the wake of globalism can be expected to generate similar antimodernist groups and impulses.

various preexisting Anabaptist antimodernist communities like the Amish or the Bruderhof, many of which have their origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One also sees this tendency manifested in the various anti-federalist schemes associated with the late-twentieth century American militia movement, whose members went so far as to create new monetary systems and underground economies, and in whom the separatist impulse is strong. In the early twenty-first century, we now see an emerging secessionist movement in the United States that is fundamentally autonomist in nature.

The impulse to separatist autonomous communities is strongest where it has a religious impulse, and this is by no means limited to variant forms of Anabaptism. One thinks here of new religious movements that emerged in the United States again in the latter half of the twentieth century, many of which speak to people's needs to belong to a religiously unified culture and to realize spiritual awakening, even if some of these movements' leading figures also exploit exactly the same needs for self-aggrandizement, along the lines of Rajneesh (among the most notorious of the New Age gurus). But even in this case, what was the motivation for creating the giant Oregon Rajneesh commune if not the establishment of a separate autonomous community at least partly outside mainstream consumerist society (even if in other respects it was symptomatic of modernism itself)? And there are countless other examples, ranging from traditionalist Catholicism (the Tradition, Family, Property movement) to fundamentalist Protestantism to various forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. Virtually all of these communities have at least some antimodernist elements within them, and new ones will continue to emerge that show antimodernist origins and impulses.

In this regard, it is revealing that by the end of the twentieth century, there was a prominent traditional conservative movement in the United States that consciously turned away from political advocacy and toward the creation of a "parallel nation" that was fundamentally opposed to the American public school system, public entertainment, and the prevailing tendencies toward centralization of government power. Primary figures in this movement to create a "parallel nation" were Paul Weyrich and William Lind, respectively president and director of the Free Congress Foundation, under whose auspices a "Declaration of Cultural Independence" appeared. This Declaration decries public schools as mere "attendance centers," public entertainment as a "bottomless sewer," and

art, architecture, and literature as ugly and self-parodic. “America,” the signers write, “is becoming a foreign country.” It is no longer possible to restore America through political means, they continue, and so they wish “nothing less than the creation of a complete, alternate structure of parallel cultural institutions.”<sup>35</sup>

In an editorial published in the *Washington Post*, Weyrich first announced his admittedly “radical” change of heart and his belief that cultural conservatives must create a kind of separate and parallel nation. He warns his fellow cultural conservatives not to believe in some

wonderful new era thanks to technology or the stock market or whatever. These are lies. We are not in the dawn of a new civilization, but in the twilight of an old one. We will be lucky if we escape with any remnants of the great Judeo-Christian civilization that we have known down through the ages. . . . I don’t have all the answers, or even all the questions. But I know that what we have been doing for thirty years hasn’t worked, that while we have been fighting and winning in politics, our culture has decayed into something approaching barbarism. We need to take another tack, find a different strategy.<sup>36</sup>

This strategy is separatism, the creation of autonomous, linked, cultural conservative communities.<sup>37</sup> We see a similar impulse at work in the secessionist movement in the United States during the early twenty-first century. Already by 2005, there were reportedly more than two dozen secessionist organizations across the United States.<sup>38</sup>

35. See William Lind and Paul Weyrich, “A Declaration of Cultural Independence,” which derived from a conference of cultural conservatives on June 18 and 19, 1999. Available online at the Free Congress Foundation website, <http://www.freecongress.org/centers/cc/culturalindependence.asp>.

36. Paul Weyrich, open letter on rethinking culture war strategy, dated February 16, 1999, and available online at <http://www.freecongress.org/misc/990216ltr.asp>.

37. See, in this regard, the “Independents’ Forum” of the Center for Cultural Conservatism, which lists as its goals the creation of new universities, the establishment of communication systems that join together the existing “islands” of cultural independence into “a broader archipelago,” the encouragement of trade schools, the development of an independent health care system, and the preparation of “the groundwork for founding Independent communities.” See Center for Cultural Conservatism, “Independents’ Forum,” [http://www.freecongress.org/centers/cc/independents\\_forum.asp](http://www.freecongress.org/centers/cc/independents_forum.asp).

38. See, for example, the website of the Second Vermont Republic, one of the most vocal and mainstream of such movements, at <http://www.vermontrepublic.org>.

It is true that the antimodernists from whatever perspective during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were largely marginalized, but this marginalization rested upon a widespread belief in progress. It is difficult to oppose alluring new technology of any kind, for after all, new machines are progressively bigger, faster, and more powerful. But in many respects, technological progress serves to mask the underlying problems created by technology itself, problems that many expect to be solved in the future—by more technological progress! Glossed over or ignored by this quasi-religious faith in technology are its consequences for people and for nature. Faith in technological solutions in the future had previously allowed many to ignore the destruction of local communities, of extended families, of small-scale agriculture, of the natural world, and of diverse small businesses in favor of increasing bureaucratization and centralization of corporate and state power. Antimodernists are and will continue to be those who dissent from this notion of inevitable systemic progress because they have either felt or seen its destructive consequences.

This brings me to my fourth prediction: there will be what I will term a religious antimodern renaissance. What Jacques Ellul wrote in *The Technological System* (1977) is true: that engrossed within secular society “man . . . has no intellectual, moral, or spiritual reference point for judging and criticizing technology.”<sup>39</sup> The technological society, seen from within, is totalizing: it is, as Marcuse put it, uni-dimensional. But there are two vantage points from *outside* the technological society that do allow for criticism of it from a moral and spiritual perspective: one is from the perspective of nature, and the other is religion. To someone standing on a wild mountainside, the corporation that blows up the next mountaintop, poisons the streams, and strip-mines the exposed coal appears not as evidence of progress but as a moral evil. There is, as Thoreau and many who came after him have recognized, a spiritual dimension implicit in the experience of wild nature, and hence there is also a kind of religious fervor impelling ecological antimodernism.

But the strongest and most enduring forms of antimodernism—both the most destructive and the most hopeful—are explicitly religious. In the end, it is religious faith that anchors the antimodern against the perceived onslaught of modernity (and against modernity’s decline). It is religious faith that provides the strength not only to refuse mainstream social values

39. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Jacques Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), p. 318.

based on exploitation or destruction, but also to affirm higher values based in love. If the antimodernist goes in the direction of violent ideocracy, then political religion can become the basis for very extreme destruction, including mass murder. The religious ideologue as terrorist is only a variant form of the same phenomenon one saw earlier in groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army: decentralized, fanatical cells that convince themselves to kill others in the name of some hypothetical historical future. Yet these are distorted forms of religious faith because they insist on the violent historical realization of a quasi-millennialist ideocratic vision, and antimodernism cannot be reduced only to those distortions.

Religious faith can also provide what I term the “great affirmation.” The antimodernists, taken as a whole, are not wrong to critique environmental destruction, the loss of local and regional culture, the erosion of religious traditions, and other problems. This critique I term “the great refusal.” What religious antimodernism provides at its best is “the great affirmation.” By this I mean the affirmation of enduring values that make life meaningful: an affirmation based upon love—love of the divine, love of one’s neighbor, love of nature. All of the most lasting antimodernist socio-cultural experimental communities in American history had a religious center, from the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania community of Ephrata to the nineteenth-century Harmony Society of George Rapp to Amish settlements and even to the twentieth-century hippie farm communes in Tennessee and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> All are based not just on the rejection of mainstream society, but on the affirmation of communal and spiritual values. All are based in a noble vision, even if for some this vision was only realized for a short time, if at all.

Whatever one may think of the various separatist antimodern communities that have arisen and that will continue to arise, there is bound to be a religious resurgence of such communities or affiliated families and individuals as the various trends of modernity continue. Social fragmentation, the diminishment of a social safety net, increasing divisions between rich and poor, the de-industrialization and decay of the so-called “first world” into something like a third-world country, environmental degradation—all

40. Concerning Ephrata, see Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999), pp. 89–112. On the Harmony Society of George Rapp, see Arthur Versluis, “Western Esotericism and the Harmony Society,” *Esoterica* 1 (1999): 20–47, available online at <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/Versluis.html>.

of these tendencies are bound to intensify, not diminish, people's needs for a spiritual anchor and for the renaissance of alternative communities based on a common religious faith. Such communities can indeed provide community and culture, and restore meaning to the lives of those who feel they are without it and adrift in modernity. They can provide hope for an alternative future that looks beyond increasing state and corporate centralization and bureaucratization.

What is more, there is such a rich and growing body of diverse anti-modernist religious writing that one begins to suspect that being creative in modernity implies some degree of contrarian antimodernism. Authors like Berdyaev, Sherrard, and Solzhenitsyn (to give three examples from the Christian tradition) have a prophetic quality in their works that is not only critical toward mainstream society, but also looks toward an affirmative vision of the future that is bound to continue to inspire other creative people. This is also the kind of vision offered by H. H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, a future in which people are guided by compassion for one another and concern for natural balance and harmony, in which the diverse richness of world cultures is encouraged, and in which an economics of sustainability is preferred over universal exploitation. Such a vision is bound to continue to inspire creative efforts to realize it in local, autonomous communities.

Hence it is critical to keep in mind the division between violent and non-violent antimodernism. So many and yet so similar are the critiques of modernity we have discussed that it becomes impossible to dismiss them. They are telling us something vital and urgent. The question is what we do as a result of these critiques. Violent antimodernists would answer that one must force society as a whole to conform to one's wishes. But history has shown that such efforts either cause mainstream society to recoil and respond with more repression from its side, or, if the radical group itself gains power, it proves to be at least as repressive and violent. The non-violent critics of modernity, on the other hand, point us toward a higher vision, one that calls us to preserve what is best and most meaningful in human life. We should try to avoid confusing the best among us with the worst.

The antimodernists do have important things to tell us. In many respects, they represent the prophetic voice that warns us that if we continue to follow our present course, we may well end in catastrophe. They point out the dark side of modern society, its exploitiveness and destructiveness, the

ways in which technology and the centralization of power leach meaning from life, fragment us, and separate us into ever greater divisions between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, even as they continue to allure us with greater material prosperity and technological power. The warnings of the antimodernists are often dire, but the best among them also affirm a vision of a better society—a more ethical way of life—and remind us of our spiritual purposes and responsibility. Antimodernists, far from representing a purely negative or pessimistic current, advance a critique of the society in which we live in order to call us toward a better one. Our future quality of life, perhaps even our survival, may depend upon whether we begin to heed their warnings.