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Gender, Authoritarian Populisms, and the Attack on Democracy

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The rhetoric of “saving children” has long been central to the religious right playbook in the United States, especially in campaigns against abortion rights, gay/lesbian rights, and against comprehensive sex education. Today the guardians of the traditional family, increasingly globalized, have shifted their focus to protecting women and girls from so-called “gender ideology.” These campaigns emerge in relation to a renewed authoritarian populism which seeks consent for deeply conservative policies by claiming to represent “the people” against the supposed threat posed by minority groups aligned with elites. In these campaigns, feminists and LGBT people are charged with conspiring with medical professionals and teachers to indoctrinate children and undermine fixed notions of gender and sexuality. Rather than see these campaigns as single-issue attacks on feminists or LGBT people, we should understand them as attacks on democracy; an effective defense against them therefore requires us to promote a vision of inclusive democracy.

KEYWORDS: authoritarian populism; Christian nationalism; democracy; gender ideology; sexuality; transgender.

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, parents in communities across the nation received an anonymous flyer in the mail. It objected to three specific children’s books and urged people to take a stand against them at upcoming board of education meetings. One of the books in question, the award-winning “When Aidan Became a Brother,” was on a recommended summer reading list for kindergartners and first-graders. The book tells the story of Aidan, a child designated a girl at birth who feels at odds with his assigned gender. In the book Aidan explores “different ways of being a boy,” and his parents learn from other parents of transgender children that it is okay to do that. Eventually, with the help of his parents and community, Aidan begins to feel more comfortable in his own skin. Parents objected to the book on the grounds it encourages kids to identify as transgender.

In August 2021, the *New York Times* reported a new rise in “school culture wars” over the teaching of gender theory (Mervosh and Heyward 2021). Parents called for the censorship of LGBTQ related books, and contested individuals’ right to claim transgender identities and occupy public spaces, such as school bathrooms. These campaigns represent a renewed wave of rightwing populist mobilization

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against sexual and gender liberalism in the United States, continuing the battles of the past in a somewhat new guise.

During the 1980s and 1990s, in the United States, rightwing populist campaigns organized by evangelical Protestant and (to a lesser extent) conservative Catholic organizations cast gays and lesbians, supporters of women's abortion rights, and proponents of comprehensive sexuality education as immoral individuals who challenge the "natural" dichotomy of the sexes and the authority of fathers. They charged that undeserving elites exert an outsized influence upon the state and its institutions, manipulating it in order to carry out their liberal agenda. And they used affect and emotions such as anger, shame, and rage, to amplify their message and to gain adherents for their "culture war" against secular liberalism (Hunter 1992; Stein 2022 [2001]).

In the new millennium, rightwing populist campaigns became globalized, somewhat more secularized, and increasingly animated by the goal of overturning "gender ideology." This frame emerged in Europe and Latin America as conservative Catholic activists sought to discredit gender studies programs and scholars of gender, whom they accused of being ideological, pseudo-religious, and propagating pseudo-science (Corredor 2019; Graff et al. 2019; Hark 2022). Rightwing activists have long argued that feminist and queer notions of gender threaten a presumed natural social order, promote heterosexuality, and induce gender confusion. Increasingly, they draw upon themes from the rapidly globalizing anti-gender discourse, using both secular and faith-based arguments to reassert essentialized notions of gender and sexuality.

These campaigns emerge in relation to the rise of "authoritarian populism"—a term first used by British cultural theorist Stuart Hall in the 1980s to make sense of the appeal of Margaret Thatcher (Hall 1985). As Hall explains, Thatcher's promise to put the 'great' back into Great Britain gained popular consent for deeply conservative policies while retaining formal democratic institutions. Authoritarian populists gain consent by claiming to represent "the people" against the supposed threat posed by so-called outsiders—typically pictured as minority groups who are aligned with elites.

In campaigns against gender and sexual liberalism, authoritarian populists oppose the efforts of feminists and LGBT activists, whom they charge are conspiring with liberal elites, especially medical professionals and teachers, to indoctrinate their children with radical conceptions of gender and sexuality. Contemporary battles against gender self-expression are animated by the figure of the innocent, vulnerable child who symbolizes national purity, and at times racial purity too (Gill-Peterson 2021; Marx Ferree 2020; Stern 2019). They gesture toward feminism, and at times even make common cause with some feminists, claiming to defend women and girls against a supposed transgender threat. Deploying essentialist understandings of gender and (often) race, they seek to uphold traditional hierarchies and undermine critical understandings of difference.

Rather than see these campaigns as single-issue attacks on feminists, or LGBT people, we should see them as attacks on democracy. By feeding on political disaffection, they seek to undermine democratic norms and institutions. To defend against them we must promote a vision of inclusive democracy.

DOING IT FOR THE KIDS

The rhetoric of “saving children” has long been central to the religious right playbook in the United States, especially in campaigns against abortion rights, gay/lesbian rights, and against comprehensive sex education. What is new is that the guardians of the traditional family now proclaim to be protecting women and girls from becoming the unwitting, nonconsenting victims of gender/trans ideology. They assert that trans women threaten cis women by infringing on single-sex spaces, making them unsafe, erasing women’s sex-based rights, taking opportunities away from women, and recruiting young cis girls into transness.

Christian conservatives have long positioned themselves as saviors of “the family,” against state governments and local school boards which advocate for the teaching of sex education, “secular humanism,” and evolution (Irvine 2002, 2023), and called for women’s return to “traditional” roles as wives, homemakers, and mothers. They see women as producers of the nation whose role is conceived largely in terms of maintaining traditional households, raising children, and supporting their breadwinner husbands, and have therefore defended versions of hegemonic masculinity which position men as protectors of the family.

In the 1980s and 90s in the United States, as the Republican Party sought to establish itself as the party of so-called “traditional values,” religious conservatives began to mobilize in evangelical churches, whose numbers were rapidly growing. In Oregon, for example, a Christian conservative group sponsored a ballot initiative to try to amend the state constitution to prohibit legal protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It called upon the state to protect youth from exposure to so-called perverse behaviors, and to act against the promotion of homosexuality. The amendment would have defined homosexuality as a perverse practice, along with pedophilia and sadism. Pivotal, it also reframed civil rights protections for LGBT people as “special rights” (Stein 2022 [2001]).

When the right questioned whether LGBT people should be full citizens, they were attacking the very notion that the state should protect its most vulnerable citizens, whether they are queer, or people of color, or immigrants, or others. When they warned that schools were promoting homosexuality, they expressed their fear that the knowledge kids learn in schools can unsettle norms and open up new possibilities for living—and they did not want their children to enjoy that kind of freedom. When they attacked gay/lesbian rights they were also attacking elites—principally government officials, teachers, and medical professionals.

More recently, the fight focused on the very notion of gender, which the right cast as “gender ideology.” Focusing on the plight of children, rightwing campaigners affirm essentialist understandings of sex, charging that feminist and queer notions threaten the natural social order, sexualize children, promote homosexuality, and induce gender confusion. “At younger ages than ever before, American children are being targeted by the left with sexual content and destructive gender ideology . . . biological differences between the sexes are integral to the personhood and health of all children. A child’s best chance at a happy and healthy life is one free from sexual

politics, one in which kids can be kids.”² Thus warned a group calling itself the Promise to American Children, sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, a leading rightwing organization.

Concerns about the sexualization of children have been a feature of rightwing discourse at least since the 1970s and 80s. Beginning in the 2010s, responding to the growing influence of the transgender movement, the right began to focus on the problem of “gender ideology.” Targeting elementary and secondary school teachers, school administrators, and members of school boards, they used secular arguments to assert that curricula which questions the essential, fixed nature of gender and sexuality are unscientific and pose threats to public health. Continuing long-standing rightwing movements for “parental rights,” which seek to assert the authority of the patriarchal family, they charged that elite state actors are usurping the role of parents and interfering with their right to determine their childrens’ futures.

By the new millennium, transgender Americans had become more visible and more numerous. They had come to enjoy greater access than prior generations to language and concepts which made the idea of modifying their bodies more imaginable. Trans activists, drawing upon the work of feminists and sexologists, located gender in the mind rather than in the body, defining it as an “inner essence of which each individual is the sole legitimate interpreter” (Brubaker 2016:136). And they fought to enable people to adopt language, occupy spaces, and modify their bodies in ways that conform to their gender identities (Stein 2018a). A 2015 survey of a thousand 13- to 20-year olds in the United States reported that 56% knew someone who used gender-neutral pronouns such as “ze,” and over 80% agreed that gender does not define a person as much as it used to (Risman 2018; Stein 2018a, 2018b).

In many respects, trans activists’ efforts to gain support for gender diversity proved remarkably successful. The Obama Administration enacted rules which allowed individuals to change the gender on passports, and in May 2016, directed all US school districts to allow transgender students to use bathrooms consistent with their gender identity, rather than the gender they were assigned at birth.³

The right fought back, first with “bathroom bills” to prevent trans people from using bathrooms which align with their gender identity. These state and local initiatives focused on the supposed threat posed by transfeminine people to cisgender women and girls, raising the specter of sexual assault (Westbrook and Schilt 2015). To guard against threats by boys and men “masquerading” as female, they sought to re-essentialize sex/gender by compelling those who are assigned the sex of male at birth to use men’s bathrooms. Though most of these bills were eventually defeated at the polls, President Trump signed an executive order rescinding federal protections for transgender students that had allowed them to use bathrooms corresponding with their gender identity, reversing Obama-era policies.

On the first day of his administration in January 2021 President Biden directed all federal agencies that enforce federal laws prohibiting sex discrimination to also

² The Heritage Foundation, “Promise to America’s Children Warns of Destructive Equality Act LGBT Agenda,” February 19, 2021. <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/promise-americas-children-warns-destructive-equality-act-lgbt-agenda>.

³ Samantha Allen. How Obama Became the Trans-Rights President. The Daily Beast. May 13, 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/05/13/how-obama-became-the-trans-rights-president.html>.

prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. He recognized that “transgender black Americans face unconscionably high levels of workplace discrimination, homelessness, and violence, including fatal violence,” and sought to permit trans students to participate in school sports in ways that accord with their gender identities.⁴ And then, within the first 5 months of 2021, in a backlash against the progressive policies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, conservatives pushed more than 250 anti-LGBTQ bills into state legislatures around the country, the majority of which targeted trans, nonbinary, and gender-expansive youth.

ESSENTIALIZING GENDER AND RACE

Turning liberal discourse against itself, a female Congresswoman speaking on a panel against trans rights proclaimed: “We need to celebrate our differences rather than make us all the same.” In contrast, she declared, transgender activists deny the essential differences between men and women. The right that has sought to consolidate essentialized notions of binary gender, and legislate against those who would make public facilities more accessible to those who embrace gender identities which are at odds with their assigned sex.

After fighting to defend men’s sports and minimize the reach of Title IX of the Higher Education Act (which promises equal access to education, including team sports, for all students and protects them against discrimination on the basis of sex), Republican lawmakers also became obsessed with “saving women’s sports,” introducing over 100 bills in more than 30 states limiting trans children’s access to sports teams. Women tended to be the visible spokespersons for such campaigns to ban trans women and girls from women’s sports, on the grounds that “these policies destroy opportunities for female athletes and deprived children of privacy and safety.”⁵ They argued that transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in girls’ and women’s sports, though they presented no convincing evidence to that effect (Swisher and Strangio 2021).

Critiques of “gender ideology” also fueled efforts to restrict gender-affirmative medical care for young people on the grounds that the very notion of transgender children is a dangerous myth constructed by those who would seek to “convert” masculine cisgender girls especially. Echoing early panics around homosexual “contagion,” some warned of an “epidemic” of “rapid onset gender dysphoria” that misled young women into thinking they were “really” men, causing them to mutilate their bodies, and become sterile. They claimed that transgender is a fad, a “craze” sweeping America’s youth, raising questions about whether individuals are capable of clearly articulating their desires and choices for body modification technologies such as puberty blockers and cross-gender hormones (Schrier 2020).

It was a short jump from such assertions to the claim that gender affirmative health care, typically through pubertal suppression or affirming hormone therapy, is

⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-preventing-and-combating-discrimination-on-basis-of-gender-identity-or-sexual-orientation/>.

⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, “What President Biden’s LGBTQ Executive Order Does and Doesn’t Do,” January 21, 2021. <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/what-president-bidens-lgbtq-executive-order-does-and-doesnt-do/>.

a form of child abuse, which is precisely what a Texas bill argued. “Children should not be experimented on,” proclaimed a Republican congresswoman. “We believe in the wholeness of children’s minds, their bodies, and their relationship with their parents.”⁶ Such claims suggest that gender differences are inviolable, and that parents should always have ultimate authority over their children’s lives and choices. It is a short jump from this view to the belief that racial hierarchies are also immutable, and that the United States is fundamentally a white Christian nation.

AGAINST CRITICAL FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE

In the United States and Europe, struggles against the notion of gender have come to unite a spectrum of reactionary forces—authoritarian, traditionalist, and ethno-nationalist. In the United States, these battles increasingly bring white nationalists and religious conservatives together, enlisting white women into the role of guardians of the white Christian nation. If 1990s campaigns against abortion rights, comprehensive sex education, and LGBT rights in the United States skirted the issue of race, contemporary rightwing populists are more and more willing to make racist appeals explicit.

Christian nationalism upholds patriarchy and heteronormativity, stands for white supremacy, and believes that there is divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It contends that America “has been and should always be distinctively ‘Christian’ from top to bottom—in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies” (Perry et al. 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020). While white men are the principal proponents of this ideology, large numbers of white women also embrace such ideas, imagining themselves as mother/protectors of the nation.

Many of the same organizations which are mobilizing against “gender ideology” are also working to ban the teaching of “critical race theory” (CRT), a body of scholarly literature which argues that white supremacy of the past lives on in the laws and societal rules of the present (Crenshaw 2019). “Elites are enforcing a set of manners and cultural limits,” said one spokesman for the campaign against CRT, and “they’re seeking to reengineer the foundation of human psychology and social institutions through the new politics of race” (Wallace-Wells 2021). Again, as in all populist campaigns, elites are blamed for championing ideas which threaten “the people.”

The right charged that educational curricula that teach critical race and gender theories subvert the purity of innocent children, making them unwitting victims of liberal indoctrination. An anti-trans campaigner offered the following analogy between the teaching of black studies and queer studies: “After 1964 federal courts ordered public schools to teach black history to remedy discrimination against African Americans. In like fashion, federal courts could also order schools to teach the sexual orientation and gender identity curricula.”⁷ It seemed to matter little to them

⁶ <https://www.heritage.org/gender/event/virtual-event-the-promise-americas-children-protecting-kids-extreme-gender-ideology>.

⁷ “Promise to America’s Children,” <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/promise-americas-children-warns-destructive-equality-act-lgbt-agenda>.

that critical race theories are mainly taught in colleges and universities, and rarely if ever at the kindergarten through high school level.

Those who oppose the circulation of critical forms of knowledge such as these are threatened by the possibility that individuals could use these ideas to live openly as feminists and LGBT people, or to struggle against white supremacy. Critical theories of race and gender, in contrast, show us that hierarchies of race and gender are not natural but are in fact human-made social arrangements. They tell us that things do not have to stay as they are. Knowledge can set one free, unsettling norms, and opening up new possibilities for living.

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

The right-wing organizations leading the charge against critical forms of knowledge have ambitions that go beyond rolling back LGBTQ rights, women's rights, the rights of racial minorities, or even the rights of children. Their goal is to threaten democracy. They know that an educated citizenry can demand certain things of their elected officials, and that an uneducated citizenry is more easily manipulable. Their want to sow distrust in science, public education, and the operations of the secular democratic state by polarizing Americans and turning us against one another, stirring resentments, exacerbating divisions, and diminishing our faith in public institutions.

Arendt (1973) noted that twentieth-century totalitarian rulers were successful because they managed to destroy civic institutions, keeping people away from one another and preventing them from sharing creative or productive projects. They made people afraid to speak to one another. Isolation corrodes democracy and makes resistance impossible. It feeds resentments, and leads to mistrust—of one's neighbors, elected officials, one's community. Institutions such as libraries and schools are guardrails that protect us against isolation. They help to nurture social bonds that make community possible. And they give young people the capacity to lead more fulfilling lives.

Many years ago, as the Tea Party began to mobilize in Oregon, Marcy Westerling, a visionary organizer who founded a group called the Rural Organizing Project, began a campaign to defend post offices small towns throughout the state. People showed up, holding signs proclaiming that they love their post offices. They handed out hot chocolate. In retrospect, her strategy was brilliant. She knew both how precious and how precarious so many of the public institutions are that we take for granted. She understood that these institutions—libraries, schools, and even post offices—make democracy possible. They keep our society functioning. They enable us to communicate with one another. They protect us. And they work to alleviate the isolation that often comes with living in our large, complex, and fragmented society. They bring us together and put us into contact with one another. Authoritarian populism feeds on cynicism and complacency. It seeks to divide us. Defending democracy means nurturing the social bonds that make community and democracy possible.

POSTSCRIPT

A few months after completing this essay, I learned that my book “Unbound”, a study of transgender men, was challenged by parents in League City, Texas, for possible removal from the public library. Its mayor had established a committee to oversee the public library system to determine whether books in its collection violated “community standards.” For the first time, it selected three books to challenge. My book was among them.

I had followed with great interest, and more than a little dismay, campaigns to ban books over the past few years. I knew that nearly half of all book bans, according to PEN America, target LGBTQ+ themes. But because I live in the reliably blue state of New Jersey and teach at a university, I felt fairly insulated from it all—until then.

My book had caught the eye of someone who had seen it on display at the city’s Helen Hall Library during Pride Month in June. They reported it to the Community Standards Review Committee on the grounds that it was potentially “obscene.” At a preliminary hearing, members of the review committee argued that my book was “strategically placed” near the children’s section of the library, an unsubstantiated claim. They also warned that my book (and one other) other would “indoctrinate our kids to [the] LGBTQ and transgender lifestyle.”

But why pick on my book? Those who seek to ban books focus on their supposed threat to children, and my book is not a children’s book. Nor is it even vaguely “obscene.” It tells the story of four people in their 20s who decide to modify their bodies to align them more closely with their felt sense of gender. It is a sociological study written for a general audience.

The right claims that that by publicly discussing LGBTQ+ issues we threaten families by undermining the ties between parents and children. But if the responses to my book are any indication, the opposite is true. By offering parents the possibility of better understanding their children, my book, and others like it, contribute to keeping family bonds intact. In fact, I wrote the book with the parents of one of my interview subjects in mind. Bob and Gail Shepherd live in Maine. I met them in the waiting room of a surgeon in Florida as they accompanied their son Ben, who was having his chest masculinized.

They were looking for answers to the questions: why is my child trans? What will his life be like once he transitions? These are the same questions many parents of trans young people are understandably asking. Books like mine help make sense of what can be a scary and confusing process. By all accounts, this is where my book has proven most useful.

In the end, the committee decided to table the matter until they actually read the book. They will then decide whether to “dispose of or destroy” the library’s copy. It’s a chilling thought. “It always starts with book bans,” an acquaintance of mine remarked. The cauldron of fascism began with the public burning of books. Seemingly symbolic attacks on knowledge, we now know, can have catastrophic effects.

The truth is that people will seek out information about controversial issues whether my book, or other such books, are in their library. The question is: will they have access to the kinds of thoughtful knowledge that one can only find in books? Books alone cannot influence people to radically upend their lives, but they can offer

clarifying information to those who are suffering, so that they know they are not alone. They can also help people better understand those who are different from them. By encouraging us to reflect upon and interrogate our taken-for-granted ideas about how the world works, books make our democracy stronger. That, in the end, is precisely what would-be book banners, and other moral crusaders against gender and sexual diversity, really fear.

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