

# Grooming Authoritarianism: Anti-Trans/Queer Panic as Pedagogy for Democratic Decline

Aylon Cohen, *Oxford University, United Kingdom*

Samuel R. Galloway, *Purchase College, United States*

## ABSTRACT

We address the anti-trans/queer panic integral to the ascendance of authoritarian politics in America and respond by calling on all political scientists to “queer” political science by undoing the cisheteronormativity of the discipline. We contend that this is not the special obligation of LGBTQ scholars but all political scientists. In this we follow Eve Sedgwick’s orientation away from a “minoritizing” to a “universalizing” epistemological perspective that situates this responsibility relative to resisting democratic decline.

To which queer issues should political scientists attend today? To answer this question, we must note the current political atmosphere that research on queer issues must confront and address. Since the 1970s, coalitional networks including religious fundamentalists, parent organizations, and far-right politicians have organized, campaigned, and sometimes successfully achieved reforms against reproductive rights, same-sex public accommodations, gender-affirming health care, sex education, gender studies programs, and legal protections against gender- and sexuality-based discrimination and violence. After a brief respite harkened by marriage equality and Lady Gaga, in the first six weeks of 2024, 400 bills targeting trans people were introduced into state legislatures ranging from restricting access to hormone replacement therapy to denying minors the right to change their name or pronoun in schools, or play sports, or use a website or bathroom in peace (Reed 2024). Nearly 30 years after the murder of Brandon Teena, the death of Nex Benedict, a nonbinary trans Indigenous teenager, was ruled a suicide despite their being violently battered by young women in a women’s bathroom following scrutiny of their Oklahoma school district by the right-wing social media troll, Chaya Raichik, creator behind Libs of TikTok, who espouses eliminationist views toward transgender people and serves on the state’s Department of Education’s Library Media Advisory Committee. Such victim blaming distorts the harsh reality that trans/queer people remain disproportionately affected by housing,

employment, and health care discrimination and that trans/queer youth suffer severe rates of homelessness and suicide: an attempt is made every 45 seconds, according to the Trevor Project (2024).

Cynical targeting of trans people has not been, nor was it ever meant to be, contained. The political operative Christopher Rufo encourages acolytes to call drag queens—mostly gay cis men—“trans strippers” owing to the “more lurid set of connotations” that “shifts the debate to sexualization” (Rufo 2022). A kid-friendly parody of gender while reading a picture book becomes resignified to a dangerous scene of seduction that sexualizes the body of the performer and contagiously threatens to sexualize the bodies of the audience, especially because they are children. Despite the best intentions of analytic distinctions parsing sex from gender from sexuality, these categories collapse under the threat posed by the figure of the sexual predator, and while certainly such distinctions are important, what matters in noting their collapse is the construction of a figure that itself must be analyzed and opposed. As Guy Hocquenghem observed of the emergence of the revanchist 1980s, what we see Rufo, Raichik, and self-described “theocratic fascist” commentator Matt Walsh doing is “constructing an entirely new type of criminal, a criminal so inconceivably horrible that his crime goes beyond any explanation, any victim” (Foucault 1988, 278). According to Joseph Fischel’s careful analysis of the sexual offender in the political imaginary, this figure consolidates many anxieties about the sexual agency of children and queer people while displacing and sanitizing what is abusive in heteronormative kinship (Fischel 2016). In an age of scale-shifting social media circulation, the trans/queer “groomer” becomes spectral: “a clear and omnipresent danger” (Davis and Kettrey 2021).

What is additionally new in the figure of the trans/queer child predator is that in the lurid fantasies of opponents the predator

**Corresponding author:** Aylon Cohen is a lecturer at Oxford University in the Department of Politics and International Relations. They can be reached at [aylon.cohen@politics.ox.ac.uk](mailto:aylon.cohen@politics.ox.ac.uk).

Samuel R. Galloway is an assistant professor at Purchase College, SUNY in the Department of Political Science. They can be reached at [samuel.galloway@purchase.edu](mailto:samuel.galloway@purchase.edu).

grooms the innocent to “child mutilation.” Yet, as Andrea Long Chu has bitinglly observed, despite histrionics that what is hap-

Far from disavowing these patently creepy fantasies, the 2024 GOP presidential nominee, Donald Trump, incites their underly-

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pening to children is “mutilation,” the real panic appears to be, in fact, that if children are able to transition before puberty, they would not require as many intrusive surgeries at all, nor would they be as discernible to the paranoid eye, especially as they age. As much as monstrosity is projected onto the trans person, therefore, the real horror appears to be that they are eminently capable of becoming indiscernible from cis people (Long Chu 2024). At issue is not merely the possibility of a world in which trans/queer existence is tolerated when assimilable but one in which pluralism is actively encouraged to flourish—a world where, to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s provocation, we want trans/queer children to exist (Sedgwick 1991).

Bomb threats routinely follow scrutiny from Raichik, Rufo, and Walsh, and since 2022 dozens of hospitals providing gender-affirming care have been targeted by such patterns of violence (Human Rights Campaign 2023). Hardly confidential internal memos circulated among other Manhattan Institute fellows, Rufo publishes his guidance openly on Twitter/X as a piece with the vilification of LGBTQ people as a matter of policy for one national party (Dans and Groves 2023). Just as brazenly, Justice Clarence Thomas, in his *Dobbs* concurrence, targets the host of rulings also hinging on substantive due process jurisprudence undergirding rights to contraception and prophylaxis (conceivably including the HIV-prevention medication PrEP), consensual sodomy, and marriage equality. Quite publicly, legislative, intellectual, and judicial forces are aligning around the electoral vanguardism exemplified by governors like Ron DeSantis, whose “multiracial white nationalism” (Beltrán 2021) is facilitated through anti-trans/queer trafficking in “groomer” panic and whose stunted presidential bid saw his campaign air one of the most overtly anti-trans/queer political ads. The ad, which was released on the last day of Pride month, opens to clips of drag queens supporting Trump, who voices toleration for Caitlin Jenner, only to announce “psych!” and go on to alternately liken the governor to a gator, the *American Psycho* (2000) serial killer, Brad Pitt’s Achilles, and a high-flying Fuhrer while interspersing headlines of the governor’s legislative response to the “threat” of trans people. Seeped in right-

ing anxieties. Take as exemplary a campaign speech in Michigan, where in opposition to President Biden’s initiatives promoting EV cars, which the former president suggests give the driver performance anxiety, he promises to protect carbon-combustion engines. Note how this protection is accomplished:

These radical democrats—fascists, Marxists—now they want to make [internal combustion engines] illegal. And yes, it’s true, today’s radical Democrat party wants to legalize drugs, shoplifting and sexual mutilation of your children, but they want to allow your gas powered Suburban, Silverado, and Ford F-150s to *die* (emphasis in original). Under a Trump administration, gasoline engines will be allowed and sex changes for children will be banned! [*cheers.*] Can you believe it? Mutilization [sic]. If you said 10 or 15 years ago, “we will stop the mutilization [sic.] of children,” someone would say, “what the hell is he talking about?” (Trump 2023)

Trump’s discourse, including his mangling of “mutilation,” exemplifies what Judith Butler (2024) contends is the contemporary function of gender as a “phantasm” that enables the “condensation of a number of elements, and a displacement from what remains unseen or unnamed.” Anxiety about crimes of vice or necessity, sexual prowess, freedom of movement (denied those seeking refuge and asylum, let alone a second start at the southern border), which gender expression is facilitated by the commodity of the vehicle, and the fuel you run on—tradition or progress, here standing in for partisan affiliation—all concentrate in the figure of the transgender child. The promised elimination of transgender children allows displacing myriad tensions created not by the existence of transgender people but by the strictures of compulsory cisheteronormative reproductivity, the double binds of citizenship in the nation-state anchored in living legacies of ascriptive identitarian belonging, the ravages of capitalism on the habitability of the planet, and even the passage of historical time as an embodied, political experience that all find hollowed relief after 40 years of neoliberalism exacerbated under Trump’s tenure. Gender—what Trump denominates as “mutilization”—aggregates acutely apprehended panic while displacing confrontation

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wing “Chad” meme lore, the ad depicts DeSantis as a cold-blooded executive ruthlessly man enough to do what needs to be done to protect the children while owning the libs.

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This is accomplished by recruiting auditors into participation. Suturing aggressive fossil fuel consumption to prohibiting gender-affirming care for minors exemplifies Trump's amplification of a long-standing faux populist "truck" patriarchy (Grattan 2016, 97) in his specific embrace of an eliminationist structure of desire that animates the demagoguery around queer people at this moment. Heavier, more costly trucks and SUVs, some with blunt grill heights of 55 inches, are uniquely responsible for the "silent epidemic" of child pedestrian deaths while emitting twice the carbon as the average sedan (Schmitt 2020). This implicit lethality is reinforced by laws in multiple states decriminalizing the weaponization of vehicles against protesters, normalizing the 2017 vehicular murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville by a white supremacist (Savitzky and Cidell 2023). Yet, in the logic of the stitch, buying into truck ownership is imbued with a potent patriarchal protective charge: its protectivity fuels its destructive potency; that it is protective drives it to be destructive, even overdrives it, because it is pitched not as an appeal to reason but an incitement to transgression. Under a child protectionist aegis, Trump incites violence against not only transgender children but all children as pedestrians, inheritors of a carbon-choked planet, and subjects to the antidemocratic impoverishment of worldly plurality. Rather than clock the contradictions, we should instead track the consistency of the eliminationist logic, the creep of disability that finds resonance in greater auditor disinhibition.

However, when the "symbolic glue" of gender becomes a mere "cover up for fostering a deeper and profound change" (Petó 2015, 127) such that gender is understood to be just "a metaphor for the insecurity and unfairness produced by the current socioeconomic order" (Petó, Grzebalska, and Kováts 2017), attacks against trans/queer people paradoxically come to represent an attack against so many phenomena except gender and sexual freedom. Rather, with Eric A. Stanley (2021), who has recently theorized violence against trans/queer people as the social antagonism that structures what is and is not fit to appear as free in contemporary democratic America, we understand the need to repress trans/queer people as *productive* of a certain configuration of public space, privacy, bodily appearance, desire, and pleasure. Efforts to prohibit the existence of gender and sexual minorities simultaneously occasions the conscription of everyone else into a specific form of cisheteronormativity that Nathan Duford (n.d.) demonstrates is profoundly erotophobic and obsessed with policing desire. Thus, as Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell, and Judith Butler helped articulate in their exchanges a generation prior, scholars make a conceptual error when they reduce gender and sexuality to only cultural or symbolic concerns seemingly separate from and opposed to material matters: gender and sexuality are symbolic systems of meaning-making organizing our political affairs because the glue "sticks" to embodied, and so material, asymmetric relations of power that engender us all (Benhabib et al. 1995).

Attention is then owed to bodily practices and affective attachments sustaining authoritarianism. Submission to authoritarian gender normativity shapes the social in vertical hierarchies that are primed, made meaningful, and enjoy reinforcement through agentic lateral relationships. In his monograph, *Aspirational*

*Fascism*, William Connolly rightly returns to Klaus Theweleit's account of the bodily habits and attunements that organize a reactionary sensorium. Misogyny and homophobia discipline strict gender and sexual presentation as "armored" against any disaggregating disruptions of desire (Connolly 2017, 53–54). The kind of cruelty and cheap bullying personified by Trump is internalized and socially reproduced. The need for tenderness, intimacy, and softness is disavowed as "feminine," where that denotes the ambiguating "flows" of a woman's body that make it a site of hyperdomination, as attested to by immediate passage of state law restricting access to abortion in the wake of *Dobbs*, doubling the laws denying bodily autonomy to transgender people.

At the same time, Ashleigh Campi's research on Christian nationalist media culture details the already operative lateral relations animating authoritarian structures on one hand and their disciplinary productivity on the other to draw out the relations of vulnerability that exist even among "armored" authoritarian adherents. Take for instance, House Speaker Mike Johnson's use of an app that monitors pornography consumption, which holds him and his son mutually accountable to their abstinence. This dynamic is mirrored in political organizations such as the self-proclaimed "western chauvinist" Proud Boys, where initiation requires men to be dogpiled by other members and membership entails ongoing discussion of one's sexual desires and physical longings to maintain the organization's strict ban on masturbation. Whereas classical accounts of authoritarian repression presume that adherents resist inwardness and self-reflection, Campi and Connolly point us toward an analytic of "practices [that] use gendered vulnerability and self-regard to cultivate forms of self-fashioning" (Campi 2021, 458) such that these men can submit to Trump's pressure as men *because* reciprocally participating in the many virile horizontal relations of masculinist accountability with other men that productively stabilize rather than subvert submission to the authoritarian leader.

As Campi further reminds, women's "submission to hierarchies of men ... overlaps with stories of racial hierarchy" (2021, 458). That Nex Benedict was forced to use the bathroom that corresponded to the sex they were assigned at birth and so was killed by young women in a women's space highlights both the fallacy of natural allyship among trans/queer people and women in the absence of organized resistance to the patriarchy and homophobia, racism and settler colonialism, and dispossessions of capitalism that otherwise divide people into factional oppositions but also the fact that between 2016 and 2020 support for Trump among white non-college-educated women grew 2:1 (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig 2021). Indeed, when coupled with Trump capturing 40% of college-educated white women, a hefty plurality of white heterosexual women support an adjudicated rapist. In part, this is because such attachment comes with certain pleasures that some women derive from proximity to figures of patriarchal white power. The gratifications of enacting and/or deferring patriarchal violence against racialized, sexualized others has deep roots in American white democracy (Spillers 1987, 76–77). Right-wing mothers' political organizations, for instance, have been integral antidemocratic institutions, historically resisting school integration by wielding the dangers of interracial sexual contact among youth as a direct template for their anti-gay campaigns (Frank 2013; McRae 2018). Partaking in the pleasures afforded by this tradition continues today in organizations such as Moms for Liberty, who mobilize against both "critical race theory"

and LGBTQ visibility under the aegis of parental rights and the values of child protection (Kearl and Mayes 2024).

In this milieu, how we study authoritarianism must account for its sexual, gendered, racial, and bodily politics, and political scientists benefit from widening their scope to engage those theoretical interdisciplines that articulate accounts of undemocratic power operative within democracy. We have tracked how politically demonizing a targeted minority is foundational for a regime of cisheterosexuality elaborated as universally normative that advances an antidemocratic movement and its vision of the world. Although driven by one ascendant wing of one political party, the embrace of cisherteronomativity is a bipartisan consensus, evidenced by President Joe Biden's recent statements withdrawing support from gender-affirming care for minors. In thus training our focus, we have departed from the familiar, because dominant, approach to studying queer politics, where the value of sexuality and gender as analytical categories mainly pertains to research on quantifiable insiders of minority groups (i.e., LGBTQ people). On this count, authoritarian proclamations about trans/queer people are worrisome for trans/queer people, but only for them.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this as a “minoritizing” view that conceives of sexuality as an “issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority” (Sedgwick 2008, 1). This approach in the discipline was given succinct voice in the 2009 survey conducted by the APSA Committee on the Status of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and the Transgendered in the Profession, which found that although 41% of respondent members deemed scholarship on LGBT topics to be “very appropriate,” there remains resistance. As one political scientist in the survey put it, “The biggest problem is [they’re] not doing real political science, [they’re] just focusing in on themselves. The LGBT faculty whom I respect professionally the most are the ones who do real political science. We don’t do heterosexual political science so why do ... LGBT political science” (Currah 2011, 14)? The irony of this sentiment was captured by Paisley Currah in a symposium on “The State of LGBT/Sexuality Studies in Political Science,” that the preponderant “absence of research on LGBT topics, however, signals the largely unquestioned presence of heteronormativity” in the discipline (Currah 2011, 14).

Fifteen years later, as laws strip queer people of our rights and vigilante violence saturates our spaces of public life, under the pretense of this false universal—real political science—the discipline persists in doing cis-heterosexual political science. Admirable advances are being made in the study of LGBTQ politics within political science, but in exclusively staking out a minoritizing

Transformations to the structures of knowledge production are a slow process, but historical continuities paired with the contemporary moment leave us in a different mood than Currah's more than a decade ago. We do not optimistically feel that “this is an exciting time to be producing knowledge about sexuality in the field of political science” (Currah 2011, 15). Instead, we contend that these are desperate and cruel times. Unless the discipline “queers” its analytical practices, it risks being unable to critically analyze our authoritarian present and so becomes irrelevant to those wishing to understand contemporary politics. The discipline of political science must reckon with how the existence of trans and queer people continues, again, to become a threat that drives contemporary antidemocratic politics, and urgently.

The other side of the minoritizing displacement that gels ascendant authoritarianism is that gender and sexuality is, of course, “of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick 2008, 1). We have sought to traverse the gap of this contradiction by following Foucault's allusion to the potential for queerness to cut “slantwise” through the social fabric along a diagonal line that opens new affective and relational possibilities (Foucault 1997, 138). Following the slantwise angle offers another “queer universalizing” way forward that has several consequences for us as political scientists.

To be certain, we should further support empirical and theoretical research into the social and intimate patterning, public opinion formation, political and associational relations of actual LGBTQ people. When trans/queer life is legislated out of existence, as it is now in several states, the political stakes of such scholarly undertakings is brought into stark relief. However, the burden does not fall to sexual and gender minority and specialist scholars alone. Epistemically, queering political science means dismantling the presumptive cis-heterosexual citizen as the reasoner, researcher, voter, politician, and activist. It means queering the good life of democratic citizenship beyond married with children, even as this vision has come to include a wider array of LGBTQ people. This is cognitive labor we all can and should undertake. Such work is not the exclusive burden of queer political scientists any more than dismantling racism or patriarchy within the discipline is the exclusive burden of political scientists of color and women in the profession.

Rather than allow the experience of gender, sexuality, and desire to fade into the transparency of a false universality, these vectors of power are politicized and so merit frontal acknowledgment in how we theorize, research, and organize our embodied understanding of the world (Sedgwick 2008, 86). This shapes not only the questions we ask, but how. Our proposal is “minor” in the

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position, we have also invited putatively straight political scientists to outsource these research questions, effectively ghettoizing rather than incorporating them as their own. In this dialectic, it is insufficient to lodge an assimilationist claim to inclusion.

grand scheme of things: no epic resolution to the crisis, but the friction it introduces can be called political for inciting a perspectival shift in orientation from accommodating anti-trans/queer violence as a democratic trade-off, to resisting the impoverishment

of democratic plurality. When Eric Stanley writes that anti-trans/queer violence saturates the “atmosphere” of contemporary democracy, he confronts us with how “this political abstraction is not something external to the social” but is embedded in the “everydayness of the social—the internalization of the enemy and our reproduction of hierarchy” (2021, 117). The norms of sexuality and gender are potent means of political control because they have implications for the intimate lives of us all. Yet, for this reason, they can also be tilted to become the very “slantwise” axes along which to cohere a scholarly response that accounts for how the power of these forces, conventions, and expectations are mobilized to act on us as researchers and citizens in uneven ways, but on us all.

Reattuning our sense of queer politics from the minoritizing view to one where everyone is responsible for dislodging the antidemocratic prerogatives of cisheteronormativity also invites LGBTQ political scientists to loosen our attachment of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) to gaining acceptance from the discipline as “real” political science. Instead, “real” political science should have to answer, “Why would anyone take straight a political science that does not account for its own enactments of cisheteronormativity, let alone the sexual and gendered dimensions of political life beyond it?” The fantasy that these dynamics in political life can be removed from our analytics without distortion and that such decisions are not political in a time of explicit state repression is part and parcel of the displacement of drive, desire, and deviance onto easily despised minorities that is a defining operation of contemporary democratic decline. Rather than descriptive, such scholarly decisions are productive of a disposition toward disposability precisely worthy of universal resistance.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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