# The last outsider

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IN 1946 Albert Camus, soccer player and existentialist, published "The Outsider", the novel that set him on the road to a Nobel prize. The novel's hero, Meursault, shows no compassion at his mother's funeral; he commits murder for no reason; and then, in the book's most biting section, he is arrested and tried. Camus portrays the judicial process as an absurd series of pomposities. His hero finds his defence lawyer ridiculous, and considers defending himself unaided; as he listens to the lawyer's convoluted arguments, he feels like an intruder at his own trial. Sentenced to decapitation "in the name of the French people", the outsider is overwhelmed by the arrogance of so-called justice. The sentence has been "decided by men who change their underwear". And yet it is final, unmovable; in its lack of equivocation, it is grotesque.

Half a century on, it is worth recalling this strange novel as another outsider is brought to trial. This one is real, not fictitious; he has lived, literally, the life of an outsider, hiding away in the empty vastness of Montana rather than merely being alienated in the psychological sense. If the prosecutor is right that this man, Theodore Kaczynski, is indeed the *Unabomber*, then he has committed more than just one murder: over the course of 17 years, the *Unabomber* mailed out explosives that killed three people and injured 17 more. And the prosecutor wields compelling evidence: Mr Kaczynski's shack contained diaries with entries such as "I intend to start killing people"; a fully armed bomb of the sort used by the *Unabomber*; and carbon copies of the *Unabomber*'s rambling manifesto, explaining the murders as part of a campaign against technology.

On trial in California, Mr Kaczynski is displaying the same hostility to the judicial process that *Camus*'s hero did. He has quarrelled with his lawyers, who wish to defend him by using arguments that Mr Kaczynski would never make himself He has delayed proceedings by asking to represent himself; he seems determined to have his own say in the courtroom. "My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion," Meursault tells the reader. Mr Kaczynski seems determined to avoid that bitterness.

The two outsiders have much in common. And yet the really interesting thing about them is a contrast between them: not a contrast in how they are, but in how they are perceived. *Camus* presents Meursault as a hero, the judicial process as a villain. Today, it is the other way around. The question currently asked about the Kaczynski trial is how a court can judge a madman. *Camus* preferred to ask how a mad (or at least a very bizarre) man might choose to judge a court.

It is easier to indulge a fictitious murderer, rather than a possibly gruesome real one with blood on his hands. But the Meursault-Kaczynski contrast is about more than this: it is a difference between then and now. Contemporary fiction does not make heroes out of mad outsiders, even though the theme of alienation is still around. Don DeLillo's new novel, "Underworld", dwells on the awfulness of technology (in this case, nuclear technology), a subject dear to the *Unabomber*'s heart. But, unlike *Camus*, Mr DeLillo offers no hero who rebels against the "system", only the modest hope that the paranoia spread by technology may be checked by love and art.

Equally, there have been times when real outsiders mocked the legal system and managed to look heroic In 1969 the Chicago Seven, on trial for violently demonstrating against the violence of war, turned the courtroom into an agit-prop theatre, a commercial for the counter-culture of the time. Abbie Hoffman blew kisses at the jurv; his co-defendants made speeches about peace and love. The New York Times depicted the judge as an arrogant despot, intent on punishing youthful ideals he was too bigoted to understand.

Today, with the exception of the militia fringes, nobody wants any longer "to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences", as the *Unabomber* put it in his manifesto. The "system" has become too flexible and tolerant to be worth rebelling against; it turns new ideas and trends into Tv shows, clothes labels, and other money-spinning schemes. True, America is plagued by political correctness. But you can work in a T-shirt, smoke grass, and write celebrated software programmes. You can abandon the rat race, live in Vermont, and make ecological ice-cream; and, if you are Ben & Jerry, you can be capitalist success stories at the same time.

This, of course, is fine: it is excellent that society is more broad-minded, excellent that rebellious instincts can be channelled in creative ways. Yet it is worth wondering what has been lost with the demise of outsider-heroes. If most Americans feel there is no point in rebelling against conventional measures of achievement, the pressure to succeed grows heavier. If you can no longer scorn the system, you are more likely to scorn yourself. Small wonder that Americans are both perfectionist and paranoid. They have no escape from the responsibility to live life to its fullest, which is a both a privilege and a burden.

And this sheds an intriguing sidelight on the *Unabomber* trial. Mr Kaczynski's lawyers wish, quite reasonably, to plead insanity on behalf of their client; after all, he has attempted suicide in prison, and his behaviour fits the patterns of schizophrenia. This has provoked the usual objections to insanity pleas: that lawyers and therapists have stretched the definition of madness until it excuses all manner of wrong. But there is a reason for this stretching. Now that most of them no longer rail against "the system", Americans lack a good explanation for destructive impulses: and so they attach clinical terms to them, from attentiondeficit disorder to road rage. Mental illness has become so broadly defined and so common that it has become meaningless-just as, some years earlier, counter-cultural rebellion became so common that it ceased to constitute rebellion at all.

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