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Sexual Revolutions

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Trans Visibility and Moral Panic in the 2010s

The 2010s marked a surge in the visibility of the transgender community that sparked both heated debates and advocacy movements. These conversations were especially prevalent in the U.S. government. Legislators tackled the topic of transgender rights more extensively than any time before. Issues revolving around the transgender community's access to facilities like bathrooms, locker rooms, sports, and prisons became controversial and widely contested during this time period. Mass media, including television and the emerging internet, played an important role in bringing these debates to the forefront of American politics. The media's widespread coverage of transgender issues amplified the controversy and influenced the beliefs of legislators, doctors, politicians, and American households. Amidst this increase in visibility and discourse, deliberate and reactionary movements formed and aggressively opposed the rights of the transgender community for a variety of reasons. Anti-trans conservatives opposed the acceptance of the transgender community, primarily motivated by traditional values and religious beliefs, while "gender-critical" feminists argued that transgender rights would endanger women and uphold patriarchal gender norms. I argue that the increased visibility of the transgender community during the 2010s led to the emergence of reactionary anti-trans movements.

Firstly, we must examine how the role of transgender people in American politics has changed during the 2010s. In 2012, Vice President Joe Biden stated that transgender equality is

“the civil rights issue of our time.”¹ Similarly, in 2014, *Time* magazine declared the topic as “America’s next civil rights frontier.”² In 2016, Sarah McBride was the first transgender speaker at a major party national convention, speaking to the Democratic National Convention in July.³ As of 2013, over 90% of people living in the U.S. reported hearing the word “transgender” at some point in time, and 75% of them claimed to know the meaning of the word.⁴ While this does not necessarily imply a widespread understanding of the debate surrounding transgender issues, this statistic highlights an increase in transgender visibility.

To gain a greater understanding of how the anti-trans movement gained the prevalence it now has today, we must explore the importance of mass media in shaping our cultural beliefs. According to Schiappa, most people first come into contact with a transgender person through mass media.⁵ Particularly, many people in the United States were first introduced to a transgender public figure through the publicized transition of Caitlyn Jenner in 2015.⁶ Jenner’s transition was significant as she was already culturally notable due to her career as an Olympic athlete and her appearance in the television program *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. While Jenner may not have been the public’s first introduction to transgender people as a concept, her publicized transition was notable as it enabled the public to understand the daily experiences and struggles of an individual transgender person, often for the first time. Other television programs like *I am Jazz* (a 2015 reality show that focuses on the experiences of Jazz Jennings, a young

¹ Edward Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency : Defining Sex and Gender in the 21st Century*, First edition (Routledge, 2021), 39.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, Second edition (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), 83.

⁵ Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency*, 39.

⁶ Ibid.

transgender woman) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (an ongoing reality competition show that started in 2009) increased transgender visibility during this time period.

When examining the reasons why transgender issues became prevalent during the 2010s specifically, the importance of the internet cannot be overstated. YouTube in particular contributed to this massive increase in transgender visibility, offering transgender youth the opportunity to share their experiences to an audience of unprecedented scale. The internet offers people a space to “explore new information and lifestyles,” and it “may be able to function as a tool for decreasing transphobia in society.”⁷ However, mass media does not always represent transgender people in a positive manner. Today, they are still often portrayed as “freaks,” “perverts,” and “mentally ill;” mass media also “homogenizes, stereotypes, and pathologizes” transgender people.⁸ For example, whistleblower Chelsea Manning was involved in the highest-profile transgender incarceration case in the United States for leaking classified military information.⁹ An article published online by Fox News in 2014 disrespectfully and intentionally refers to her by her “dead name,” the name assigned to her at birth, rather than Chelsea, even though her transition was public knowledge at this time.¹⁰ The article portrays her as an anti-American saboteur and pathologizes her gender identity as a “disorder.”¹¹ Demonstrably, both television programs and the internet have played a significant role in bringing transgender issues to the forefront of American attention in both positive and negative manners.

⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁸ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 11.

⁹ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 159.

¹⁰ “Pvt. [Chelsea] Manning, Convicted in WikiLeaks Case, Seeks Formal Name Change to Chelsea,” *Fox News*, March 19, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

Media exposure is so significant because it can play a role in reducing or creating prejudice against marginalized groups. Many social psychologists have attempted to explain this concept by developing what is known as the Contact Hypothesis or the Intergroup Contact Theory, which is based in the belief that prejudice often stems from ignorance; meaningful contact with members of a minority group can dispel stereotypes and increase understanding, reducing prejudice.¹² However, mass media can also delegitimize transgender issues. Barry L. Tadlock, a professor at Ohio University that researches LGBTQ politics, notes that mainstream coverage of trans issues from 1992-2011 differed significantly from the coverage of homosexual issues. Particularly, he noted that homosexual issues were typically covered as a conflict between equality and traditional values while transgender issues were almost always described using language that centers the debate in “highly individualistic rather than systemic terms.”¹³ This is significant, as this emphasis on individual experiences rather than systemic injustices underscores the complexity of transgender rights, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing these problems. For example, another Fox News article about Chelsea Manning describes her suicide attempt in prison, stating that her suicide risk was caused by a need for “more focused treatment for gender dysphoria.”¹⁴ However, the article neglects to mention the “cruel and arbitrary punishments” imposed upon her by the men’s prison she was incarcerated in which contributed to her fragile mental state.¹⁵ By framing her mental health struggles as caused by a lack of medical treatment rather than the discriminatory and inhumane treatment she received in the men’s prison due to her gender identity, the Fox News article obscures the need to address systemic issues such as transgender inmates. Due to the

¹² Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴ “Military Approves Hormone Treatment for Leaker Chelsea Manning,” *Fox News*, February 13, 2015.

¹⁵ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 158.

framing of transgender issues, the urgency of addressing systemic issues becomes diluted, and transgender issues are often mischaracterized as solely personal or medical matters that do not require broader societal changes.

This massive increase in transgender visibility has been met with intense opposition; anti-trans movements formed in response to the newfound prevalence of the transgender rights debate. A significant portion of the pushback against transgender rights came from self-proclaimed “gender-critical” feminists, who believed that “the very concept of gender” has been created to maintain “male supremacy and the oppression of women by men.”¹⁶ In 2013, a group of feminists published an open letter titled “Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of ‘Gender,’” arguing that the transgender rights movement is rooted in sexism; they viewed it as an intentional attempt by a powerful “transgender lobby” to enforce male dominance over women.¹⁷ Similarly, in 2014, Sheila Jeffreys published *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, which articulated a belief that “gender ideology” enables transgender women to harm cisgender women.¹⁸ Particularly, Jeffreys’s argument was that transgender women are attempting to “colonize” the women’s liberation movement and deliberately enforce gender roles.¹⁹ By framing transgender activism as an attempt to undermine the women’s liberation movement and enforce harmful gender stereotypes, Jeffreys uses her rhetoric to support a reactionary anti-trans movement. Additionally, Jeffreys notes that this issue is particularly notable in the 2010s due to the fact that “as a result of the greater visibility of the possibilities of transgenderism online and in the media generally,” more “cross-dressers” are

¹⁶ Ibid., 167.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 37.

transitioning.²⁰ Evidently, a subset of feminists deliberately attempted to undermine the goals of the new transgender rights movement, and their beliefs did contribute to tangible changes in United States politics.

In 2015, voters repealed the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), a piece of legislation that attempted to ban discrimination based on “age, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, genetic profile, disability, family or marital status, pregnancy, religion, military service, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.”²¹ Opponents of this legislation viewed it as a deliberate attempt to impose a set of progressive views on people that did not necessarily share these beliefs. It is important to note that transgender issues were a key factor in voters’ decisions. Campaign for Houston was an organization specifically founded by religious conservatives to combat HERO, and their rhetoric was specifically designed to target transgender women. The legislation was framed solely as a “bathroom ordinance;” activists displayed signs proclaiming “No Men in Women’s Restrooms” and aired ads that claimed that “Any man, at any time, could enter a women’s restroom, simply by claiming to be a woman that day.”²² Clearly, Campaign for Houston was an organization that was formed specifically to oppose the transgender rights movement, as their rhetoric focused primarily on an imagined threat posed by transgender women in public restrooms. Despite this movement being led by Christian conservatives, its rhetoric was very similar to the ideas expressed by the “gender-critical” feminists.

In 2016, the election of Donald Trump sparked a similar anti-trans movement that was backed in conservatism, again framing transgender women as a threat to cisgender women. Transgender issues were frequently debated during the Republican primaries, and Trump’s

²⁰ Ibid., 80.

²¹ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 167.

²² Ibid., 168.

running mate, Mike Pence, supported draconian anti-LGBT measures such as conversion therapy when he served as the governor of Indiana.²³ After Trump was elected, Attorney General Jeff Sessions was quick to appeal to overturn a ruling by a federal judge that found that the Obama administration's "guidance to interpret Title IX protections against sex discrimination as inclusive of gender identity," arguing that the interpretation of Title IX should be decided on a state-by-state basis instead.²⁴ This was a setback for transgender civil rights, as discrimination based on gender identity was not banned at the federal level. With the rise of the "alt-right," right-wing political commentators encouraged by Trump's election spread anti-trans rhetoric under the guise of "free speech."²⁵ I will demonstrate that increased transgender visibility brought the issue of transgender rights to the attention of American conservatives, who viciously opposed measures to protect transgender people from discrimination using similar rhetoric to "gender-critical" feminists.

To further understand the anti-trans movement during this decade, it is important to examine their rhetoric. By analyzing their talking points surrounding transgender rights, we can gain a greater understanding of the conditions that led to this moral panic. As previously discussed, bathrooms and locker rooms were a significant subject of debate. The failure of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance set a status quo that encouraged businesses and other institutions to "deny bathroom access to gay and transgender people without fear of violating anti-discrimination laws."²⁶ Conservatives were quick to latch onto bathroom access as an anti-trans talking point. In 2016, Ted Cruz declared: "If Donald Trump dressed up as Hillary Clinton,

²³ Ibid., 172.

²⁴ Ibid., 173.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency*, 73.

he still can't use the girl's restroom."²⁷ Similarly, Lt. Governor of Texas Daniel Patrick stated in 2015 that "Men in women's bathrooms defies common sense and common decency."²⁸ These statements are shockingly similar to those expressed by "gender-critical" feminist Sheila Jeffreys, who argued that transgender activism is "designed to force women to room, shower, and consort with men who cross-dress."²⁹

Clearly, conservatives and some feminists took issue with transgender people using the bathroom that aligned with their gender identity, particularly transgender women. Despite these claims, it is important to note that these statements are not based in actual evidence. Reports from 12 states that protect bathroom use on the basis of gender identity show "no evidence that non-discrimination laws have any relation to incidents of sexual assault or harassment in public restrooms."³⁰ As shown, conservatives and some feminists created a moral panic surrounding the topic of transgender people in public restrooms in an intentional attempt to oppose transgender rights.

The role of transgender people in competitive sports was similarly leveraged by conservatives to oppose transgender rights. Sports are typically segregated by gender; there is a polarization based on the belief that men have an inherent, biological advantage in sports. The participation of transgender people in sports became a frequent topic of debate during this time period, as their existence inherently challenges this dichotomy. In 2015, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) met to discuss this issue.³¹ They developed a new policy, which asserted that transgender individuals transitioning from female to male can compete as males

²⁷ Ibid., 79.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 177.

³⁰ Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency*, 80.

³¹ Ibid., 119.

with no restrictions, while those who transition from male to female are only eligible to compete if they maintain a female gender identity for at least four years and their testosterone levels do not exceed 10 nanomoles per liter for a year before their first competition.³² These requirements were met with backlash from all sides; progressives argued that these rules were bio-essentialist and that participation in sports should solely be based on self-identification, while conservatives argued that “the advantage to transwomen afforded by the IOC guidelines is an intolerable unfairness.”³³ Conservatives have continued to argue that male puberty gives transgender women a significant advantage even after hormone replacement therapy. This debate is especially prevalent with respect to youth athletes. States such as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Texas, etc. have regulations that segregate high school sports teams based strictly on assigned sex at birth.³⁴ Some states have similar guidelines to the IOC, requiring some form of medical transition, while others allow participation based solely on self-identification.³⁵ This issue continues to be heavily politicized. As of May 2021, legislators in over 30 states have introduced over 100 bills that limit transgender rights, and “more than half are about limiting sports participation.”³⁶ The issue of sports has been a frontier in the debate over transgender rights, and increased transgender visibility has sparked anti-trans outrage and legislation pertaining to transgender athletes. For example, the conservative Christian legal advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom recently published an article which claims that this issue is becoming increasingly urgent as “more and more male athletes have begun competing in

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 123.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

numerous women's sports" and "winning."³⁷ Evidently, the debate surrounding transgender participation in sports is becoming increasingly relevant as transgender visibility increases.

Overall, the surge in visibility of the transgender people brought transgender issues to the forefront of American politics during the 2010s, sparking crucial debates regarding transgender rights. Mass media, including television shows like *I am Jazz* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, alongside the internet, played a large role in exposing the United States population to the experiences and challenges faced by transgender individuals. I argue that this increase in public discourse and political engagement with transgender issues catalyzed the formation of deliberate anti-trans movements. Notably, "gender-critical" feminists and conservative groups both opposed the increasing acceptance and rights of transgender individuals using similar rhetoric and strategies. Specific topics became battlegrounds of debate; transgender bathroom access, participation in sports, and treatment within the prison system all became focal points of these anti-trans movements. Particularly, the portrayal of transgender women as men who enter the women's restroom was a significant argument presented by both anti-trans groups to delegitimize transgender rights. Conservatives used these topics to fuel moral panic and opposition to transgender rights, even if their claims were often unsubstantiated. This time period underscores the deep-seated opposition to transgender rights in the United States, necessitating continued advocacy for the inclusion of transgender individuals.

³⁷ Grant Atkinson, "Transgender Athletes Breaking Records in Women's Sports," *Alliance Defending Freedom*, November 21, 2022.

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