

The New Puritans

Anne Applebaum

44-56 minutes

Social codes are changing, in many ways for the better. But for those whose behavior doesn't adapt fast enough to the new norms, judgment can be swift—and merciless.

“It was no great distance, in those days, from the prison-door to the market-place. Measured by the prisoner's experience, however, it might be reckoned a journey of some length.”

So begins the tale of Hester Prynne, as recounted in Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. As readers of this classic American text know, the story begins after Hester gives birth to a child out of wedlock and refuses to name the father. As a result, she is sentenced to be mocked by a jeering crowd, undergoing “an agony from every footstep of those that thronged to see her, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample upon.” After that, she must wear a scarlet *A*—for adulterer—pinned to her dress for the rest of her life. On the outskirts of Boston, she lives in exile. No one will socialize with her—not even those who have quietly committed similar sins, among them the father of her child, the saintly village preacher. The scarlet letter has “the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.”

We read that story with a certain self-satisfaction: *Such an old-fashioned tale!* Even Hawthorne sneered at the Puritans, with their “sad-colored garments and grey steeple-crowned hats,” their strict conformism, their narrow minds and their hypocrisy. And today we are not just hip and modern; we live in a land governed by the rule of law; we have procedures designed to prevent the meting-out of unfair punishment. Scarlet letters are a thing of the past.

Except, of course, they aren't. Right here in America, right now, it is possible to meet people who have lost everything—jobs, money, friends, colleagues—after violating no laws, and sometimes no workplace rules either. Instead, they have broken (or are accused of having broken) social codes having to do with race, sex, personal behavior, or even acceptable humor, which may not have existed five years ago or maybe five months ago. Some have made egregious errors of judgment. Some have done nothing at all. It is not always easy to tell.

Yet despite the disputed nature of these cases, it has become both easy and useful for some people to put them into larger narratives. Partisans, especially on the right, now toss around the phrase *cancel culture* when they want to defend themselves from criticism, however legitimate. But dig into the story of anyone who has been a genuine victim of modern mob justice and you will often find not an obvious argument between “woke” and “anti-woke” perspectives but rather incidents that are interpreted, described, or remembered by different people in different ways, even leaving aside whatever political or intellectual issue might be at stake.

There is a reason that the science reporter Donald McNeil, after being asked to resign from *The New York Times*, needed 21,000 words, [published in four parts](#), to recount a series of

conversations he had had with high-school students in Peru, during which he may or may not have said something racially offensive, depending on whose account you find most persuasive. There is a reason that Laura Kipnis, an academic at Northwestern, required an entire book, [*Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*](#), to recount the repercussions, including to herself, of two allegations of sexual harassment against one man at her university; after she [referred to the case in an article about “sexual paranoia.”](#) students demanded that the university investigate her, too. A full explanation of the personal, professional, and political nuances in both cases needed a lot of space.

There is a reason, too, that Hawthorne dedicated an entire novel to the complex motivations of Hester Prynne, her lover, and her husband. Nuance and ambiguity are essential to good fiction. They are also essential to the rule of law: We have courts, juries, judges, and witnesses precisely so that the state can learn whether a crime has been committed before it administers punishment. We have a presumption of innocence for the accused. We have a right to self-defense. We have a statute of limitations.

By contrast, the modern online public sphere, a place of rapid conclusions, rigid ideological prisms, and arguments of 280 characters, favors neither nuance nor ambiguity. Yet the values of that online sphere have come to dominate many American cultural institutions: universities, newspapers, foundations, museums. Heeding public demands for rapid retribution, they sometimes impose the equivalent of lifetime scarlet letters on people who have not been accused of anything remotely resembling a crime. Instead of courts, they use secretive bureaucracies. Instead of hearing evidence and witnesses, they make judgments behind closed doors.

I have been trying to understand these stories for a long time, both because I believe that the principle of due process underpins liberal democracy, and also because they remind me of other times and places. A decade ago, I wrote a [book about the Sovietization of Central Europe](#) in the 1940s, and found that much of the political conformism of the early Communist period was the result not of violence or direct state coercion, but rather of intense peer pressure. Even without a clear risk to their life, people felt obliged—not just for the sake of their career but for their children, their friends, their spouse—to repeat slogans that they didn’t believe, or to perform acts of public obeisance to a political party they privately scorned. In 1948, the famous Polish composer Andrzej Panufnik sent what he later described as some “rubbish” as his entry into a competition to write a “Song of the United Party”—because he thought if he refused to submit anything, the whole Union of Polish Composers might lose funding. To his eternal humiliation, he won. Lily Hajdú-Gimes, a celebrated Hungarian psychoanalyst of that era, diagnosed the trauma of forced conformity in patients, as well as in herself. “I play the game that is offered by the regime,” she told friends, “though as soon as you accept that rule you are in a trap.”

But you [don’t even need Stalinism to create that kind of atmosphere](#). During a trip to Turkey earlier this year, I met a writer who showed me his latest manuscript, kept in a desk drawer. His work wasn’t illegal, exactly—it was just unpublishable. Turkish newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses are subject to unpredictable prosecutions and drastic sentences for speech or writing that can be arbitrarily construed as insulting the president or the Turkish nation. Fear of those sanctions leads to self-censorship and silence.

In America, of course, we don't have that kind of state coercion. There are currently no laws that shape what academics or journalists can say; there is no government censor, no ruling-party censor. But fear of the internet mob, the office mob, or the peer-group mob is producing some similar outcomes. How many American manuscripts now remain in desk drawers—or unwritten altogether—because their authors fear a similarly arbitrary judgment? How much intellectual life is now stifled because of fear of what a poorly worded comment would look like if taken out of context and spread on Twitter?

To answer that question, I spoke with more than a dozen people who were either victims or close observers of sudden shifts in social codes in America. The purpose here is not to reinvestigate or relitigate any of their cases. Some of those I interviewed have behaved in ways that I, or readers of this article, may well consider ill-judged or immoral, even if they were not illegal. I am not here questioning all of the new social codes that have led to their dismissal or their effective isolation. Many of these social changes are clearly positive.

Still, no one quoted here, anonymously or by name, has been charged with an actual crime, let alone convicted in an actual court. All of them dispute the public version of their story. Several say they have been falsely accused; others believe that their “sins” have been exaggerated or misinterpreted by people with hidden agendas. All of them, sinners or saints, have been handed drastic, life-altering, indefinite punishments, often without the ability to make a case in their own favor. This—the convicting and sentencing without due process, or mercy—should profoundly bother Americans. In 1789, [James Madison proposed](#) that the U.S. Constitution ensure that “no person shall be ... deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.” Both [the Fifth](#) and [the Fourteenth](#) Amendments to the Constitution invoke due process. Nevertheless, these Americans have been effectively deprived of it.

Many of the people described here remain unavoidably anonymous in this essay. This is because they are involved in complicated legal or tenure battles and do not want to speak on the record, or because they fear another wave of social-media attacks. I have tried to describe their current situations—to explain what price they have paid, what kind of punishment they have been handed—without identifying those who did not want to be identified, and without naming their institutions. Necessarily, a lot of important details are therefore excluded. But for some, this is now the only way they dare to speak out at all.

Here is the first thing that happens once you have been accused of breaking a social code, when you find yourself at the center of a social-media storm because of something you said or purportedly said. The phone stops ringing. People stop talking to you. You become toxic. “I have in my department dozens of colleagues—I think I have spoken to zero of them in the past year,” one academic told me. “One of my colleagues I had lunch with at least once a week for more than a decade—he just refused to speak to me anymore, without asking questions.” Another reckoned that, of the 20-odd members in his department, “there are two, one of whom has no power and another of whom is about to retire, who will now speak to me.”

A journalist told me that after he was summarily fired, his acquaintances sorted themselves into three groups. First, the “heroes,” very small in number, who “insist on due process before damaging another person’s life and who stick by their friends.” Second, the “villains,” who think

you should “immediately lose your livelihood as soon as the allegation is made.” Some old friends, or people he thought were old friends, even joined the public attack. But the majority were in a third category: “good but useless. They don’t necessarily think the worst of you, and they would like you to get due process, but, you know, they haven’t looked into it. They have reasons to think charitably of you, maybe, but they’re too busy to help. Or they have too much to lose.” One friend told him that she would happily write a defense of him, but she had a book proposal in the works. “I said, ‘Thank you for your candor.’”

Most people drift away because life moves on; others do so because they are afraid that those unproven allegations might imply something far worse. One professor who has not been accused of any physical contact with anybody was astonished to discover that some of his colleagues assumed that if his university was disciplining him, he must be a rapist. Another person suspended from his job put it this way: “Someone who knows me, but maybe doesn’t know my soul or character, may be saying to themselves that prudence would dictate they keep their distance, lest they become collateral damage.”

Here is the second thing that happens, closely related to the first: Even if you have not been suspended, punished, or found guilty of anything, you cannot function in your profession. If you are a professor, no one wants you as a teacher or mentor (“The graduate students made it obvious to me that I was a nonperson and could not possibly be tolerated”). You cannot publish in professional journals. You cannot quit your job, because no one else will hire you. If you are a journalist, then you might find that you cannot publish at all. [After losing his job as editor of *The New York Review of Books*](#) in a #MeToo-related editorial dispute—he was not accused of assault, just of printing an article by someone who was—Ian Buruma discovered that several of the magazines where he had been writing for three decades would not publish him any longer. One editor said something about “younger staff” at his magazine. Although a group of more than 100 *New York Review of Books* contributors—among them Joyce Carol Oates, Ian McEwan, Ariel Dorfman, Caryl Phillips, Alfred Brendel (and me)—had [signed a public letter in Buruma’s defense](#), this editor evidently feared his colleagues more than he did Joyce Carol Oates.

For many, intellectual and professional life grinds to a halt. “I was doing the best work in my life when I heard of this investigation happening,” one academic told me. “It all stopped. I have not written another paper since.” Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor at Northwestern (and the subject of Laura Kipnis’s book), lost two book contracts after the university forced him out of his job for two alleged instances of sexual harassment, which he denies. Other philosophers would not allow their articles to appear in the same volume as one of his. After Daniel Elder, a prizewinning composer (and a political liberal) posted a statement on Instagram condemning arson in his hometown of Nashville, where Black Lives Matter protesters had set the courthouse on fire after the killing of George Floyd, he discovered that [his publisher would not print his music and choirs would not sing it](#). After the poet Joseph Massey was accused of “harassment and manipulation” by women he’d been romantically involved with, the Academy of American Poets removed all of his poetry from its website, and his publishers removed his books from theirs. Stephen Elliott, a journalist and critic who was accused of rape on the anonymous “Shitty Media Men” list that circulated on the internet at the height of the #MeToo conversation—he is now suing that list’s creator for defamation—[has written that](#), in the aftermath, a published collection of his essays vanished without a trace: Reviews were canceled; *The Paris Review*

aborted a planned interview with him; he was disinvited from book panels, readings, and other events.

[John McWhorter: Academics are really, really worried about their freedom](#)

For some people, this can result in a catastrophic loss of income. Ludlow moved to Mexico, because he could live more cheaply there. For others, it can create a kind of identity crisis. After describing the various jobs he had held in the months since being suspended from his teaching job, one of the academics I interviewed seemed to choke up. “I am really only good at one thing,” he told me, pointing at mathematical formulas on a blackboard behind him: “this.”

Sometimes advocates of the new mob justice claim that these are minor punishments, that the loss of a job is not serious, that people should be able to accept their situation and move on. But isolation plus public shaming plus loss of income are severe sanctions for adults, with long-term personal and psychological repercussions—especially because the “sentences” in these cases are of indeterminate length. Elliott contemplated suicide, and has written that “every first-hand account I’ve read of public shaming—and I’ve read more than my share—includes thoughts of suicide.” Massey did too: “[I had a plan and the means to execute it](#); I then had a panic attack and took a cab to the ER.” David Bucci, the former chair of the Dartmouth brain-sciences department, who was named in a lawsuit against the college though he was not accused of any sexual misconduct, [did kill himself](#) after he realized he might never be able to restore his reputation.

Others have changed their attitudes toward their professions. “I wake up every morning afraid to teach,” one academic told me: The university campus that he once loved has become a hazardous jungle, full of traps. Nicholas Christakis, the Yale professor of medicine and sociology who was at the center of a campus and social-media storm in 2015, is also an expert on the functioning of human social groups. He reminded me that ostracism “was considered an enormous sanction in ancient times—to be cast out of your group was deadly.” It is unsurprising, he said, that people in these situations would consider suicide.

[Read: Nicholas Christakis and the new intolerance of student activism](#)

The third thing that happens is that you try to apologize, whether or not you have done anything wrong. Robert George, a Princeton philosopher who has acted as a faculty advocate for students and professors who have fallen into legal or administrative difficulties, describes the phenomenon like this: “They have been popular and successful their whole lives; that’s how they climbed the ladder to their academic positions, at least in places like the one I teach. And then suddenly there is this terrible feeling of *Everybody hates me* ... So what do they do? More often than not, they just cave in.” One of the people I spoke with was asked to apologize for an offense that broke no existing rules. “I said, ‘What am I apologizing for?’ And they said, ‘Well, their feelings were hurt.’ So I crafted my apology around that: ‘If I did say something that upset you, I didn’t anticipate that would happen.’” The apology was initially accepted, but his problems didn’t end.

This is typical: More often than not, apologies will be parsed, examined for “sincerity”—and then rejected. Howard Bauchner, the editor of *the Journal of the American Medical Association*, [apologized for something](#) he’d had nothing directly to do with, after one of his colleagues made controversial comments on a podcast and on Twitter about whether communities of color were held back more by “structural racism” or by socioeconomic factors. “I remain profoundly disappointed in myself for the lapses that led to the publishing of the tweet and podcast,” Bauchner wrote. “Although I did not write or even see the tweet, or create the podcast, as editor in chief, I am ultimately responsible for them.” He wound up resigning. But this, too, is now typical: Because apologies have become ritualized, they invariably seem insincere. Websites now offer “[sample templates](#)” for people who need to apologize; some universities offer [advice on how to apologize](#) to students and employees, and even include lists of good words to use (*mistake, misunderstand, misinterpret*).

Not that everyone really wants an apology. One former journalist told me that his ex-colleagues “don’t want to endorse the process of mistake/apology/understanding/forgiveness—they don’t want to forgive.” Instead, he said, they want “to punish and purify.” But the knowledge that whatever you say will never be enough is debilitating. “If you make an apology and you know in advance that your apology will not be accepted—that it is going to be considered a move in a psychological or cultural or political game—then the integrity of your introspection is being mocked and you feel permanently marooned in a world of unforgiveness,” one person told me. “And that is a truly unethical world.” Elder’s music publishers asked him to make a groveling apology—they even went so far as to write it for him—but he refused.

Even after the apology is made, a fourth thing happens: People begin to investigate you. One person I spoke with told me he believed he was investigated because his employer didn’t want to offer severance compensation and needed extra reasons to justify his termination. Another thought an investigation of him was launched because firing him for an argument over language would have violated the union contract. Long careers almost always include episodes of disagreement or ambiguity. Was that time he hugged a colleague in consolation really something else? Was her joke really a joke, or something worse? Nobody is perfect; nobody is pure; and once people set out to interpret ambiguous incidents in a particular way, it’s not hard to find new evidence.

Sometimes investigations take place because someone in the community feels that you haven’t paid a high enough price for whatever it is you have done or said. Last year Joshua Katz, a popular Princeton classics professor, [wrote an article](#) critical of a letter published by [a group of Princeton faculty on race](#). In response *The Daily Princetonian*, a student newspaper, spent seven months investigating his past relationships with students, eventually convincing university officials to relitigate incidents from years earlier that had already been adjudicated—a classic breach of James Madison’s belief that no one should be punished for the same thing twice. The *Daily Princetonian* investigation looks more like an attempt to ostracize a professor guilty of wrong-think than an attempt to bring resolution to a case of alleged misbehavior.

Mike Pesca, a podcaster for *Slate*, [got into a debate with his colleagues](#) on his company’s internal Slack message board about whether it is acceptable to pronounce a racial slur out loud when reporting on the use of a racial slur—an action that, he says, was not against any company rules

at the time. After a meeting of the editorial staff held soon afterward to discuss the incident—to which Pesca himself was not invited—the company launched an investigation to find out whether there were other things he might have done wrong. (According to a statement by a *Slate* spokesperson, the investigation was prompted by more than just “an isolated abstract argument in a Slack channel.”) Amy Chua, the Yale Law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, told me she believes that investigations into her relationships with students were sparked by her personal connections to Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Many of these investigations involve anonymous reports or complaints, some of which can come as a total surprise to those being reported upon. By definition, social-media mobs involve anonymous accounts that amplify unverified stories with “likes” and shares. The “Shitty Media Men” list was an anonymous collection of unverified accusations that became public. Procedures at many universities actually mandate anonymity in the early stages of an investigation. Sometimes even the accused isn’t given any of the details. Chua’s husband, the Yale Law professor Jed Rubenfeld, who was suspended from teaching due to sexual-harassment allegations (which he denies), says he did not know the names of his accusers or the nature of the accusations against him for a year and a half.

Kipnis, who was accused of sexual misconduct because she wrote about sexual harassment, was not initially allowed to know who her accusers were either, nor would anyone explain the rules governing her case. Nor, for that matter, were the rules clear to the people applying them, because, as she wrote in *Unwanted Advances*, “there’s no established or nationally uniform set of procedures.” On top of all that, Kipnis was supposed to keep the whole thing confidential: “I’d been plunged into an underground world of secret tribunals and capricious, medieval rules, and I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone about it,” she wrote. This chimes with the story of another academic, who told me that his university “never even talked to me before it decided to actually punish me. They read the reports from the investigators, but they never brought me in a room, they never called me on the phone, so that I could say anything about my side of the story. And they openly told me that I was being punished based on allegations. Just because they didn’t find evidence of it, they told me, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Secretive procedures that take place outside the law and leave the accused feeling helpless and isolated have been an element of control in authoritarian regimes across the centuries, from the Argentine junta to Franco’s Spain. Stalin created “troikas”—ad hoc, extrajudicial bodies that heard dozens of cases in a day. During China’s Cultural Revolution, Mao empowered students to create revolutionary committees to attack and swiftly remove professors. In both instances, people used these unregulated forms of “justice” to pursue personal grudges or gain professional advantage. In *The Whisperers*, his book on Stalinist culture, the historian Orlando Figes cites many such cases, among them Nikolai Sakharov, who wound up in prison because somebody fancied his wife; Ivan Malygin, who was denounced by somebody jealous of his success; and Lipa Kaplan, sent to a labor camp for 10 years after she refused the sexual advances of her boss. The sociologist Andrew Walder [has revealed](#) how the Cultural Revolution in Beijing was shaped by power competitions between rival student leaders.

This pattern is now repeating itself in the U.S. Many of those I spoke with told complicated stories about the ways in which anonymous procedures had been used by people who disliked

them, felt competitive with them, or held some kind of personal or professional grudge. One described an intellectual rivalry with a university administrator, dating back to graduate school—the same administrator who had played a role in having him suspended. Another attributed a series of problems to a former student, now a colleague, who had long seen him as a rival. A third thought that one of his colleagues resented having to work with him and would have preferred a different job. A fourth reckoned that he had underestimated the professional frustrations of younger colleagues who felt stifled by his organization’s hierarchies. All of them believe that personal grudges help explain why they were singled out.

The motivations could be even more petty than that. The [writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recently described](#) how two younger writers she had befriended attacked her on social media, partly, she wrote, because they are “seeking attention and publicity to benefit themselves.” Once it becomes clear that attention and praise can be garnered from organizing an attack on someone’s reputation, plenty of people discover that they have an interest in doing so.

America remains a safe distance from Mao’s China or Stalin’s Russia. Neither our secretive university committees nor the social-media mobs are backed by authoritarian regimes threatening violence. Despite the right-wing rhetoric that says otherwise, these procedures are not being driven by a “unified left” (there is no “unified left”), or by a unified movement of any kind, let alone by the government. It’s true that some of the university sexual-harassment cases have been shaped by Department of Education Title IX regulations that are shockingly vague, and that can be interpreted in draconian ways. But the administrators who carry out these investigations and disciplinary procedures, whether they work at universities or in the HR departments of magazines, are not doing so because they fear the Gulag. Many pursue them because they believe they are making their institutions better—they are creating a more harmonious workplace, advancing the causes of racial or sexual equality, keeping students safe. Some want to protect their institution’s reputation. Invariably, some want to protect their own reputation. At least two of the people I interviewed believe that they were punished because a white, male boss felt he had to publicly sacrifice another white man in order to protect his own position.

But what gives anyone the conviction that such a measure is necessary? Or that “keeping students safe” means [you must violate due process](#)? It is not the law. Nor, strictly speaking, is it politics. Although some have tried to link this social transformation to President Joe Biden or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, anyone who tries to shoehorn these stories into a right-left political framework has to explain why so few of the victims of this shift can be described as “right wing” or conservative. According to one recent poll, [62 percent of Americans, including a majority of self-described moderates and liberals, are afraid to speak their mind about politics](#). All of those I spoke with are centrist or center-left liberals. Some have unconventional political views, but some have no strong views at all.

Certainly nothing in the academic texts of critical race theory mandates this behavior. The original critical race theorists argued for the use of a new lens to interpret the past and the present. You can dispute whether or not that lens is useful, or whether you want to look through it at all—but you can’t blame critical-race-theory authors for, say, Yale Law School’s frivolous decision to investigate whether or not Amy Chua gave a dinner party at her house during the

pandemic, or for the array of university presidents who have refused to stand by their own faculty members when they are attacked by students.

[Elizabeth Bruenig: Amy Chua, Yale Law School, and the problem with whistleblowing](#)

The censoriousness, the shunning, the ritualized apologies, the public sacrifices—these are rather typical behaviors in illiberal societies with rigid cultural codes, enforced by heavy peer pressure. This is a story of moral panic, of cultural institutions policing or purifying themselves in the face of disapproving crowds. The crowds are no longer literal, as they once were in Salem, but rather online mobs, organized via Twitter, Facebook, or sometimes internal company Slack channels. After Alexi McCammond was named editor in chief of *Teen Vogue*, people discovered and recirculated on Instagram old anti-Asian and homophobic tweets she had written a decade earlier, while still a teenager. [McCammond apologized](#), of course, but that wasn't enough, and she was compelled to quit the job before starting. She's had a softer landing than some—she was able to return to her previous work as a political reporter at *Axios*—but the incident reveals that no one is safe. She was a 27-year-old woman of color who had been named the “Emerging Journalist of the Year” by the National Association of Black Journalists, and yet her teenage self came back to haunt her. You would think it would be a good thing for the young readers of *Teen Vogue* to learn forgiveness and mercy, but for the New Puritans, there is no statute of limitations.

This censoriousness is related not just to recent, and often positive, changes in attitudes toward race and gender, and to accompanying changes in the language used to discuss them, but to other social changes that are more rarely acknowledged. While most of those who lose their positions are not “guilty” in any legal sense, neither have they been shunned at random. Just as odd old women were once subject to accusations of witchery, so too are certain types of people now more likely to fall victim to modern mob justice. To begin with, the protagonists of most of these stories tend to be successful. Though not billionaires or captains of industry, they've managed to become editors, professors, published authors, or even just students at competitive universities. Some are unusually social, even hyper-gregarious: They were professors who liked to chat or drink with their students, bosses who went out to lunch with their staff, people who blurred the lines between social life and institutional life.

“If you ask anyone for a list of the best teachers, best citizens, most responsible people, I would be on every one of those lists,” one now-disgraced faculty member told me. Amy Chua had been appointed to numerous powerful committees at Yale Law School, including one that helped prepare students for clerkships. This was, she says, because she succeeded in getting students, especially minority students, good clerkships. “I do extra work; I get to know them,” she told me. “I write extra-good recommendations.” Many highly social people who are good at committees also tend to gossip, to tell stories about their colleagues. Some, both male and female, might also be described as flirtatious, enjoying wordplay and jokes that go right to the edge of what is considered acceptable.

Which is precisely what got some of these people into trouble, because the definition of *acceptable* has radically changed in the past few years. Once it was not just okay but admirable that Chua and Rubinfeld had law-school students over to their house for gatherings. That moment has passed. So, too, has the time when a student could discuss her personal problems

with her professor, or when an employee could gossip with his employer. Conversations between people who have different statuses—employer-employee, professor-student—can now focus only on professional matters, or strictly neutral topics. Anything sexual, even in an academic context—for example, a conversation about the laws of rape—is now risky. The Harvard Law School professor Jeannie Suk Gersen [has written](#) that her students “seem more anxious about classroom discussion, and about approaching the law of sexual violence in particular, than they have ever been in my eight years as a law professor.” Akhil Reed Amar, a professor at Yale, told me that he no longer mentions a particular historical incident that he once used in his teaching, because it would force his students to read a case study that revolves around the use of a racial slur.

Social rules have changed too. Professors used to date and even marry their students. Colleagues used to drink together after work, and sometimes go home together. Today that can be dangerous. An academic friend told me that in his graduate school, people who are close to getting their doctorate are wary about dating people just beginning their studies, because the unwritten rules now dictate that you don’t date colleagues, especially if there could be any kind of (real or imagined) power differential between you and the person you are dating. This cultural shift is in many ways healthy: Young people are now much better protected from predatory bosses. But it has costs. When jokes and flirtation are completely off-limits, some of the spontaneity of office life disappears too.

It’s not just the hyper-social and the flirtatious who have found themselves victims of the New Puritanism. People who are, for lack of a more precise word, *difficult* have trouble too. They are haughty, impatient, confrontational, or insufficiently interested in people whom they perceive to be less talented. Others are high achievers, who in turn set high standards for their colleagues or students. When those high standards are not met, these people say so, and that doesn’t go over well. Some of them like to push boundaries, especially intellectual boundaries, or to question orthodoxies. When people disagree with them, they argue back with relish.

That kind of behavior, once accepted or at least tolerated in many workplaces, is also now out of bounds. Workplaces once considered demanding are now described as toxic. The sort of open criticism, voiced in front of other people, that was once normal in newsrooms and academic seminars is now as unacceptable as chewing with your mouth open. The non-sunny disposition, the less-than-friendly manner—these can now be grounds for punishment or ostracism too. A relevant criticism of Donald McNeil turned out to be that he was “[kind of a grumpy old guy](#),” as one student on that trip to Peru described him.

What many of these people—the difficult ones, the gossipy ones, the overly gregarious ones—have in common is that they make people uncomfortable. Here, too, a profound generational shift has transpired. “I think people’s tolerance for discomfort—people’s tolerance for dissonance, for not hearing exactly what they want to hear—has now gone down to zero,” one person told me. “*Discomfort* used to be a term of praise about pedagogy—I mean, the greatest discomforter of all was Socrates.”

It’s not wrong to want a more comfortable workplace, or fewer grumpy colleagues. The difficulty is that the feeling of discomfort is subjective. One person’s lighthearted compliment is

another person's microaggression. One person's critical remark can be experienced by another person as racist or sexist. Jokes, wordplay, and anything that can have two meanings are, by definition, open to interpretation.

But even though discomfort is subjective, it is also now understood as something that can be cured. Someone who has been made uncomfortable now has multiple paths through which to demand redress. This has given rise to a new facet of life in universities, nonprofits, and corporate offices: the committees, HR departments, and Title IX administrators who have been appointed precisely to hear these kinds of complaints. Anyone who feels discomfort now has a place to go, someone to talk to.

Some of this is, I repeat, positive: Employees or students who feel they have been treated unfairly no longer have to flounder alone. But that comes at a cost. Anyone who accidentally creates discomfort—whether through their teaching methods, their editorial standards, their opinions, or their personality—may suddenly find themselves on the wrong side of not just a student or a colleague but an entire bureaucracy, one dedicated to weeding out people who make other people uncomfortable. And these bureaucracies are illiberal. They do not necessarily follow rules of fact-based investigation, rational argument, or due process. Instead, the formal and informal administrative bodies that judge the fate of people who have broken social codes are very much part of a swirling, emotive public conversation, one governed not by the rules of the courtroom or logic or the Enlightenment but by social-media algorithms that encourage anger and emotion, and by the economy of likes and shares that pushes people to feel—and to perform—outrage. The interaction between the angry mob and the illiberal bureaucracy engenders a thirst for blood, for sacrifices to be offered up to the pious and unforgiving gods of outrage—a story we see in other eras of history, from the Inquisition to the more recent past.

Twitter, the president of one major cultural institution told me, “is the new public sphere.” Yet Twitter is unforgiving, it is relentless, it doesn't check facts or provide context. Worse, like the elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who would not forgive Hester Prynne, the internet keeps track of past deeds, ensuring that no error, no mistake, no misspoken sentence or clumsy metaphor is ever lost. “It's not that everybody's famous for 15 minutes,” Tamar Gendler, the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Yale, told me. “It's that everybody gets damned for 15 seconds.” And if you have the misfortune to have the worst 15 seconds of your life shared with the world, there is nothing to guarantee that anybody will weigh that single, badly worded comment against all the other things you have done in your career. Incidents “lose their nuance,” one university official told me. “So then what you get is all kinds of people with prearranged views, and they come in and use the incident to mean one thing or another.”

It can happen very fast. In March, Sandra Sellers, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center, was [caught on camera](#) speaking to another professor about some underperforming Black students in her class. There is no way to know from the recording alone whether her comments represented racist bias or genuine concern for her students. Not that it mattered to Georgetown—she was fired within days of the recording's becoming public. Nor could one know what David Batson, the colleague she was talking to on the recording, really thought either. Nevertheless, he was placed on administrative leave because he seemed, vaguely, to be politely agreeing with her. He quickly resigned.

That conversation was captured inadvertently, but future revelations might not be. This spring, Braden Ellis, a student at Cypress College in California, [shared a class Zoom recording](#) of his professor's response when Ellis defended portrayals of police as heroes. Ellis said he did this in order to expose a purported bias against conservative viewpoints on campus. Even though the recording by itself does not prove the existence of long-standing bias, the professor—a Muslim woman who said on the recording that she did not trust the police—became the focus of a Fox News segment, a social-media storm, and death threats. So did other professors at the college. So did administrators. After a few days, the professor was removed from her teaching assignments, pending investigation.

In this incident, the storm came from the right, as it surely will in the future: The tools of social-media mob justice are available to partisans of all kinds. In May, a young reporter, Emily Wilder, [was fired from her new job](#) at the Associated Press in Arizona after a series of conservative publications and politicians publicized Facebook posts critical of Israel that she had written while in college. Like so many before her, she was not told precisely why she was fired, or which company rules her old posts had violated.

Some have used Wilder's case to argue that the conservative criticism of "cancel culture" has always been fraudulent. But the real, and nonpartisan, lesson is this: No one—of any age, in any profession—is safe. In the age of Zoom, cellphone cameras, miniature recorders, and other forms of cheap surveillance technology, anyone's comments can be taken out of context; anyone's story can become a rallying cry for Twitter mobs on the left or the right. Anyone can then fall victim to a bureaucracy terrified by the sudden eruption of anger. And once one set of people loses the right to due process, so does everybody else. Not just professors but students; not just editors of elite publications but random members of the public. Gotcha moments can be choreographed. Project Veritas, a well-funded right-wing organization, [dedicates itself to sting operations](#): It baits people into saying embarrassing things on hidden cameras and then seeks to get them punished for it, either by social media or by their own bureaucracies.

But while this form of mob justice can be used opportunistically by anyone, for any political or personal reason, the institutions that have done the most to facilitate this change are in many cases those that once saw themselves as the guardians of liberal and democratic ideals. Robert George, the Princeton professor, is a longtime philosophical conservative who once criticized liberal scholars for their earnest relativism, their belief that all ideas deserved an equal hearing. He did not foresee, he told me, that liberals would one day "seem as archaic as the conservatives," that the idea of creating a space where different ideas could compete would come to seem old-fashioned, that the spirit of tolerance and curiosity would be replaced by a worldview "that is not open-minded, that doesn't think engaging differences is a great thing or that students should be exposed to competing points of view."

[From the April 1886 issue: Nathaniel Hawthorne's son reviews *The Scarlet Letter*](#)

But that kind of thought system is not new in America. In the 19th century, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel argued for the replacement of exactly that kind of rigidity with a worldview that valued ambiguity, nuance, tolerance of difference—the liberal worldview—and that would forgive Hester Prynne for her mistakes. The liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, writing at about

the same time as Hawthorne, made a similar argument. Much of his most famous book, [*On Liberty*](#), is dedicated not to governmental restraints on human liberty but to the threat posed by social conformism, by “the demand that all other people shall resemble ourselves.” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about this problem, too. It was a serious challenge in 19th-century America, and is again in the 21st century.

Students and professors, editorial assistants and editors in chief—all are aware of what kind of society they now inhabit. That’s why [they censor themselves](#), why they steer clear of certain topics, why they avoid discussing anything too sensitive for fear of being mobbed or ostracized or fired without due process. But that kind of thinking takes us uncomfortably close to Istanbul, where history and politics can be discussed only with great care.

Many people have told me they want to change this atmosphere, but don’t know how. Some hope to ride it out, to wait for this moral panic to pass, or for an even younger generation to rebel against it. Some worry about the costs of engagement. One person who was the focus of a negative social-media campaign told me that he doesn’t want this set of issues to dominate his life and his career; he cited other people who have become so obsessed with battling “wokeness” or “cancel culture” that they now do nothing else.

Others have decided to be vocal. Stephen Elliott wrestled for a long time with whether or not to describe what it feels like to be wrongly accused of rape—he wrote something and abandoned it because “I decided that I wouldn’t be able to handle the blowback”—before finally describing his experiences in a published essay. Amy Chua ignored advice to remain silent and instead has talked as much as possible. Robert George has created the [Academic Freedom Alliance](#), a group that intends to offer moral and legal support to professors who are under fire, and even to pay for their legal teams if necessary. George was inspired, he told me, by a nature program that showed how elephant packs will defend every member of the herd against a marauding lion, whereas zebras run away and let the weakest get killed off. “The trouble with us academics is we’re a bunch of zebras,” he said. “We need to become elephants.” John McWhorter, a Columbia linguistics professor (and *Atlantic* contributing writer) who has strong and not always popular views about race, told me that if you are accused of something unfairly, you should always push back, firmly but politely: “Just say, ‘No, I’m not a racist. And I disagree with you.’” If more leaders—university presidents, magazine and newspaper publishers, CEOs of foundations and companies, directors of musical societies—took that position, maybe it would be easier for more of their peers to stand up to their students, their colleagues, or an online mob.

The alternative, for our cultural institutions and for democratic discourse, is grim. Foundations will do secret background checks on their potential grantees, to make sure they haven’t committed crimes-that-are-not-crimes that could be embarrassing in the future. Anonymous reports and Twitter mobs, not the reasoned judgments of peers, will shape the fate of individuals. Writers and journalists will fear publication. Universities will no longer be dedicated to the creation and dissemination of knowledge but to the promotion of student comfort and the avoidance of social-media attacks.

Worse, if we drive all of the difficult people, the demanding people, and the eccentric people away from the creative professions where they used to thrive, we will become a flatter, duller,

less interesting society, a place where manuscripts sit in drawers for fear of arbitrary judgments. The arts, the humanities, and the media will become stiff, predictable, and mediocre. Democratic principles like the rule of law, the right to self-defense, the right to a just trial—even the right to be forgiven—will wither. There will be nothing to do but sit back and wait for the Hawthornes of the future to expose us.

This article appears in the [October 2021](#) print edition with the headline “The New Puritans.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.