Mobile vulgus – The "Excitable Crowd"

I love language, or more specifically words. In my case it is English words, or, if you must, American English. Depending on which authority you ask, and how the question is posed, there are easily over half a million words in the English language. By age 60, most American adults should have learned approximately 40,000 words, referred to as a "passive" vocabulary, while using only half (20,000) that many, called an "active" vocabulary. Because of the many other languages that make up our English, the meaning of English words, and their history (etymology) can be fascinating.

Take, for instance, the word *mob*. The word itself is an abbreviation, which is a common trait in English. We Americans love to abbreviate or "clip" words. The word *mob* came to be in the 1680s, and meant "a disorderly part of the population, rabble, common mass, the multitude, especially when rude or disorderly; a riotous assemblage,". It was a slang shortening of the Latin word *mobile*, *mobility* "common people, populace, rabble", probably with a conscious play on the word *nobility*, and had originated from Latin *mobile vulgus* "fickle common people", sometimes also referred to as the "excitable crowd.".

It was not long after the word became part of the lexicon of its day, and the common people put it into practical use in order to obtain their demands, that the colonials (that would be us proto-Americans) decided to let King George III know that his divine status was less so, and "We the People" told him where to get off. That was in that famous July of 1776. But do you want to guess who the writers of that "Dear George" letter feared more than George himself? You guessed it. The mob. You see, George was a month and a half's boat ride away from receiving word of our dissatisfaction; and the founders were another month and a half away from hearing the king's response. Three month's reprieve. But these wealthy rebellious aristocrats were only an evening's ale or two away from receiving the feelings of the "excitable crowd", who were less likely to demand in writing redress of their grievances, and more likely to burn down things and make proper use of the combination of tar and feathers. Without a standing army or a phalanx of men in blue to keep order, a wealthy patriot had to keep a fresh horse available for a quick exit from town.

Which brings us up to the present date. We Americans no longer roam the countryside with torches, or post broadsides on barns to notify the aggrieved where to meet and what weapons to bring. Nope. We now have the Internet, where the excitable crowd can lounge in their stretch pants while getting a tattoo for the latest rebellion (What are you rebelling against? Answer: Whatta ya got?").
Yes, rather than reason out things by finding facts, we prefer the emotional approach, particularly if we know(or think we know) there are a lot of us, even if "us" don't really know for sure that what has us angry is based in any sense at all upon reality (I'm talking about basement pedophile rings at the White House, etc.)

I would like to think that a reasonable person would, before breaking out the bear spray, strapping on the shoulder holster and getting all mobbed up, do a little bit of fact checking. Problem is, people don't really know how to fact check any more. They read something on Breitbart and it might just as well have been written by Bart Simpson. Ever read the Epoch News? Mightn't it be a good idea to find out where their funding comes from first? Hillsdale College? It's a freakin' college; it must be reputable. Right?

People don't do any kind of research. Why? Because we used to rely on Ed Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, Sander Vanocur, Huntley and Brinkley. Who? (You youngsters, look 'em up). Yeah, these were people who reported news, with an occasional opinion when it seemed appropriate. We trusted them to report the news. Now anyone with a microphone and someone to pay for the air time can offer you not the news, but the news you would like to hear, or news that someone hopes you will hear and be endeared to. Donald Trump famously said, "I love the poorly educated". What's not to love? The uneducated are in no position to ask why he loves them. Heck, they don't even know they're poorly educated. And if they do happen to know, they hate people who *are* educated.

Social media has created an excitable crowd. January 6th, 2021 showed us a spectacular example, aided and abetted, but a mob, nevertheless. And so, you now know why our founding fathers feared giving too much power to the common people, and why a lot of contemporary politicians live in fear. Not of Trump, but of his crowd. Different crowd. Same fear.

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