

REVIEWS

Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist, by Alston Chase. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003, 432 pp., \$26.95 hardbound

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Alston Chase writes lucid and provocative books, and *Harvard and the Unabomber* is no exception. Working outward from the terrorism of Ted Kaczynski, Chase presents a multi-layered indictment of the American educational establishment of the 1950s, a period Chase regards as the source of the more widely recognized pathologies of the 1960s. He targets the anti-intellectualism of high schools, the “culture of pessimism” promulgated by the Harvard General Education curriculum, the dangerous social engineering pretensions of the social sciences, particularly psychology, the problematic relationship between government and the academy created by the Cold War, even the failure of the Enlightenment project. All become part of Chase’s attempt to make Kaczynski exemplary of the willingness to kill for an idea that is both the heart of “contemporary terrorism” and “the nature of modern evil” (369).

Such an account will seem implausible to those whose last thoughts of the Unabomber were informed by the news coverage of his capture or the legal proceedings that have him serving four consecutive life sentences. Not to put too fine a point on it, that coverage made it easy to dismiss Kaczynski as a dangerously nutty recluse, driven to kill by fringe environmentalist views that gen-

erated hatred of modern technological society. For a host of reasons, Chase finds this account inadequate. Working back and forth between the particulars of Kaczynski’s character and life story, and the broader educational and cultural milieus in which he moved, Chase attempts to show that the evil in him was as much or more made as born. Its source was not exposure to marginal ideas, but to currents of thought that were commonplace among the intellectual elite of the 1950s and have since become simply commonplace.

Moving between intellectual and personal history is difficult, to say the least, and Chase is aware of the limited degree of causality which he can suggest; after all, most of those who grew up and were educated under circumstances like Kaczynski’s did not become terrorists. Chase’s attempt to account for the host of factors that led this particular person down the path to becoming a frighteningly meticulous, clever, and remorseless murderer produces a rich, sometimes complicated, argument.

We might begin where most people are likely to begin these days when seeking to understand a story like Ted Kaczynski’s—with his psychology. Surely the murder and maiming by finely crafted bombs that became his life-work are indicative of mental illness. But it turns out there is disagreement on this point among those who evaluated him for the purposes of determining his sanity by legal standards. Chase himself is at pains to normalize some of Kaczynski’s behavior, reminding us that it is not a sign of illness to be passionate about ideas, and that seeking to live a relatively isolated life in quasi-wilderness

is for many a “lifestyle” ideal. For much of his life, Chase reports, those who knew Kaczynski best found him to be normal within the framework of being an extremely bright, bookish, introverted, relatively proud, mathematically inclined young man who did not suffer fools gladly, and was quite inclined to see fools around him. What made him a murderer? In the end, Chase puts much of the blame on Harvard.

Chase links Kaczynski’s campaign first of all to his encounter as a Harvard undergraduate with Dr. Henry Murray, “a towering figure in the world of psychology” and creator of the Thematic Apperception Test, “widely used by psychologists for probing the psyche” (241). Kaczynski served as a subject for one of Murray’s last experiments, an archetypical piece of deception-based psychological research in which students were subjected to an intentionally humiliating “third degree.” Murray had been performing such experiments for many years; during World War II he developed them while working for the Office of Strategic Services as a means of testing and training potential spies. One of the most shocking elements of this part of Chase’s story is that, by the time Kaczynski encountered Murray, it is not clear that there was any compelling professional reason to continue these investigations into “The Dyad,” Murray’s label for stressful interactions. That makes plausible Chase’s suggestion that the source of Murray’s interest in recording these humiliating interviews is revealed by another Dyad: a sadistic, adulterous relationship Murray had with a co-worker over many years.

Murray is central to Chase’s argument in two other respects. He is emblematic of a psychological establishment that, as Chase sees it, had little concern for informed consent back in the 1950s, even though the principle had already been established with the Nuremberg Code. This lack of interest in informed consent goes hand in hand with what Chase claims is an increased tendency since the 1950s for psychological research to involve deception of subjects. Chase is therefore sympathetic with Kaczynski’s own tremendous distrust of psychology as a way of denying human freedom by manipulating minds—a distrust that was only increased by his appointed lawyers’ efforts to pursue an insanity defense. Chase makes a great deal of this distrust, since it seems to support the notion that Kaczynski, already emotionally vulnerable, was traumatized by the Murray experiments. Yet Kaczynski himself only recalls the experience as “unpleasant,” (292) and though Chase says Murray’s notes on Kaczynski suggest that in three categories he was “most traumatized of all,” the meaning of Murray’s categories and marginal notes seemed to this reader quite cryptic. Oddly, given the weight Chase wants psychology to play in the story, Kaczynski never made an attempt on the life of a psychologist.

Finally, for Chase, Murray represents the wholesale penetration of the academy by secret government programs that took place during the Cold War. Chase paints a picture of the infusion of large sums of research dollars, often so laundered that those getting them did not know they were working on government projects. While Chase never directly

blames the United States government for creating Ted Kaczynski and would doubtless reject the proposition stated so baldly, the imputation is created through the extended treatment of other instances, particularly involving drugs, where Cold War experimentation is claimed to have harmed people. At the very least, Chase suggests in one respect a moral equivalence between Kaczynski and those officials in American government who, he believes, lacked all moral restraint in pursuit of their goal of winning the Cold War.

This similarity is not accidental, as Chase tells the story. The best and brightest in government and the academy of the 1950s were infected by a "culture of pessimism" that they conveyed to students like Kaczynski through Harvard's famous "Gen-Ed" curriculum. On the one hand, students were taught that there was little hope for democracy, and in particular fear that, left to themselves, people would put the great powers gained by science and technology to self-destructive purposes. On the other hand, there was great hope for the ability of an educated, technical elite to use these same powers to lead mankind to a more "mature," peaceful and stable state. Yet this progressive charitable impulse, Chase's presentation suggests, concealed a moral vacuum. The elite had long since given up on the idea that morality had a rational foundation and instead took moral views to be simply expressions of emotional preferences. What could "progress" be but an expression of their particular wills? Those who sought weapons in the struggle with the Soviets, then, people who at any time

might have pursued their goals with a certain competitive ruthlessness, were further liberated by utopian but foundationless ends and morally unrestrained means.

If Chase is correct about the underlying message of the Gen-Ed curriculum—and he makes a compelling, if almost of necessity anecdotal, case—this part of his story is a crucial cautionary tale about core curricula. For on paper, Gen-Ed was an effort to develop the moral foundations for citizenship, not undermine them. A core curriculum cannot be judged by its mission statements or even syllabi, but by what is happening in the classroom.

In any case, the transformation of elite cultural pessimism into mass culture in the course of the 1960s, Chase believes, helps to account for the relative lack of intellectual interest in the manifesto that Kaczynski got the press to publish as the price for supposedly ending his terror campaign. For by the time it was published, Chase believes, there was little in the manifesto that had not become commonplace. Kaczynski accepted the premise about the self-destructive nature of science and technology, and believed that all moral scruples, some of which he very occasionally records having felt, were simply a matter of social conditioning. (Moral scruples seem far less common in his diary than laments over the time and expense he put into bombs that did not kill people.) To this pessimistic relativism he added a "green" façade that Chase believes to have been almost entirely tactical. The only substantial difference between Kaczynski and the elite

cultural pessimists of the 1950s is that Kaczynski saw their paternalistic project of manipulation as part of the problem, not part of the solution.

It appears that he feared above all for human liberty, so much so that it is almost tempting to call Kaczynski a libertarian terrorist if, as Chase suggests, it is the sign of modern terrorism that it kills for ideas. That Chase nowhere himself supplies such a label may have to do with a suspicion that Kaczynski had a less than serious idea of what liberty is. He wanted the liberty both to have nothing to do with his family, and get money from them when he needed it. He wanted the liberty to live in the wilderness where he would not be bothered by others, but also to live close enough to a civilization that ceaselessly annoyed him, to pursue his terror campaign. In short, he wanted the liberty to say "Fuck you!" to the world and be appreciated for it" (329). Chase documents convincingly the deep contradictions in Kaczynski's character and actions, contradictions which would pretty much guarantee his unhappiness no matter what he did.

As Chase presents him, Kaczynski was helped by Harvard to become the quintessential "free soul" who understands his freedom only by negation of a "system" that he sees as denying him freedom. That is why this public concern for freedom comes to be so closely identified in his mind with the privately expressed motive of revenge. At first, this motive appears somewhat mysterious. While Chase shows that as early as 1966 Kaczynski had vowed to "kill someone I hate" (the bombings did not begin until 1978), his terrorism was at best only indirect revenge on those (like his fam-

ily) who he believed had hurt him over the years. Instead, his revenge is against a controlling "system," his campaign proof that he can escape its strictures. If moral scruples are just matters of conditioning, then to be free is to ignore them.

"Bad men do what good men dream," quotes Chase, and while desire to live as one wishes has long been a democratic dream, Chase makes Kaczynski's essential normlessness emblematic of the failure of the Enlightenment project. As Chase tells the story, the Enlightenment did not give up on the classical quest for an objective foundation for morality, and held that scientific and technical progress would produce a world ever improved by becoming ever more reasonable. But when science denuded nature of moral content, the search for a universal rational morality did not survive enlightened skepticism. As the terrible possibilities of technical and scientific progress became more evident, there was no solid ground left for a moral response. Kaczynski embodies the contradictions that result. A strict believer in scientific and mathematical reasoning, he disliked the results of science and technology. A radical moralist, he believed that all his moral beliefs were simply the products of socialization.

Of course, even vast numbers of people who live in the modern world, in a sense beyond mere chronological courtesy, do not fall so deeply as Kaczynski into this intellectual abyss. Chase is attracted to the idea that Kaczynski's terrorism resulted from an excessive belief in reason, and approvingly quotes Chesterton's dictum that "The madman is the man who has lost

everything except his reason." He also provides reasons why Kaczynski might have been peculiarly vulnerable to a corrosive understanding of reason. From his working class, free thinking parents he had no religious training, and his intelligence further placed him outside of the social norms of his youth. Ghettoized at Harvard among other precocious students, subject both to Harvard snobbery and general social isolation, he was an empty vessel into which cultural pessimism could be poured.

Since these ideas are still powerful, Chase closes his book with serious concerns that, in the present war on terror, our government may replicate the excesses of the Cold War. This concern is not unreasonable, yet there is a problem with Chase's mode of analysis that deserves attention. His approach is, broadly speaking, Machiavellian. He starts with the terrible things, the pathological cases, and proceeds as if they illuminate the truth most clearly, whether about Kaczynski or about the manner in which the Cold War was fought. There can hardly be any quarrel with starting this way when one wants to understand terrorists, but is starting with a terrorist the best way to gain insight into American education, society, and politics?

Surely, in spreading within and beyond the academy, cultural pessimism has done harm; Chase's account helps explain the violent and unsettled 1960s. So it would be nice to think that Kaczynski killed *because* of ideas that are

intellectually bankrupt; but, given his own demons, it is not so clear that the fact that he killed for them proves or even depends on their bankruptcy. It would be convenient to hold that his moral relativism did him in, but fanatics may be nihilistic or absolutist in their moral assumptions. Chase's book is a powerful reminder that bad ideas have bad consequences; here, they surely helped create a troubled man who destroyed his own life along with the lives of others. Yet Chase, who presents himself in many ways as a matched pair to Kaczynski, was not sucked into the same emotional and intellectual maelstrom, and the same would be true of most who live with the legacy of the culture of pessimism. The fact remains that Kaczynski is exceptional.

Chase would have it that for various reasons Kaczynski was specially vulnerable to acting out all that is inherent in the message of cultural pessimism, and of course one can explain unique results by particular circumstances. But something more is necessary if Kaczynski is to illuminate our times. The sources and perhaps surprising strength that allow decency to prevail, one might say despite the best efforts of the academy, deserve more attention than a focus on Ted Kaczynski can provide.

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