

On Mobs

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When, in June 2022, the philosopher and former *Point* columnist Agnes Callard considered the possibility that she might one day be “canceled” in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, she predicted that such an attempt would have one of two causes: either she would write something offensive or she would exhibit a personal failing. Her prophecy came true on both accounts, though doubtless not in the way she anticipated.

In a tweet posted on November 1st, Callard confessed to throwing away her children’s Halloween candy each year after they go to bed. Though Halloween was over, it quickly became clear that the ghouls and goblins had yet to slink off to their graves. Thousands of Twitter users descended upon Callard. Her tweet, they insisted, was very offensive, and hinted at deeper personal defects. They massed in her mentions and quote-tweets to condemn her parenting, dredge up rumors about past domestic affairs (never mind what effect *that* might have on her children), speculate about her sex life and evaluate her personal appearance. Some took it upon themselves to contact her employer, the University of Chicago, and demand that she be fired. After receiving a death threat over the phone, Callard had to file a police report. “You should have seen the policeman’s face when I explained why ppl were after me,” she wrote to us in private correspondence.

Callard’s friends, the authors of this letter among them, observed the convulsions of the mob in horror, but what were we to do about it? If we respected Callard’s own request: nothing. “If I am being canceled,” she wrote in her op-ed, “I want my friends—and this includes not only my closest associates but any people who consider themselves friendly to me—to stand by, remain silent and do nothing.” The reason, she argues, is that to oppose a mob is merely to form a counter-mob—and a mob of any kind, regardless of its constituents or commitments, is anathema to public thoughtfulness.

Callard’s position is a common one among philosophers, who, ever since Socrates warned of “the great, strong beast,” have regarded the unthinking masses with suspicion. By Callard’s lights, swift withdrawal is the only cure for a mob attack. Preparing for the “cancellation” that ultimately befell herx, she preemptively asked sympathizers to stand back: “If you care about me,” she urged, “let them eat me alive.”



Wherever did she get the idea that they wanted to *eat* her?

The figure of the zombie—originating in myths about reanimated human bodies in Haitian folklore—started haunting the Western popular imagination only in the twentieth century. Until video games began introducing quick-moving zombies in the late 1990s, the species tended to amble. Once they gained speed, however, the zombies came into their own, and the image of the lightning-fast mass of bodies that threatens to destroy everything in its path emerged as a remarkably fitting allegory for the power and danger of the mob.

The zombie swarm demonstrates the immense power of group action, and, as such, it is as awe-inspiring as it is terrifying. Literally or in effect dead—requiring no sustenance,

shelter or sociability—each discrete creature is animated by a desire for only one thing: living human flesh. Even as they rot away, the mere prospect of advancing closer to their target is enough to incite them to plunge off a cliff or clamber up a growing pile of bodies, only to be crushed in the process. Never pausing to coordinate their actions, they are nonetheless able to surmount nearly any obstacle before them; since every defeated individual is forced to join them, to oppose them is always to run the risk of rendering them stronger.

It is easy to imagine why the figure of the zombie resonated so strongly with twentieth-century Western audiences, who increasingly learned to fear the destructive potential of “the masses,” whether in the form of fascist crowds or conformist consumers. To these familiar threats, we can add another: that of the online mob. The basic characteristics of this new entity remain unaltered: here, too, individuals seem to lose themselves. Setting aside their customary timidity, their desire to distinguish themselves by means of original ideas or gestures, their ordinary habit of critical reflection and their usual inclination to express some modicum of respect for their fellows, they become aggressive, impatient with opposition and, most conspicuously, indistinguishable from one another. In the swarm, the contours of individual thinkers are hard to make out.

Zombies are brought about by magic and pathogens, but what drives real human beings to lose themselves in the mob? “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown,” writes Elias Canetti in his 1960 monument of poetic anthropology, *Crowds and Power*. Under normal circumstances, this fear drives us to lock ourselves in our homes, to keep our distance from others in the street, in the restaurant, on the bus or train. Only in a crowd does this all-consuming fear let up. There we no longer notice, or mind, who is touching us; ordinary distinctions no longer matter. Hence the unique pleasure of dissolving into the crowd. This pleasure, as Canetti observes, is bound up with a distinct danger: “With the lifting of these burdens of distance,” the individual “feels free,” and “his freedom is the crossing of these boundaries. He wants what is happening to him to happen to others too; and he expects it to happen to them.” The mob always wants to grow.

“The crowd particularly likes destroying houses and objects,” Canetti writes, invading personal spaces and violating the “generally established and universally visible and valid distances.” Smashing windows and doors, publicizing a target’s phone number and address, dredging up their personal history and encouraging others to contact their employers: these are all ways to remove the boundaries protecting others from the attacking mob.

The significance of the crowd to the individuals within it—as the only possible reprieve from the burdens of individuality, vulnerability and hierarchy—renders opposing it largely futile, as Canetti observes:

One of the most striking traits of the inner life of a crowd is the feeling of being persecuted, a peculiar angry sensitiveness and irritability directed against those it has once and forever nominated as enemies. These can behave in any manner, harsh or

conciliatory, cold or sympathetic, severe or mild—whatever they do will be interpreted as springing from an unshakable malevolence, a premeditated intention to destroy the crowd, openly or by stealth.

In the movies, the characters who try to outrun or outpunch the horde are pummeled, trampled and zombified in short order. The monsters are not only more robust than their flimsy human opponents, but they have the additional advantage of proving too insensate to care about the prospect of their own destruction. When a mob assembles, no one pauses to worry whether they are just as vulnerable as the quarry of the hour, or may find themselves on the receiving end of the barrage the next day: the only thing that matters is the rhythm of the pile-on, the likes amassing with every refresh, the flurry of retweets, the jovial whirl of agreement, the oozing of the self into a bigger body.

Even a mild first brush with the Twitter zombies taught Callard that “every act of defense and every show of loyalty served to keep the fight alive. This explains the curious fact that for all the fighting people do against cancellation, no cancellee ever vanquishes her cancelers.” We cannot, she observed correctly, hope to dissolve a mob by resorting to its native methods. Even if we managed to summon a larger or more vicious crowd—and whether those public intellectuals could ever succeed in drumming up an army is dubious—we have already lost if we have accepted the terms of the swarming. To defeat a zombie on the battlefield, it would be necessary to become a zombie. Is our only option, then, to hide until the zombies have run out of people to eat?



We are Callard’s friends, and yet here we are, ignoring her injunction. Why? Because we do not believe that the only way to meet the challenge posed by zombies is to remain silent or passively await the next attack. Callard is right that “within the mob there is no justice and no argument and no reasoning, no space for inquiry or investigation,” but she is wrong to infer that “the only good move is not to play.” No matter how apparently deserving their targets, mobs always present a potentially deadly threat to open-minded exchange. But that doesn’t mean we are powerless to make any moves on behalf of public thoughtfulness in advance. Preparing for the next onslaught, we must instead learn how to play a different game: the game of mutual humanization. But how do we know when we are playing that game?

A special difficulty attends contemporary attempts to call out a mob: any such criticism can seem to leave no room for the collective thinking and acting that are at the heart of democratic life. No doubt, it’s easy for collective thinking and acting to resemble and, indeed, devolve into swarming (especially online), but the danger implicit in any joint endeavor is no more a reason to avoid groups than the possibility of monstrosity is a reason to avoid other people. Instead, it is a reason to take care in clarifying what distinguishes communal reasoning from its ugly cousin.

One type of collective thinking and acting frequently mistaken for a mobbing is public conversation. The exchange of claims and reasons can persuade many participants in a dialogue of a common view, prompting them to voice shared moral judgments. The public outcry over the University of Pennsylvania professor Amy Wax's disparaging remarks about students of color convinced her academic community to take formal action. Art historians, journalists and Islamic scholars publicly debated, and then overwhelmingly condemned, the decision of the Hamline University president to fire an adjunct professor of art history for showing her class a work of art featuring the Prophet Muhammad. (A decision the university is, as of the time of writing, "reconsidering.")

In isolation, we converge on the same opinions only accidentally. In a mob, we voice the same conclusions because we defer to others or because we ape them, or because we are afraid of what might happen if we don't. There are no "shared" views, merely views that are replicated, like a virus multiplying. In a public conversation, we correct and challenge each other, so it is no stroke of fortuity when we find ourselves in accord—and the accord we reach together testifies not just to the sheer number of people demanding the same thing, but to the persuasive power of the position they jointly advocate.

The second sort of communal reasoning that can superficially resemble mobbing is collective action—disruptive or impolite behavior in the service of particular goals, strategic affronts to what is sometimes called "respectability politics." Examples include everything from unions striking to improve workplace conditions to authors staging coordinated campaigns to ensure that a bookstore pays its employees higher wages and citizens arresting traffic by staging protests against police brutality. Thoughtful collective actions like these are not indiscriminate in their targets or methods: each lambastes its nemeses in their public or institutional capacity, and each chooses its marks not because they have been "nominated forever as enemies" (in Canetti's words) but because they are responsible for a concrete policy in want of change. Erecting an inflatable rat sculpture outside the boss's house is to target him as a *boss*, not as a private person.

Of course, co-reasoners voicing an objection in tandem may still be wrong about it. A commitment to collective reasoning does not yield infallibility. What it yields instead is humility—and humanity. When we see each other as agents capable of conversation, we also see the objects of our criticism as fellow thinkers, trying to work out what is best and how best to pursue it, just like us. Accordingly, co-reasoners tend to adduce reasons for their opprobrium, refraining from delving cruelly and needlessly into their target's private life or from associating present moral failures with past irrelevant ones. Condemnation of an action that in fact merits censure need not spiral into a free-for-all without justification or end point. To reason with or act with someone—and even to reason and act so as to correct someone—is necessarily to regard her as something more than a body to be mobilized or scrambled over on the way toward tastier flesh: it is to regard her as a fellow human being.



In the 2013 film *World War Z*, the entire globe is overrun by what are probably the fastest zombies imagined to date. Searching for patient zero and, hopefully, a cure, Brad Pitt hops from one more or less nondescript zombie-infested area to another. For a moment, he seems to find a haven in Israel, which has preemptively established a safe zone under the cover of a towering wall. Perhaps this is where humanity might survive? But the wall is no match for the crazed zombies. In one of the most visually arresting moments in the movie, the monsters, drawn by the sound of joyous singing on the other side of the barrier, begin to fling themselves against it, and then to climb, using one another as rungs in a dark and writhing ladder. Within minutes, a decomposing arm appears at the top of the wall; next, a body comes flying down to the other side.

Having learned that no wall is high enough to keep the zombies out, Pitt observes that there is one group that the zombies refuse to target: the terminally ill. He wonders: What if humans were to infect themselves with a deadly but curable virus? The solution requires co-reasoning and cooperation. In a sequence that must not have had the resonance when it was released that it has since acquired, Pitt rushes to coordinate injections across the world. Callard might worry that he is just creating a new zombie army, but we think otherwise. The people who injected themselves with the experimental virus, Pitt first among them, had good reason to do so, despite the risks. They were endeavoring to create a new public, one capable of walking among the zombies with their humanity intact.

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