LETTER SENT AS EMAIL ATTACHMENT FROM kwesthue@uwaterloo.ca TO dennis.buehler@republik.ch
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Mr. Dennis Bühler
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Dear Mr. Bühler:

You have requested my comments, from the viewpoint of research on academic mobbing, on the threatened dismissal of Professor Marcella Carollo from the faculty of ETH Zürich, and you have sent me nine specific questions. Here I answer your request as best I can.

Assumptions and qualifications

My comments are necessarily tentative and preliminary, and this for two reasons.

First, I have reviewed only some, not all, of the evidence on the conflict surrounding Professor Carollo. I have read the ETH press releases, the coverage in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Science,* sundry online commentaries by astronomers and physicists, the collective letters respectively supporting and denouncing her, and the statements you sent me, not yet publicly released, by her and her attorney, Martin Farner. Any conclusive analysis of this conflict must await release of all relevant evidence by the parties in dispute; this will presumably occur in the course of eventual adjudication, unless the parties come to some kind of agreement beforehand.

The second reason my comments must be taken with caution is that I may miss details and nuance in the documentation of this conflict, on account of my limited facility in German. If my command of your language were stronger, my observations in the paragraphs below would probably be more pointed.

With these caveats, I am confident in what I write below. I am not acquainted with any of the people involved in this conflict and have never communicated with any of them. I have no dog in this fight. I am as eager to correct any *mis*identification of a conflict as a case of mobbing, as to recognize an actual case for what it is. You may wish to seek a second opinion or corroboration of my comments from another expert in the field. You mention one of them in your ninth question: Eve Seguin, political scientist at the University of Quebec at Montreal, French-English bilingual, author of an excellent recent summary article on academic mobbing. Another is the Mexican anthropologist Florencia Peña Saint Martin, Spanish-English bilingual with some German, who has produced incisive analyses of mobbing in academia. A third expert,

although mostly retired, is Swiss anthropologist [Noa Zanolli](#), the *grande dame* of research in this field, who makes her home in Bern.

Clarification of what the word *mobbing* means

I defined *mobbing* in 2002 as "an impassioned, collective campaign by co-workers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker" [(here)](#). S. B. Khoo, following Zanolli, defines it in more detail as an "organizational pathology in which co-workers essentially "gang up" and engage in ongoing rituals of humiliation, exclusion, unjustified accusations, emotional abuse and general harassment in their malicious attempt to force a targeted worker out of the workplace" [(here)](#). These and similar definitions are consistent with what the word meant to [Heinz Leymann](#), the German-Swedish psychologist who began research in this area in the 1980s, and to Nobel Laureate [Konrad Lorenz](#), in his earlier studies of collective aggression among birds and animals.

In this response to your request for comments from me on the Carollo conflict, I am obliged to recall explicitly these scientific definitions of the word *mobbing,* because in the all-important initial public discussion of this conflict [(here)](#), the newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* used the word in a loose, unscientific way that serves only to confuse the issue. The newspaper headlined its article on 22 October 2017, "ETH-Professorin mobbt jahrelang Doktoranden." Similarly, in the lede of its article on 25 October 2017, *NZZ* referred to Carollo as a professor "die Doktoranden schikaniert und gemobbt haben soll." In these quotations, the newspaper treats *mobbing* as a synonym for *bullying* or *harassment* (*schikanieren* or *belästigen*), one person's mistreatment or abuse of one or more other people. This is incorrect. It is not how specialists use the term. It clouds evidence of workplace conflict, deters understanding of what is going on.

Mobbing is collective aggression, something done by a coalition of individuals. You cannot do it by yourself. A one-person mob is a contradiction in terms. One person can show aggression toward another, bully or harass another, but not mob another. The latter can be done only by a group. The issue in the case at hand is whether Professor Carollo has *bullied* and *harassed* (*schikaniert* and *belästigt*) some of her students, so severely that she deserves to be dismissed, or whether some students, colleagues, and administrators have *mobbed* (ge*mobbt*) Professor Carollo, unfairly ganged up to get rid of her. These are the opposing hypotheses: *her* bullying or *their* mobbing. The question is which competing characterization of the conflict better fits the evidence. From what I have seen, I think the latter. I believe most other experts would agree.

Overall take on the Carollo conflict

Many accusations against a professor, if proven true, are generally accepted as grounds for dismissal. Examples are embezzling university funds, casino gambling with money from research grants, falsifying credentials, fabricating research results, and trading grades for sex. If the professor faces collective hostility on such a ground, it is beside the point. What matters is whether available evidence supports the accusation of serious misconduct at a specific time and place. If it does, the professor deserves to be sacked.

I have found no such offense in the roughly 50 separate accusations against Professor Carollo that I have gleaned from the documentation. The accusations are instead of the fuzzy kind to which I devoted a chapter of my first book on academic mobbing [(1998)](#):

- faults that are, like beauty, mainly in the eye of the beholder, so vague and general as to be hard to disprove – in the present case, bullying of students, harassment, micromanagement, disrespect, "inadequate leadership behaviour," expectation of "superhuman commitment";
- without identification of time, place, or frequency of the alleged offense, like "deadlines always changed according to her needs";
- when formulated in specific terms, trivial misdeeds, or maybe not misdeeds at all, like criticizing student posture, holding meetings with students in the evening, or advising a student to "spend less time on makeup and more on research";
- lacking context or comparison – Carollo is said to be "over-committed, no time for students," a characterization that fits many professors at any university;
- made by anonymous accusers, with lack of clarity as to how many there are and who said what.

From the documentation I have read, the case against Professor Carollo looks like the epitome of fuzziness, what is called in the judicial system a *nonsuit*, a flurry of imprecations showing great hostility but no actionable wrongdoing.

Most of the misconduct attributed to Professor Carollo reflects the normal, inevitable workings of any institution of research and advanced education. It is *normal* for professors sometimes to disagree about the quality of a doctoral student's work, *normal* for one professor to judge a student's work substandard and to decline to supervise the student further while another professor leaps at the opportunity to supervise the same student, *normal* for a student to switch supervisors, and *normal* for some students to think ill of the same professor that other students warmly applaud. Carollo appears to be a prolific, widely respected scholar, a high achiever by standard criteria, and a no-nonsense, demanding *Doktormutter*. At least five of her supervisees at ETH have gone on to faculty positions of their own [(Science 2017)](#). That some other of her supervisees have had unsatisfying relationships with her is regrettable, but not at all an offense for which anybody should be punished. It is how things go in the real world. In my own long career, I have appreciated the many kind comments from my students and supervisees, I am proud of my teaching awards, but I am also mindful that some students have found me inept and unfair, like the anonymous churl who wrote just three memorable words on the course evaluation, "Fuck you, Kenny!"

From the documentation I have read, the following appear to be the key circumstances that led to formation of the mob bent on eliminating Professor Carollo from ETH:

- the broad cultural context of distrust of authority, celebration of victimhood, censoriousness, what Robert Hughes called [The Culture of Complaint](#), a *Zeitgeist* manifested in the crusade against alleged workplace bullies;

- invidious academic politics at ETH, especially between the physics department and the separate institute of astronomy where Professor Carollo and her husband, Professor Simon Lilly, held their appointments;
- Professor Carollo's termination of her supervision of a doctoral student in late 2016, on grounds of unsatisfactory performance;
- this student's angry retaliation, her complaints to the ETH ombudsperson and *Prorektor* for Graduatre Studies that Carollo had mistreated her and other supervisees;
- the zealotry of one or more administrative officials, who took up the angry student's cause and gathered complaints from others, building the case against Carollo in the name of protecting students from victimization;
- in October of 2017, the leaking of the internal, until then confidential, complaints against Professor Carollo to *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*;
- the newspaper's readiness to break the story and frame it (see Schneider 2010 on "framing contests") as a case of heroic whistleblowing, the outing of an academic ogre, in a way that identified Professor Carollo publicly without explicitly naming her;
- almost instant spread of the newspaper account worldwide in the community of physicists and astronomers;
- prompted by this publicity and under pressure from Carollo's adversaries on campus, the administration's closure of the institute of astronomy, public denunciation of her, imposition of restrictions on her work, and commencement of proceedings toward dismissing her.

Now to your questions.

1. Which aspects of her case drew your attention most?

The formulaic character of the charges against Professor Carollo was one aspect of the conflict that initially caught my attention. Fuzzy charges like these have become almost routine in the academic workplace.

Second, Carollo is in the tiny minority of full professors of physics who are female – only five percent or so in America (click here), apparently about the same percentage at ETH.

A third aspect was the obvious embeddedness of the accusations against Carollo in administrative politics at ETH surrounding the separate institute of astronomy.

What got my attention most was that by one week after *NZZ* broke the story, 700 astronomers and other scientists from around the world had signed an open letter accepting the *NZZ* framing as established fact (Sciencemag 11/2/2017). Written by Professor Bryan Gaensler of the University of Toronto, the letter identified the ETH accusers as *victims*, implying as a further fact that Carollo is a victimizer, a bully: "We write to express our support for the anonymous early-career researchers who have been victims of bullying at ETH…" (here). Only after many signatures were gathered did somebody think to suggest inserting the word *alleged*.

This letter is dramatic evidence of online, virtual mobbing. The hundreds of signers did not each review evidence separately and independently, then reach a common conclusion. All these people firmly taking one side of a workplace conflict reflected nothing more than social contagion, the sharing of hearsay. The letter was their means of virtue signaling, a conspicuous show of good character and moral correctness on the issue of bullying. The letter had no need to name Carollo. Her identity was already obvious in the community of astronomers (see this post from 10/23/2017). Online collective denunciations like this one have become common in our time. Here is a more extreme example with 9,000 signatures, demanding the resignation of a prominent history professor accused but not yet found guilty of wrongdoing.

The Gaensler document is in sharp contrast to an earlier open letter in support of Carollo, this one with 25 signers, at least half of whom appear to have worked with Carollo, five of them under her supervision. This letter lauds the work of Professors Lilly and Carollo at ETH and defends Carollo against the slurs of the *NZZ* article, but without showing eagerness to punish anyone. It does not read like the work of an academic mob.

2. How do you evaluate the handling of the case by the university?

I have not studied the ETH policies on conflict resolution. I assume they reflect the standard priority on informal mediation and constructive problem-solving, without anybody being punished. This often involves helping the warring parties go their separate ways, get out of each other's hair, and build productive, satisfying relations with other co-workers.

The priority in the present case, by contrast, on the part of the ombudsperson, *Prorektor* for graduate affairs, acting chair of physics, and senior administrators, appears to have been punitive. Professor Carollo was scantily informed during the first months of 2017, while administrators plotted against her. According to Professor Carollo, she learned later that the ombudsman had come out in favour of her dismissal as early as February, and in early March, the vice-president for human resources reassigned three of Carollo's four doctoral supervisees to other professors.

By the rules of natural justice, an accused person must be fully informed of the accusations and given opportunity to respond. These rules were followed loosely at best in the present case – a hallmark of mobbing. So far as I can tell, Professor Carollo was not told who her accusers were, and given only a composite list of vague complaints. The administrators seem to have reached a consensus that she was guilty of serious misconduct without having attended to her side of the story.

Flaws in the university's handling of this case pale, however, by comparison to the wrongness of the *NZZ* article of 22 October 2017, which smeared Professor Carollo indelibly while ignoring her side of the story altogether. She did indeed decline to be interviewed, presumably for the same good reason as Board President Fritz Schiesser declined, that this was a confidential internal matter not yet resolved. I have come across quite a few mobbing cases where a

periodical drags a professor's name through mud on the word of anonymous accusers, while the professor has no voice. This case is an egregious example, a veritable hatchet job.

By publishing the article, the author and editors became key participants in this mobbing. On a scale of sneakiness, their use of fake names (Gabiela M. and Paul F.) for Professors Carollo and Lilly scores high. The journalists made a show of disguising the professors' identities, while at the same time publishing more than enough information to identify them unmistakably – married couple, full professors, one British, who had founded the ETH Institute of Astronomy in 2002 and led it ever since, and more).

3. For months, ETH left Marcella Carollo in the dark about what she is accused of. To this day, she was not allowed to see the testimonials written by (former) PhD-students and post-docs on which the entire investigation is based. Is this typical of cases of academic bullying?

I avoid using the word *bullying*, finding it too broad and subjective for scientific purposes. The word *mobbing*, by contrast, has a clear, specific empirical meaning: the coalescence of individuals into a fanatic group aimed at destroying a target.

Yes, withholding accusations and denunciations from the target for as long as possible is typical of cases of academic mobbing. This makes it harder for the target to mount a defense, and it encourages exaggeration of the target's alleged misdeeds in the workplace gossip mill.

Keeping the accusers' identities secret is also typical, and it serves the same purposes. It is comical sometimes how institutional authorities solemnly insist on keeping the supposedly powerless student accusers' names confidential, in order to protect them from retaliation by the supposedly powerful accused professor, while the latter is maligned by name.

The U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, famously wrote that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." One implication is prompt, full disclosure of accusations to someone accused. Another is symmetry in naming: either keep the names of both accuser and accused confidential, or publicly identify both of them.

4. Why do you think there was never a presumption of innocence for Marcella Carollo?

In cases like Carollo's, administrators typically defend their incursions on a professor's job by saying, "I had no ill will toward her at the start. I barely knew her name. But then I kept getting reports from students whom she had horribly abused. I could tell these students were in real distress. Why would they lie? I had a responsibility to take action."

It is by this line of thinking that an academic mobbing often reaches the stage of formal discipline. An alliance forms between student accusers and administrators. The presumption of innocence enshrined in Western jurisprudence is not thought to be relevant. Administrators just "believe the survivors," admire "victims" brave enough to come forward, and refrain from questioning their motives or memories. The lack of procedural safeguards for the accused is a

major difference between mobbing and the routine administration of justice through the courts.

5. Can the investigation conducted by the university be considered «unbiased»?

An important question. I suspect the ETH investigation follows a pattern I and other researchers have written about extensively (see here, for example). In the face of a mob demanding action against the targeted professor, administrators hesitate to go out on a limb and impose sanctions without some kind of backing. They therefore appoint and pay an outside expert – typically a lawyer or consulting psychologist – to make an investigation and write a report. This expert is not neutral. He or she tends to be biased toward whatever position in the matter the expert believes the administration holds. But the expert also hesitates to go out on a limb. The safest way to write the eventual report is to appear to be neutral and simply present the interview results – which consist mainly of deprecations of the target. The typical report therefore tends to be slanted in the mobbers' favour. There is strength in numbers. That is what gives mobbing its power. Administrators then use the expert's report as a basis for taking action against the targeted professor.

As further answer to your question, let me cite an important recent arbitration in Canada. An angry movement arose over a number of years at Queen's University against a senior professor named Adèle Mercier. Co-workers accused her of harassment. The administration appointed an external lawyer to conduct an investigation. On the basis of this expert's report, the administration took punitive action against Professor Mercier. She filed a grievance on this account, which was eventually the subject of an arbitration hearing. The administration sought to introduce sections of the external lawyer's report as evidence in this hearing. The faculty association, representing Professor Mercier, strongly objected, arguing that the report was prejudicial to her. In November 2017, the arbitrator ruled strongly in the faculty association's favour. The arbitrator called the disputed sections of the report "hearsay or double hearsay," and said these sections, "if admitted for the truth of the contents, would be giving life to facts that have not met the requirement of testimony under oath that is subject to cross-examination. Further, their admission would give life to certain of the opinions of the investigator as to the conclusions that I must draw from the evidence before me presented under oath and made subject to cross-examination."

In a subsequent decision early in 2019, not yet available online, the arbitrator fully exonerated Professor Mercier and declared the university's sanctions against her unwarranted.

6. In your opinion, what role did Marcella Carollo's gender play in this case of academic mobbing (she was one of two female professors in the Department of Physics, which included 27 male professors)?

I don't know what role her being female played in the campaign against her. Her adversaries would likely say, "No role at all." Imputing motives to other people is risky business. I have trouble sometimes knowing my own motives, why I do what I do. So far as possible, I

emphasize behaviour more than motives, actions more than intentions, in trying to make sense of mobbing cases and conflict in general.

In a 2006 article, I identified five main conditions that increase a person's vulnerability to being mobbed at work. The second condition on the list was: "Being different from most colleagues in an elemental way (by sex, for instance, sexual orientation, skin color, ethnicity, class origin, or credentials)." It is well established that being in a sex-defined minority in one's workplace increases the odds of being ganged-up-on, humiliated, and expelled. Heinz Leymann himself described the vulnerability of male teachers in elementary schools staffed mainly by females. I note that Professor Carollo and many of her supporters believe that prejudice against women lies at the root of the campaign against her. The research literature leads me to suspect they are right. For sure, women in physics are a small minority, the more so at senior ranks.

I should mention also, however, the first item on my list of conditions that heighten vulnerability to being mobbed at work: "Foreign birth and upbringing, especially as signaled by a foreign accent." I suspect the fact that neither Professor Carollo nor Professor Lilly is native Swiss has a great deal to do with the movement against her, possibly more than her being female. The *NZZ* article identified her husband as a "British professor." She herself is of Sicilian birth and upbringing. They both arrived at ETH from professorships in English-speaking North America. I observed in the documentation that many emails between Professor Carollo and her supervisees were in English or Italian, as opposed to the Zürich vernacular. I do not know how complete is her command of Swiss German, but I noticed her report that an administrator said he used a less precise but more common German word in a communication to her, for fear that she would not understand the more precise but less common German word. All this leads me to suspect that Professors Carollo and Lilly are seen as foreigners at ETH, people who do not entirely belong.

Let me make a further observation in this connection, since I have come across quite a few mobbing cases wherein the targeted professor's spouse was employed in the same workplace. The campaign against Professor Carollo is targeted not just on her but on her husband. The Institute of Astronomy was their common project from 2002 to 2017, and its abolition was a blow to him as well as to her. The prospect of her dismissal from ETH threatens disruption not only of her career but of the agenda of work she and he have been jointly pursuing in Zürich for more than 15 years.

Yet one further observation. Administrators have pointed out that the appointment of both members of a married couple to the same academic unit, as was done in the case of Professors Lilly and Carollo in 2002, would not be done at ETH today. That such double appointments complicate relations in an institute or department is true enough. Pierre and Marie Curie had to fight hard for their own laboratory and later the Institute of Radium at the University of Paris (and the Polish-born Marie was the subject of xenophobic attacks by the native-born French). What matters in academic politics, and in the resolution of academic conflicts, is that all concerned keep the advancement of science as the overriding goal. If the authorities in Paris had not done that, if they had fretted too much about the fact that Pierre and Marie were not just colleagues but husband and wife, the discovery of radium might have been long delayed. I

hope that in resolving the conflict around Professors Carollo and Lilly, the authorities in Zürich will keep scientific and scholarly values uppermost in their minds.

7. Would she have been treated differently if she were a male professor?

This is hypothetical question that I cannot answer. In 20 years of research on academic mobbing, I have studied many hundreds of cases. No two are quite alike. Being male gives no immunity from being mobbed. I have written about the mobbing of a male professor of physics at the University of Ottawa, Denis Rancourt, who was formally dismissed in 2008 and who has obtained satisfactory redress only this winter, ten years later. I think it would be a mistake to hang the case of Professor Carollo on the single analytic hinge of sex discrimination. That, I suspect, is just one of the hinges on which it hangs, or to use a different metaphor, one important ingredient of the toxic stew that is poisoning her career.

8. What changes need to be made to the legal framework and governance within the university to prevent further cases such as those of Marcella Carollo?

In a 2005 paper, I set forth in ten points what I called the "Waterloo strategy for prevention of mobbing in higher education. The first point, a kind of motto or mantra of my university's Human Resources Department, is, "Focus on the situation, issue, or behaviour, not the person." It appears to me that at ETH, a focus on the person of Professor Carollo has distracted the institution from issues that need to be sorted out and constructively resolved.

9. In her essay the Canadian professor Eve Seguin writes that targets are often described as bullies. «At universities, this can easily be used against mobbed professors. All it takes is to make a faint allusion to, and if necessary, produce alleged student victims. The (self)-infantilization of students that plagues universities nowadays has only made this simpler.» (https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/academic-mobbing-become-campus-tormentors/). Do you see any signs that this has played a role in Carollo's case? And do you expect such cases to become more frequent in the future?

Seguin writes with much insight not only about academic mobbing but about the cultural context out of which many current cases arise. The frequency with which professors and other authority figures are denounced as bullies is wearisome. One of the things that aroused my interest in the conflict surrounding Professor Carollo was reading that she has been called a bully – a vague, imprecise, trite denunciation that, in the absence of detail, a reasonable observer should ignore.

Seguin is also right in attributing many current problems to the infantilization of students, as if they were tender, weak, helpless creatures – *snowflakes,* to use a current term. Like other human beings, including the allegedly powerless and oppressed, students have *agency*, minds of their own and the ability to pursue their own purposes. The students who have collectively mobilized against Professor Carollo are not infants, not children, not even teenagers. They are university graduates, young adults of above-average intelligence and cleverness. Allowing them

to remain anonymous while destroying the name and career of a professor they dislike is a nice example of infantilizing them.

Will cases like Professor Carollo's become more frequent in the future? Until universities recover a sense of purpose and defend professors who have high expectations of themselves and their students, we can expect academic life to get bogged down in steadily more conflicts like this one.

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