



VIOLENT MOBS



Like most Americans on January 6, 2021, I couldn't believe what I witnessed—the mob that stormed the United States Capitol. It took days to process. Well, “days” isn't quite right. I'm still working on it.

What. The. Hell?

It got me thinking...what were those humans thinking? Politics aside, *WERE* they thinking?! Do humans in a violent mob think?

- Many of the humans who stormed the capitol were pro-police...and yet they assaulted the police.
- Many of the humans who stormed the capitol were vocal about fighting to “save the country”...and yet they desecrated some of our country's most sacred grounds.
- Many of the humans who stormed the capitol somehow didn't think that because they weren't wearing masks they were *super* easy to identify (and later arrest).

Maybe mobs aren't the problem, though. Maybe the motivations *behind* the mobs are the problems. To know more, and to continue trying to make sense of it all, I started digging.



HERD MENTALITY



“Herd mentality” is a thing. Turns out, the cycle is predictable:

1. I’ve been done wrong!
2. I’m pissed!
3. I’m going to join others!
4. WE have been done wrong! (group solidarity)
5. WE are going to show you! (when individual values give way to group principles and violence often occurs)

We saw this in early 2021, and we’ve seen it throughout history. To learn more from a psychological perspective, I turned to **Dr. Teyhou Smyth** (pronounced TAE-who Smithe)—Performance Coach, Adjunct Professor of Psychology at [Pepperdine University](https://www.pepperdine.edu/), Keynote Speaker, and Licensed Therapist at [livingwithfinesse.com](https://www.livingwithfinesse.com).

Q&A WITH DR. SMYTH

DISCLAIMER: *Dr. Smyth’s specialty is not mob violence. Her expertise is clinical psychology.*

PS: To understand violent mobs, it seems like you have to understand anger, and you wrote eloquently about “justified anger” and “chronic anger” in your [Thrive Global article in 2020](#). What’s the difference?



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By Teyhou Smyth

DR. SMYTH: Anger activates the part of the brain that motivates us to act, and it's often based on unacknowledged emotions and feelings. Or fear. But unacknowledged feelings get internalized, creating anxiety and even depression, and they can result in very extreme emotions. You feel like you've been wronged, so your anger feels justified.

Keep in mind, we're not born angry. Anyone I've worked with who has had anger management issues has experienced traumatic events. Those events, combined with feeling underserved and not represented over time can lead to cult-like groups. If underserved, cult members connect with each other, igniting a movement, and they get angry together. Like we always say: if you manifest it, you attract it. Angry people attract angry people, which gives anger more power.

PS: Were you surprised to see the crowd become violent on January 6, 2021?

DR. SMYTH: I was surprised to see how far and quick the crowd was able to advance, which sadly is the result of built-up anger and fear.

Cults recruit specific people, going after those who are disconnected from other communities, who are often outraged, and who have those unacknowledged feelings. They get brainwashed into believing things that may not be true...and can result in followers being willing to die for those beliefs. Suicide bombers are extreme examples, martyring themselves for religious beliefs. It's really an outcry for help.

So getting a large number of communities like that together creates a camaraderie, sadly sometimes a destructive camaraderie.

Also, keep in mind, responses like what we've seen recently are fear based. People are afraid. They're afraid for their health, keeping their jobs, a new administration, and change in general. People don't like change. So add some fear-based, violent rhetoric and leadership to the mix and there will be violence.

PS: And the recruiting process has become easier these days, right?

DR. SMYTH: Recruiting for that community has been facilitated by online platforms. It's become so easy to target people with similar characteristics.

PS: What about the planning aspect? With angry mobs, there apparently doesn't have to be a plan with a desired outcome.

DR. SMYTH: No. Not necessarily...groups of people who are angry and interested in being violent want to cause disruption. That's really the plan: disrupt and destruct. That is success.



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PS: Makes sense. Talk about how people describe violent mobs as having almost a palpable energy. What is that?

DR. SMYTH: I am not a mob specialist, but I can tell you groups of people are powerful. The energy you've heard described, that I've certainly experienced in smaller settings, is connection. Humans connect. It's why a lot of therapists and institutions prefer group therapy settings. When people come together, an energy happens and it can be positive or negative.

PS: And the leader is important?

DR. SMYTH: The leader is critical. Most groups, certainly angry groups, are led by a charismatic person who unites the followers around a belief. And all of them have had pivotal moments in life that shape who they are. The result can be positive or negative.

AND SO

Even just a little amount of research finds that protests and community togetherness *can* be healthy exercises. Peaceful.

PS: What happens when there's more peaceful leadership?

DR. SMYTH: There's more of a balanced message of hope and peace.

As I ended my conversation with Dr. Smyth, I couldn't help comparing Trump's "march" in DC in January 2021 to The 1963 Great March on Washington, led by [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) That march drew 200,000-300,000 people (Trump's drew 20,000; I'm not comparing crowd sizes, here...just setting the scene to bring this story in for a smooth landing.)

Clearly, tragic outcomes can happen with smaller numbers (A). The opposite is true as well: everlasting, powerful, peaceful outcomes can happen with King size numbers (B).



Unresolved issues, anger, and fear...stir it all together, add numbers, and top it off with a charismatic leader who's talking angry talk and you got yourself a violent mob.

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By Teyhou Smyth

Anyone wanna talk about any unacknowledged stuff?

ABOUT DR. TEYHOU SMYTH

Dr. Teyhou Smyth is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (#115137) focusing on Emotion-Focused Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy. She believes that **everyone is able to access their full potential so that they may become the best version of themselves.**



She is currently an Adjunct Professor at Pepperdine Graduate School of Education & Psychology in Malibu, California.

Originally from the United Kingdom, Teyhou earned her B.A in Psychology from the University of Southern California and completed an M.A. in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Dr. Teyhou went on to complete a second Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy at the California School of Professional

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Dr. Smyth places a high value on personal development and wellness allowing for the achievement of one's full potential. Her practice, [Living with Finesse](#), focuses on stress management, corporate burnout, and achieving better work/life balance for high functioning professionals.