

The Rage to Control: Towards a Comparative Approach to Bullying as a Symptom of
Inoperative Communities

The phenomenon of bullying is no longer restricted to observations of children and adolescent. It has become the object of public awareness that bullying extends from the age and institutional space of compulsory education to the professional workplace of adults and even the arena of international relations. What has happened? Is it that more and more adults fail to reach 'maturity' and thus carry juvenile behaviour patterns into adulthood? And can statesmen (and states) be said to engage in such recognizably childish behaviour while ostensibly pursuing the serious business of diplomacy and politics? Or have social scientists merely recognized a disturbing continuum of bullying that has too many similarities to playground politics to be ignored or otherwise dubbed as 'normal'. Whether one chooses to see professional workers and states as overgrown children or children as micro-adults, the discourse on bullying in the workplace and in all areas of human relations has developed and claims both our attention to its reality as well as our responsibility to deal with it.

What that means is that once we recognize the injustice and harm of bullying, and admit it has no place in civil (and civilised) human relations, we cannot just accept it. We are, or should be, impelled to respond in a way that would end bullying and restore equitable and ethical relations. In the schoolroom and playground, this responsibility falls to the teacher, with the aid of other institutional figures, possibly also the children's parents, and, if necessary, social services. At this stage of life, the effort is to understand the underlying causes, psychological and social, that have led to the bullying. The bully is identified, comes into scrutiny and the adult support mechanisms aim at 'curing' the child or adolescent of this aggressive tendency. Attention is also paid to the victim or target of the bully; what leads to being made a target and how to overcome and deal with the experience of being targeted as well as how to avoid, whenever and however possible, becoming a bully's target. However

in influential studies focusing on bullying at school, the approach does not exclude a consideration of the crucial role played by the third party: i.e. the rest of the group in the environment of the bully and target.¹ Although the literature on the subject has also recognized that part of this group may in fact be colluding with the bully and so also actively participating in bullying the same target(s); what has been called ‘mobbing’ still considers that there is a main bully figure, who gives ‘activates’ the rest.

Despite the invaluable understanding gained by the studies of bullying that focus on the two main figures of the phenomenon (bully and victim), here I would like to propose that the phenomenon of bullying relies for its persistence on the toleration of the community/group in which it takes place. Toleration, in the case of bullying, is not merely to be understood as a weakness or limitation of the institutional contexts of liberal societies, but especially as a stance resulting from one or more of a number of variables, such as fear, indifference, individualism, autonomy of agents in an institutional setting, personal interest, vicarious pleasure, repressed desire to bully, personal dislike of the victim/target, inability to judge for oneself, lack of knowledge (much bullying is hidden). Of these, the most insidious is the feature of enjoyment and attraction to power, which also underlies the frequent mutation of bullying into mobbing. Mobbing transforms the individualistic rage for control of a bully into the ‘power-share’ of an unofficial ruling clique, that seek to ‘normalise’ domination sought via Machiavellian stratagems while also isolating and even scapegoating the target. As a result, the causes listed above for the remaining members of a group/community choosing to tolerate, ignore or turn a blind eye may be reinforced, leading to the perpetuation of the phenomenon—even beyond the ‘elimination’ of the target—to extend to any other existing member or newcomer, who may fail to ‘pay due heed to’ or otherwise seem to challenge the bully and/or power-wielding clique. In their unique and

¹ I am referring to the distinguished work of the Norwegian psychologist, Dr. Dan Olweus, whose successful bullying prevention program for schools also takes into consideration, and tries to involve, the bystanders.

carefully documented study, *Faculty Incivility*, Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. De Luca find that ‘Aggressive behavior that is legitimized through approval or indifference will be replicated and eventually inculcated because the risk of punishment is low or nonexistent. The uncivil behaviour becomes more self-regulated and normative’.² While it may often go unnoticed by those who have been long accustomed to an academic bully culture —having either isolated themselves in a ‘safety cocoon’ or having embraced the normative practice as ‘yes’ men/women to the main bully/bullies— it does not go unnoticed to some: ‘new entrants and subversives who have not fully embraced the culture’.³

While the phenomenon of bullying, the ‘profile’ of the bully and the ‘usual suspects’ for targets have surprising similarities in any given professional setting, my choice to concentrate attention on the academe may appear surprising. ‘Most outsiders to academe believe the university is a serene environment where scholars pursue a life of the mind. In fact, for some, academe is likely to be chilly, unreceptive, limiting, and contentious’.⁴ In any workplace though, the relations between people is not typically one of friendship or intimacy, and thus not personal; they are governed by a set of official but also tacit rules of behaviour. These rules aim to maintain civility and to facilitate work production. The academe is typical in that sense yet contains two other features that need to be emphasized: individual members of staff function in a highly individualistic mode for the production of research (in research-oriented institutions); the same members must collaborate on a great number of issues concerning self-governance and pedagogy. The first feature favours competitiveness, self-

²²Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. De Luca, *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It*. San Fransisco,CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 50

³ Twale and de Luca, *Faculty Incivility*, p. 96. The authors are referring to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁴ Twale and deLuca, *Faculty Incivility*,p. 112. I would add that this is especially the belief of those from the lower economic or working class, the ‘oblates’, as Bourdieu calls them (identifying himself amongst them as indeed does the author of this paper), whose ‘disappointment’ is therefore greater when ‘faced with the annihilation of the truths and values to which [they] were destined and dedicated’ (Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*. Trans. Peter Collier. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, p. Xxvi. First published by Les Editions de Minuit, 1984)

absorption and autonomy;⁵ the second feature requires co-operation, attunement to others and a sense of community. In disciplines where collaboration in the production of research is rare, such as in the humanities, the schizoid split between these two modes of functioning can be even more pronounced.

In order to appreciate the factors which may inhibit or delay appropriate action by the victim/target but also those in academic and/or administrative roles to stop bullying, it is worth having a brief overview of some typical bullying methods. ‘Masterful aggressors can use their social network and role opportunities to indirectly express anger and incivility by taking a circuitous route to conceal their behaviors so as not to be detected or linked back to the aggression or the victim’.⁶ The evidence gathered shows that when such an attempt is made, for instance by a victim, who will typically be more active in trying to find the origin of the continual aggression, then any attempt to confront or expose the bully (and mob) will only lead to increased bullying, with the aim of forcing them to leave the institution (either by their quitting or refusing them tenure). Twale and de Luca note that both the literature on the structure and functioning of academe as well as their own empirical data reveal a plethora of hidden ways in which power can be abused successfully.⁷

Quite apart from the institutional setup that may foster the abuse of power and let bullying and bad feeling fester, there is undeniable agency in the act of bullying and mobbing for which an individual is responsible and should be accountable. If there were solely structural causes, though I certainly do not mean to underplay their significance, then everyone would be a bully and we would have neither targets nor ‘bystanders’.

⁵⁵ See especially Twale & De Luca, pp. 60-61.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁷ See Chapter Four in Twale & De Luca, ‘Motivating Structures and Processes: Academic Organization and Governance Structure’, pp. 69-92.

I will leave this for the moment (to pick up in the discussion perhaps) in order to look at the profile given by Daniel Goleman to what he calls ‘the dark triad’ of sociopathic personality disorders: the narcissist, the Machiavellian and the psychopath.⁸ All three share a lack of empathy, see others merely as objects to manipulate and use in order to augment their grandiosity, achieve their power ambitions or satisfy their needs. Yet, although each represents a form of sociopathic disorder—a reduced social intelligence, in which Goleman has factored in emotional intelligence also—they form a continuum of increasing potential of harm to others. The most significant difference in social terms is probably the fact that, as Goleman illustrates, the first two are likely to move legitimately and even gain significant success in the professional world; the Machiavellian thrives in highly competitive professional environments, undetected in his/her manoeuvrings by virtue of cunning charm and a purely cognitive sense for others’ psychology that enables manipulation. Yet they also have a diminished and confused sense of their own emotions, mixing up anger with sadness, for instance. Goleman bases his arguments of *true* social intelligence (as opposed to a superficial social savvy) on the ability to empathize, to attune oneself to others’ feelings and feel *with* them; this is in line with much recent psychology and recent advances in the study of brain activity, particularly social neuroscience.⁹

Such studies in the field of social neuroscience and social psychology supplement Twale & de Luca’s study of bullying in academia (as also they would for other studies of bullying, mobbing or harassment), leading us from an awareness and appreciation of the extent of the phenomenon and its reliance on social and institutional structures and cultures, to an understanding of the subjective psychology of the agents; individuals evincing either a

⁸ See Daniel Goleman, Chapter Eight, ‘The Dark Triad’, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. London: Arrow Books, 2007, pp. 117-132.

⁹ See Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, Part One, ‘Wired to Connect’, pp.3-101. See also ‘Forget Survival of the Fittest: It is Kindness that Counts’, an interview with Dacher Keltner, director of the Social Interaction Laboratory at the University of California and author of *Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life* (W.W. Norton, 2009), by David DiSalvo in *Scientific American Mind*, September-October 2009, pp. 18-19.

narcissistic or Machiavellian disorder will surely take advantage of and possibly enjoy impunity or even reward in that kind of institutional culture. Indeed, it is not only that the 'hidden spaces' in the institutional structure encourage the emergence of, and nurture these disorders, what is more problematic is that they thus establish themselves perhaps in an open though unofficial manner as *the culture of the institution*, making it increasingly difficult to stop or reverse the downward ethical spiral of the workplace, even if it purports or aims to be an exemplary citadel of the community of knowledge. Considering the intolerance shown to 'upstarts' who question the values (or lack thereof) of such a milieu, it is not difficult to see how such a transformation or 'take over' can become total and therefore normative.

All of this leads to a very obvious argument on the necessity for the community of others –those not directly affected by the bullying- to assert their presence and take a stance as soon as possible; neither the narcissist nor the Machiavellian would dare to risk their professional success (both being extraordinarily self-oriented as well as success-oriented) or their sense of their power and prestige by going too far in the abuse of others. The fear of being detected, exposed or even punished would suffice as a deterrent for these types of disorder –unlike the psychopath who chiefly is distinguished by a complete disregard for consequences. The bully, as it has always been known to all schoolteachers, likes to act when it is safe to do so; hence the choice of target being typically too weak to defend him/herself, either by inclination (non-aggressive), by inferior physical strength or by lack of allies (newcomers or foreigners being prime targets). Therefore, for adults to 'turn a blind eye' professing 'neutrality', is really in fact to side with the bully; this may not be how they feel, but it certainly will appear so to the bully and mob, and will not offer much consolation to the victim. Bullying may have its origin in subjective, psychological shortcomings, but it is a phenomenon that occurs in the social world. As such, everyone is always already involved. Ethical action certainly involves close observation as well as judicious analysis of each

situation before acting; having social intelligence certainly helps in making a decision as to what is happening. However, the body of knowledge available now, of what is a widespread phenomenon of psychological and social violence, leading in not a few cases to illness or suicide, makes the ethical responsibility of each witness inalienable.

Although the brevity of this paper does not allow me to pursue at length the analogy between the schoolyard, the workplace and international relations, the following remarks are made in the hope of instigating further thought and discussion. In the realm of larger group politics and international politics, there is a chillingly famous dictum, often reiterated as a poem, of the excuses made by non-targeted communities when others are persecuted:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me--
and there was no one left to speak out for me.¹⁰

Not so long ago, sovereign states were in their legitimate rights to do what they wanted with their populations: displacements, massacre, liquidation; there was no word to designate it as a crime, no international law to prohibit it; the world community of states looked on, perhaps cared, but could do nothing; many of course were guilty of not a few of their own crimes against their colonised peoples. Then, after a decades-long struggle begun by a young law student in another country, and after the horrors of the holocaust, genocide was recognized and described as an international crime. It re-occured, most spectacularly and gruesomely in Rwanda. However, before any violence breaks out, before any massacre, there is the preparation, through propaganda and on the most simple, interpersonal and quotidian level by

¹⁰ Attributed to Martin Niemöller. For a discussion concerning the poem and its attribution, see Harold Marcuse's web-page: <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/niem.htm>. Accessed 14 October 2009.

those who seek control over another, who have a rage to control and gain power. This is not to simply or blithely ignore the histories, economic and political structures and influences that make fertile ground for violence to erupt. Yet the violence is also always personal because it is embodied. In the I-You relation when ethical relationality fails, the third person is needed to recognize injustice and prevent violence; this third person, is designated by Levinas as the figure of the polis, of the state and the law.¹¹ Rather than stand like a Greek chorus in a tragedy, a mere witness to events, only capable of reflecting on it either in prospective fear or after the event, they must recognize their situatedness in a shared social space is an undeniable ethical responsibility; the responsibility to respond, to speak out, to act.

In the days when universities and research centres did not aim to monopolize the production and dissemination of knowledge and critical reflection, the academe was seen as stuffy, dusty and overconservative by leading contributors to the virtual Republic of Letters. Nowadays, when ‘competition has replaced collegiality’, any invocation, if it even occurs, of a community of scholars, refers only to a defined, delimited architectural space. Yet in acquiring a space, social and economic currency and a rulebook, the ghost of the older Republic’s ideal ethical and egalitarian community does not let today’s institutionalised scholars rest in peace. What plagues them?

The choice of the academe as a focus for this paper, with special reference to the humanities, is one that recognizes the critical function that universities seek to embody within society at large. It is only in the last hundred years that scientific activity has become entirely professionalised and institutionalised, while it is only after WWII that those who are concerned with the historical, philosophical and, in general, critical theoretical reflection on

¹¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: The Athlone Press, 1998). First published as *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Editions Bernard Grasset et Fasquelle, 1991; See also Catherine Chalié, *Levinas: l'utopie de l'humain*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1993, pp. 115-124.

society have become increasingly absorbed by the institutional and professorial role of teacher and researcher in universities and higher education establishments. Thus, when bullying takes place amongst such professionals of the sciences and humanities in these institutions, we are faced with the awkward and unseemly paradox of individuals well-versed in the modern rhetoric of rights, justice, intellectual property, autonomy, freedom, or even dissent and revolutionary change, who use this rhetoric to cover up their more Machiavellian behaviour, while their research identities serve very well to absolve them (in their own eyes foremost but also to others) of any suspicion of contradictory quotidian ethics. Yet this is precisely the discourse to which we all must have recourse to or fall silent in the face of injustice and wrongdoings. The struggles of myriad thinkers, who were active agents of social reform and revolution are in this way either devalued by doubt and ambiguity or, what is worse, reduced to both a marketable good for one's one self-promotion and a universal disclaimer of misbehaviour. It is perhaps no wonder that this abuse of power and of discourse has alienated many, outsiders or not, from those who serve the establishments of either the academy or the state.

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