

The Brave New World at Work: From the MeToo Movement to Donald Trump, Political Litmus Tests Transform the Workplace

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Abstract

Tactics of mobbing have a long history in both politics and the workplace, and the intersection of the two is nothing new. What is new is how swift, brutal, and public the shaming and shunning of coworkers and colleagues has become in recent years as social media transforms a difference in views into cause for social eradication. With the rise of authoritarian and exclusionary sentiments expressed by Donald Trump on the right, and ideological purity tests that drift into the realm of the goofy on the left, success in the workplace increasingly demands allegiance to a tribalism that will ultimately turn the workplace into a zone of silent surveillance controlled not by one's employer, but one's peers.

Keywords: *Mobbing, Conformity, Liberal, Conservative, Groupthink.*

Across the globe we watch as the world becomes increasingly polarized by politics. On the right, movements to banish whole groups of people based on their ancestry, religion, or nation of origin are gaining in local and national elections. These groups call for a return to a range of “traditions,” reflecting little understanding of just how eternally changing and culturally fluid most traditions are in any time or culture. Harking to a mythic past of stability and prosperity, all that’s wrong in the world is blamed on newcomers, new rights, and new ideas. Purge the nation of these newcomers, return men to the front of the line for jobs, education, and leadership, put women back in skirts and in the kitchen with a litter of kids to homeschool, and lock gays back in the closet where they’re only let out for song and dance acts and cutting our hair, and the world will be set right again, goes this logic of tradition.

The left has its own habit of virtue signaling, proscriptions and demands for compliance, ranging from banning the teaching of biological sex¹ to firing faculty for teaching Mark Twain.² Demands that transgender women be allowed to compete in women's sports (while transgender men have yet to win any competition in male athletics), the pronoun "they" be used upon demand, pronoun preference be included in professional communications, and firing or condemning people for views expressed decades earlier that don't conform to contemporary standards³ are commonplace. Calling for the removal of statues honoring Confederate leaders is one thing, demanding that public schools change their name if it includes Washington or Jefferson is, perhaps, a battle not worth waging. Condemning employers for requiring their employees to show up to work have been increasing since the pandemic brought remote work to the home, and in my own state of Washington landlords must now rent to tenants who have obtained, for just \$89.98, a permit indicating their beloved pet is an emotional support animal. (Fortunately, [airlines have drawn the line at emotional support peacocks](#), and [emotional support alligators can no longer fly Delta](#).) I've been told at both a community college and a liberal arts college to never give students a grade below a C whether they did the work or not because it would be a blow to their self esteem, and I was once hired by a liberal nonprofit to write a paper on resilience and got fired because I suggested resilience was an adaptive trait, not a psychologically damaging one.

All this is to say that it's unsurprising that cultural divides have increasingly widened to chasms, and these divides have become so politicized that the United States now totters precariously between a call for a tougher, rougher, kick-'em-out return to the mythic past where childless cat ladies are condemned, and a kinder, gentler, more joyous direction where men can cry and women can go to war and our kids can all buy houses.

To those of us living in the United States, we've seen how these divides have hit home. They've reached our communities, our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces, our corner bars and our homes, as one side rages against the other, casting blame, hurling insults and dehumanizing terms, and shunning people they once loved (the term on the left is "go no contact," NC for short, and is

¹ On January 20, 2023, [a biology professor at St. Philip's College in San Antonio, Texas was fired for teaching that X and Y chromosomes determine biological sex](#). He has since been reinstated. In June, 2023, [a University of Cincinnati student received a failing grade of 0 for using the term, "biological women"](#) in a paper about transgender athletes. Although her professor received a reprimand and she was permitted to use the term, the professor's reprimand was rescinded.

² [A professor at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York was fired in April, 2021](#) for reading from Twain's antislavery novel, Pudd'nhead Wilson. Although she contextualized the author's use of "the N word" before reading it, she was accused of violating the college's anti-bias policy. Despite apologizing to the class and attempting to have a discussion about the use of the word, after two decades with St. John's, she was reported to HR and investigated for ethics violations and fired.

³ A [Boeing Communications Executive was fired after a 33 year career for a paper he wrote in 1987](#) arguing that women should not serve in combat, despite asserting that he no longer holds that view.

considered a good thing.) We see and understand the fear that rises in our personal and professional lives as the divisions among us become all the more palpable, and the markers that identify us—the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the words we use—all the more meaningful. We've seen the way the right casts out the left, the way the left casts out the right. In terms of workplace or community mobbing, there's no end to the stories of conservative faculty being mobbed out the door by liberal faculty members, or liberal police officers or firefighters being mobbed out of their careers by their conservative colleagues. Entire professions are now marked by preferred political leanings. Public schools, higher education, nonprofits, social service agencies, and the entertainment industry are overwhelmingly liberal, while first responders, finance, military, agriculture, mining, and, ironically, Christian churches, are overwhelmingly conservative. You best know it before you sign on, or you risk being mobbed and expelled.

But having written about mobbing for many years now, what interests me about the issue is less how we expel those on the other side, than how and why we expel those on our own side. It's probably a safe bet to assume that most everyone reading the papers in this journal has been the target of workplace mobbing or, if not, has been affected by it in some disturbing way. That's because mobbing isn't something people give much thought to, much less care about, until and unless they've found themselves excluded, gossiped about, investigated, or abused by an ever-expanding web of coworkers who one by one join in the cruel behavior.

And as someone who has found myself such a target, and written a fair bit on the topic, I regularly hear from mobbing targets seeking help, or just seeking an explanation for the seemingly inexplicable patterned and predictable behavior that all too often appears to come from out of nowhere, as well as from people who ought to know better.

One common theme I've found in all I've read on the topic and from all the people who've contacted me, is that *mobbing is something commonly discussed in terms of being the target*. Yet far less discussed is *the many ways in which all of us—targets included—have engaged in mobbing behaviors or tactics ourselves* and exempted ourselves from blame because the target supposedly had it coming, or supposedly just had to go. And there's no clearer way to understand how this process unfolds than examining how our political and social ideas take shape in the age of social media.

It's in thinking about mobbing not just as something that happens *to* us, but as something that in certain ways we participate in, however unknowingly, that we become empowered to avoid and disengage from it. Contrary to assumptions that those who participate in mobbing are bad people (though some sure are), we can all engage in mobbing, or mobbing tactics, without even realizing that is what we're doing.

I've written elsewhere that those who are out to get you aren't likely to be your ultimate downfall so much as the ones you're closest to.⁴ That's because *it's the people on our own side of the fence who so imperceptibly shape our thinking*. We all like to think that we think for ourselves, and as academics, we especially pride ourselves on our critical thinking skills. But consider this. Whether you're on the left or the right, have you ever kept your mouth shut, or avoided writing on a topic, if it might reveal a difference of opinion with those you mostly agree with? Take, for example, the conservative who supports gay rights, or the right to an abortion. If that's you, do you feel comfortable saying so among your own kind? Or do you find yourself not expressing your views in public, and only behind closed doors and with your closest friends, as you dare to say you wish the right would ease up on the demonization of gays, of abortion, or immigrants?

Or might you be the liberal who thinks maybe children shouldn't be put on hormone blockers. Do you feel comfortable saying so among other liberals? Or maybe it's abortion you have some complicated feelings about, but fear if you bring up the topic, your liberal friends will pounce on you. Maybe you don't consider yourself racist but feel sometimes that label is too unjustly bandied about. But you keep your mouth shut.

We learn to conform. We learn to fall in step with our own group, and even when we disagree on this point or that point, we learn to either keep our mouths shut and not make an issue of the matter or, over time, we learn to change our minds and embrace the position of the majority. And we learn to keep an eye out for those who don't.

And that's where the workplace comes in. We know conservatives in academia are often mobbed out of their careers by liberal faculty and administration. And we know that liberal faculty at conservative colleges face the same threat, or progressive clergy can find themselves expelled from their church for defending liberal values—even when those values are consistent with the teachings of Christ. We understand that anything that marks us as different from the majority can make us a target of mobbing. Difference is key. If you differ from the majority, you're vulnerable.

But difference within our own kind is also key, a key to understanding how each of us contains the seeds of social aggression. I regularly hear from conservative firefighters or police officers or other professions where the majority is conservative, and they are stunned when they find themselves mobbed because they've questioned a single point in the MAGA agenda. They find themselves labeled traitors, accused of being liberals, when they do not view themselves as liberals at all. But because they departed in one small way *from the set of ideas* that they are expected to embrace when working in a conservative workplace, they are mobbed.

⁴ Harper, Janice (2010) "Just Us Justice: The Gentle Genocide of Workplace Mobbing," in *What Every Target of Workplace Bullying Needs to Know*, Edited by Anton Hout, available at <http://www.overcomebullying.org/workplace-bullying-book.html>.

And I regularly hear from liberals working in progressive nonprofits, working at universities, working in the media, a few working in Hollywood or mainstream entertainment, who find themselves targets because they embraced not the MAGA movement, but expressed one or two sentiments typically associated with conservatives. Perhaps they questioned some of the accusations made during the Me Too movement, but still considered themselves advocates for anyone sexually assaulted or harassed.⁵ Perhaps, like J. K. Rowling, they've expressed a difference of views about transgender women in women's locker rooms or competitive women's sports. Still viewing themselves as liberals, but having just expressed diverging views on one or two points, they may readily find themselves labeled enemies.

By deviating just the slightest from an entire set of ideas, conservatives are labeled liberals and liberals labeled conservatives. *Not for embracing a differing set of ideas, not for their genuine perspectives, but for expressing a single idea, or a few points of departure from the set of ideas their group has agreed on.*

When that happens they are mobbed out of jobs, cancelled from public spheres, and erased from their social circles. In J. K. Rowling's case, after writing an essay proclaiming support for transgendered people overall, but concerns about certain claims in the transgender movement, her own fan club removed any mention of her name, while continuing to celebrate the books and characters she created! There was no discussion of the points she raised, only a defense of erasing her, mocking her, demonizing her, and condemning her as a Transphobic TERF⁶. She now regularly receives death threats from liberals, just as conservatives Lynn Cheney and Adam Kinzinger regularly receive death threats from conservatives for not supporting Donald Trump.

It's easy to talk about how others act when we talk about mobbing. But if we reflect on our own actions, I think it's safe to assume that there isn't a one of us who hasn't distanced themselves from someone they concluded "Isn't one of us, after all" or who hasn't concluded someone is "changing" because they've published an article, expressed an idea, or otherwise challenged conventional thinking within their own ideological group. We've seen what happens to anyone in Republican politics who claims the election wasn't rigged, or condemned the violence of January 6th. And we've seen what happens to Democrats who support immigration reform, restrictions on hormone blockers for minors, or defend Israel. And it sure wasn't Republicans who ended Al Franken's career

⁵ I recall one well-renowned comedian who began sending me hate-emails for essays I wrote defending Woody Allen. When I countered that his colleague, Bill Cosby, had been accused of sexual assault by many women and those accusations sounded far more convincing, his hate emails became more hateful. It was only after he told me to have a nice life that a few months later, Cosby's crimes came to greater light, and we know how that turned out. But for this comedian, his virtue signaling in condemnation of Allen brought him accolades, whereas at the time so little had been said of Cosby that there was no social pressure for him to denounce his powerful colleague.

⁶ Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

over a staged comic photo from years past when he was working as a comedian, it was his fellow Democrats.

In my own case, some of the cruelest things said about me were not by those who mobbed me, but by those writing on this very topic. I discovered that by just questioning some of the assumptions, claims, and tactics of the anti-bully movement has had me labeled—by leading experts in the field of bullying—as “a stupid cow,” as “too damaged” by my own mobbing to be able to think clearly, as “an enemy” and that “it was understandable” that I was mobbed given my views—those literal words have appeared online about me by prominent antibully advocates.⁷ These were claims made about me from people who shared my concerns about workplace abuse, and who seemingly shared my progressive views. Yet those who made those claims didn’t feel in any way that what they were doing was bullying, much less mobbing once they circulated the claims on social media. Because they saw me as deserving of abuse and erasure, what they saw themselves doing was considered constructive because they were purging someone who didn’t belong.

Once we understand how this purging is justified by those who view themselves as doing good, it’s easier to understand how people we once worked with, cared about, and trusted, could be so cruel. It’s something we all do, given a certain context. As I’ve written in my book, *Mobbed!*⁸, it’s a primal thing. We are social creatures, and we depend on others to keep us safe. When someone we are close to turns on us, we feel betrayed—because that’s far more dangerous to us than someone we don’t know, or someone we aren’t aligned with, turning on us. To be betrayed by those in our own group puts our very survival at risk. It means we can be cast out—where we become prey without protection.

It’s because we can be cast out, that we learn to conform. We learn to conform what we say, what we think, and what we feel about others, to what the larger group that embraces us says and thinks and feels about others. We learn to silence our different views, lest we be cast out. And we learn to be suspicious of those who express different views, lest they pose a threat to the group, if not to ourselves and our position in the group. The colleague across the hall whose politics are wholly different from yours is not so much a concern, as the colleague right next door who shares your views but starts to question one or two ideas—it’s that colleague who we begin to view differently, who we might view as unwelcome.

⁷ After much protest on my part, these claims were deleted from their online platforms.

⁸ Harper, Janice (2013, revised 2016) *Mobbed! What to Do When They Really Are Out to Get You*. Seattle: Backdoor Press.

Thus it's helpful to understand the stages of this process of conformity. We don't automatically embrace a whole set of ideas that is consistent with others in the group. We align with them step by step, both in terms of political views, and in terms of how we fall in step with mobbing tactics.⁹

The first stage is Silencing, or what I like to call the Keep Your Mouth Shut stage. In this stage, we've sensed a building consensus regarding a political issue. Initially, we may debate the topic openly, but as a consensus on the topic builds, we learn to self-silence. We continue to express our views among those we are closest to, but eventually, even then, we learn to say little. For academics, this self-silencing also comes in the form of not writing on certain subjects, not touching that topic or idea with a ten foot pole so to speak.

The second stage is Acceptance. In this stage, we begin to mimic the views of those on our political team. We parrot the position of the group, we learn to defeat the arguments that reflect what once were our own views. We now get it. We were wrong. Now we're on board.

The final stage is Denouncement. This is the stage where we don't just defend our new position, but we call out anyone among us who dares express that "wrong," or heretical view. When we see it, when we hear it, when we fear it, we point to it, condemn it, and make it clear that the one expressing that view had better change their views and fast, or they are not on our side, they are on the other side. They've changed. They're no longer one of us. It's time to gossip.

Now I'm not suggesting that we don't naturally and in a healthy manner change our views; hopefully we do. What I'm suggesting is that the process of falling in line with political groupthink is much like the process of falling in line with the workplace mob. Conformity is a cognitive and social process we engage in for self-preservation. Conformity is a survival skill, it builds bonds, and these social bonds protect us, and I say this as a die-hard non-conformist. But understanding how and why humans engage in conformity, can help us to recognize it in ourselves, and recognize it in others—thus alerting us to the early stages of mobbing if it does ensue for whatever reason.

It's by turning our gaze from the perpetrators of mobbing to our own tendencies to engage in some of the tactics—gossip, distancing, labeling, accusing, shunning—that we can begin to better understand those who've caused us so much pain. Demonizing them as monsters, sociopaths, or evil doesn't help us to heal as much as understanding their humanity, and our own vulnerabilities not just as targets of mobbing, but as people who are ourselves imperfect. And it's that understanding that can help targets of mobbing to heal.

⁹ I'm using "we" because, as I contend here, even mobbing targets are not exempt from engaging in the very cruel tactics of mobbing against others, given the patterned progression of the process.

When we judge someone as deserving of our rejection for their views on social or political issues, we excuse what we do to reject them. The same is true in the workplace. When we judge someone as deserving of our rejection, whether for their social or political views, or some other reason, say, the trouble they're causing with administration, we excuse what we do to reject them. Yes, sometimes a coworker has to go. But in most cases, if they truly have to go, they won't be mobbed, because it won't be necessary. Mobbing becomes necessary when there isn't a legitimate reason to force them out, only when they've made someone uncomfortable (usually someone in a position of power). And in these highly politicized times, we're increasingly demanding that no one make us uncomfortable, that no one on the other side cause us any discomfort, and especially, no one on our own side cause us any discomfort by departing in any way from the consensus. The set of ideas must remain a set shared by all.

I began this essay by suggesting that mobbing is usually discussed in terms of ourselves as targets of mobbing, whereas I like to think about our own proclivities toward mobbing other people. My purpose in doing so is to promote healing and moving forward. I do not forgive those who mobbed me, though I know if I were of a higher spiritual order, that is what I ought to do. But by understanding how they came to view me with such animosity, and why they felt they were right to do so, I have been able to let go of the anger. I have been able to see that I myself am not much different—I have gossiped about colleagues, I have avoided people for reasons I can't even recall, I have responded affirmatively when employers asked me if I've had problems with this person or that person—not thinking I was participating in acts that could hurt them, but just thinking I was doing what was right at the time. So am I really any better than those who destroyed my career? I like to think I am, but had someone else been the target, had someone else been rumored to be stealing nuclear secrets, threatening students, building a bomb, and planning a preposterous killing spree, as I was accused, would I have acted any differently? I'll never know. But I do recall one childhood memory that has haunted me ever since I was mobbed.

There was a tall and skinny girl in elementary school with skin nearly albino white, buck teeth and a large mole or two on her face. Everyone said she had cooties. And I said it, too. Everyone screamed and ran when she approached. And I did, too. No one spoke to her. And I didn't either.

One day, we were lining up after recess to go back into the classroom. As always, no one would stand behind her in line. Everyone screamed and howled about the cooties, pushing each other toward her like a funny game. Then suddenly, as if in a flashback, a memory came flooding back to me, a memory I had completely forgotten as I'd joined the bullying crowd. This girl had once been my friend. We used to play at each other's houses. We used to cross the big football field that separated our streets and spend hours playing together. Her mom was really sweet to me. This tall and skinny girl with alabaster skin was kind and generous to me. How had I so quickly wiped that entire experience, that friendship, from my mind?

I courageously announced that I would stand behind her in line, and I did, both proud of my selflessness, and ashamed of how I'd acted. But it was too late. I'd never be her friend again. She was

understandably done with me. And a couple of years later, I'd be the target of the schoolyard bullying myself. But one thing that memory has taught me. *We are all of us susceptible to the conformity of cruelty that constitutes mobbing.* And when we are mobbed, it's not the relationship we once had with our colleagues that they'll remember. It's the identity mobbing stamps on us. We're not the ones who worked alongside them, laughed, and bitched, and shared drinks or dinners after work. We're not the ones who share the same values, have the same dreams. We're the ones with cooties. That's what they'll remember about us. We're the ones who changed. We're the ones who turned against them. We're the ones who became the problem.

It's up to us to remember the humanity they showed before things turned ugly. It's up to us to remember them as good people, who got swept up in the hysteria. And it's up to us to remember that the liberal beside us, or the conservative beside us, needs room to differ, needs room to question, and needs room to challenge our views and ideas whatever they may be, without fearing that doing so will cast them from the social circle and label them enemies. It's the only way that we can begin to bridge this divide that is tearing apart our country. Not by making room for the other side so much. But by making room for our side, to express difference, nuance, confusion, and doubt. It's not by demanding allegiance that we'll be safer and saner. It's by refusing to demand it.

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Janice Harper is a writer, educator and cultural anthropologist whose work has been frequently featured in *The Huffington Post* and *Psychology Today*. Her writing extends to food, cooking, art, humor and memoir where her entertaining voice and story-telling skills are at their best. Her unique and insightful writings on mobbing have received international acclaim, particularly her influential book *Mobbed! What to Do When They Really Are Out to Get You*.

