

# Fear of a Gender-Fluid Planet? Rightwing Populism in the Contemporary US

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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 have objected to the use of picture books that feature transgender children. They contest individuals' right to claim new gender identities and to occupy public spaces, such as school bathrooms, on that basis. These campaigns represent a new wave of rightwing populist mobilization 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 sexual education as immoral individuals who challenge the »natural« dichotomy of the sexes and the authority of fathers. They charged that an underserving elite exerts 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 1991; Stein 2001).

In the new millennium, rightwing populist campaigns are more globalized, somewhat more secularized, and are now animated, in part, 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, Kapur, Walters 2019; Hark 2022). US anti-feminist activists have long argued that feminist and queer notions of gender threaten a presumed natural social order, promote homosexuality and induce gender confusion. Increasingly, they

draw upon themes from the rapidly globalizing anti-gender discourse, using both secular and faith-based arguments to assert that efforts to question the essential nature of gender and sexuality are unscientific and dangerous.

If in Europe university gender studies programs have emerged as a particular focus of attack, in the US the right is focused on the education of children and teenagers. Recent campaigns have sought to combat the growing influence of the transgender movement in middle and high schools. A 2015 survey of a thousand 13- to 20-year olds in the United States reported that 56 percent knew someone who used gender-neutral pronouns such as »ze,« and over 80 percent agreed that gender does not define a person as much as it used to (Stein 2020a; Stein 2020b). To those on the right, these numbers are alarming, and indicate that growing numbers of young people are unwitting victims of liberal indoctrination.

Animating contemporary battles against gender self-expression is the figure of the innocent, vulnerable child who symbolizes national purity, and at times racial purity too (Gill-Peterson 2021; Stern 2019). They do so by gesturing toward feminism, and at times even making 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.

## **Saving Women and Children**

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 women's 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 positioned themselves as saviors of »the family,« against state governments and local school boards which advocate the teaching of sex education, »secular humanism,« and evolution (Irvine 2002), 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.

More recently the fight has turned against the very notion of gender, which the right casts 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. Concerns about the supposed sexualization of children has been a feature of rightwing discourse at least since the 1970s and 80s. It was not until the 2010s, with the growing influence of the transgender movement, that the right began to focus on the problem of »gender confusion«, locating the penetration of »gender ideology« into schools as the culprit.

»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.«<sup>1</sup>

Thus warned a group calling itself the Promise to American Children, sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, a leading rightwing organization. They used secular arguments to assert that efforts to question the essential nature of gender and sexuality are unscientific and are threats to public health, targeting elementary and secondary school teachers, school administrators, and members of school boards. 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 became 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

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1 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>

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 conformed to their gender identities (Stein 2018a). In many respects, activists' efforts 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 (a regulation that has the same authority as a law) 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 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.<sup>3</sup> And then, within the first five months of 2021, in a backlash against the progressive policies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, conservatives pushed more than

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2 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>

3 <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/>

250 anti-LGBTQ bills into state legislatures around the country, the majority of which targeted trans, non-binary, 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. But in fact it is the right that has sought to consolidate essentialized notions of binary gender, and to 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 suddenly 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.«<sup>4</sup> 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

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4 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/>.

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 a form of child abuse, which is precisely what a Texasbill 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.«<sup>5</sup> 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 US is fundamentally a white Christian nation.

## Against Critical Forms of Knowledge

In Europe, struggles against the notion of gender have come to unite a spectrum of reactionary forces—authoritarian and ethno-nationalist (Hark 2022). In the United States, these battles bring white nationalists and religious conservatives together, enlisting white women into the role of guardians of the white Christian nation. 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« (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 (Daniels 2021).

Globally, »femonationalists« often instrumentalize women's rights discourse for their own political advantage, such as by depicting Muslim women as victims who need to be »saved« from oppression while demonizing Muslim and non-Western immigrant men (Faris 2017). American social conservatives similarly claim to be concerned about children's privacy, safety, and security,

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

and girls' and women's opportunities to compete in sports or to feel safe in school bathrooms, while working against racial and gender equality. Indeed, if 1990s campaigns against abortion rights, comprehensive sex education, and LGBT rights in the US skirted the issue of race, contemporary rightwing populists are more and more willing to make racist appeals explicit.

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.«<sup>6</sup> It seemed to matter little to them that critical race theories are mainly taught in higher education, and rarely ever taught in kindergarten through high school.

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 show us that hierarchies of race and gender are not natural but are in fact human-made social arrangements. They tell us, writes feminist sociologist Sabine Hark (2022), that »things do not have to stay as they are.« Knowledge can set one free, unsettling norms and opening up new possibilities.

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6 »Promise to America's Children,« <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/promise-america-children-warns-destructive-equality-act-lgbt-agenda>.

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