

STOP THE HATE

The far-right and trans rights

Alex Adams

Why is the far-right attacking trans people and trans rights?

Recently, after a period in which many gains have been made, trans rights have become a major element of the so-called “culture wars” and the “war on woke” being waged by the right around the world. This has gone hand in hand with attacks on Indigenous sovereignty in Canada. Right-wingers are trying to wrongly portray institutions such as the education system as contaminated by “wokeism”, “critical race theory” and “cultural Marxism”. Another element in this assault is the supposed defense of “free speech” by right-wing political figures and authoritarian governments, which are intent on rolling back the gains of mass movements such as Black Lives Matter, abortion rights, and the climate movement.

The right has been building their attacks on trans rights over several years, recognizing that it is a wedge issue, making it possible to open up space for their attacks on other oppressed groups and to bring more people to their cause. Many far-right groups see anti-trans arguments as a gateway to a larger attack on LGBT2S+ rights in general. It is crucial for socialists to see and understand how these arguments are being used to fuel the general bigotry of the far-right forces.

There are recent examples in Canada. At the Ottawa convoy protests in 2022, far-right groups were carrying transphobic placards calling for an end to teaching “gender ideology” in schools and “protection” for children against the same. Across Canada, anti-trans and anti-“woke” candidates ran in local school board elections in 2022 with the intention to roll back protections for trans and non-binary students in the school system.

The People’s Party of Canada (PPC) released a statement in 2021 promising to “fight radical gender ideology” - proposing to repeal Bill C-16, the legislation passed in 2016 that added gender identity and expression to the Canadian Human Rights Act. Predictably, they are also against the recent legislation banning conversion therapy, which they promote as “therapeutic counselling to help them accept who they are instead of destroying their bodies”.

Oppression and division

The opening for the far-right to attack trans rights has been created by the general political climate in which the right is growing. The impact of the pandemic and increasing economic instability have led to sharpening political polarization and opened up a space for the right and the far-right to scapegoat and blame both workers and already oppressed groups, including trans people.

Over the past year, there have also been increasing attacks on drag events – across the US, Canada and the UK. The far right has been organizing to protest all ages drag events such as “drag queen story time” events that have become popular as part of children’s programming in public libraries, for example. These far-right callouts have been happening at a regular frequency, in cities and smaller communities in Canada – including Coquitlam, Calgary, and Peterborough.

While drag events are not necessarily specifically trans events, they represent an opening up of the wedge on trans issues and into LGBTQ2S+ rights in general. The callouts for their protests often conflate gender and sexuality (similar to many other attacks on trans rights) and cite the need to “protect children” from gender and sexual confusion – that is, from developing into well-behaved, gender normative, and heterosexual adults. To be clear, the reality is that these drag events are about acceptance of self and others, self-expression, and of course, fun and dressing up.

Our starting point in today’s culture wars and conflicts over trans rights should be one of solidarity with trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people. We need to show respect for how the oppressed self-identify, and we need to resist claims that the rights of one oppressed group (trans people) undermine those of another (women). Such arguments are inherently divisive and potentially reactionary, and they fail to identify oppression in capitalist societies as being driven from the top.

That is why it is especially important for socialists to be “tribunes of the oppressed” and take the correct position on issues of oppression, because oppression literally serves to divide the working class.

Hate and Harm

In the US attacks on trans rights are a wedge issue for the right and far right. They want to use these attacks on transgender rights as a way to broaden their assault on other sections of society: lesbians and gays, women, racialized people. They also want to use this wedge to divide oppressed groups from each other in order to better divide and attack them.

This is why it’s particularly troubling that some voices on the left and some feminists are chiming in with the right in denying trans people’s right to define their gender and control their own bodies. This gender policing is an attack on any of us who don’t conform to gender norms, including feminists who have fought for decades for the right to control their bodies and not to have to conform to so-called ‘feminine’ dress or behaviour.

Tennessee lawmakers recently passed a bill prohibiting drag performances in front of children at public or private venues, putting the state at the forefront of a Republican-led effort to limit drag in at least 15 states in recent months.

Advocates worry the bill will extend beyond drag shows and be used to target transgender and non-binary performers in general.

A November 2021 report by Human Rights Watch documents how persistent marginalization puts transgender people, particularly Black transgender women, at heightened risk of violence at the hands of strangers, partners, family members, and law enforcement.



In the UK, there are many examples of newspapers and magazines publishing transphobic material, ranging across the political spectrum from the right-wing Daily Mail and Spectator to the liberal Guardian and socialist Morning Star. Radio and television shows have regurgitated damaging misinformation, as have “gender-critical” websites such as Transgender Trend and Mumsnet.

These platforms largely either ignore trans voices completely or subject them to hostile questioning in interviews. In Canada, transphobic views come from a spectrum of “intellectuals” like Jordan Peterson, to “legitimate” political parties like Maxime Bernier’s PPC, to far-right groups like Diagonol. Gender critical radical feminist, Meghan Murphy, runs the transphobic website “Feminist Current” which similarly puts out loads of disinformation on trans issues. A campus speaking tour she went on in 2018/19 drew protests at many universities against her transphobic views.

There is a campaign of disinformation on social media and the internet by right wing groups including the LGB Alliance, a virulently anti-trans group based in the UK, which was welcomed at the 2021 Conservative Party conference in Britain. The Canadian chapter of the LGB Alliance campaigns against trans rights specifically where they have been encoded in law.

All these attacks share similar features – concerns for the “safety” of women and girls from “biological men” accessing bathrooms and other gendered spaces, the alleged push by “predatory doctors and activists” for children and youth to identify as trans and undergo the gender transition process.

They also confuse gender identity and sexual orientation, asserting that children with gender dysphoria are “being encouraged to start transitioning”, but that otherwise they would all become gay or lesbian as adults.

These articles, reports and posts damage trans and gender-diverse people; transphobic misinformation has real consequences. Hate speech causes emotional damage and legitimates hate crimes. As Judith Butler recently wrote:

“The fear is particularly prevalent when public figures—politicians, high profile newspaper columnists and so on—demonize trans people in print or on air; it makes the fear more pronounced because you worry someone is going to act on it”.



Thousands attended vigils for Brianna Ghey

In February 2023, UK transgender teen, Brianna Ghey, was murdered in what appears to be a transphobic hate crime. This is only one recent example in a long history of a high rate of violence towards trans and non-binary people. A disproportionate number of these victims are also BIPoC. Suicide rates among trans and non-binary people are higher as well, with one Canadian study last year finding that trans youth are 7.6 times more likely to attempt suicide.

Most transphobia is driven by the right and far-right. Anti-trans agitation was consciously adopted some years ago as a “wedge issue” by both the religious and secular right. It was seen as an effective way to mobilize conservatives on social issues and to split progressives, liberals and feminists by arguing that trans and gender-diverse people constitute a threat to women. Of course, these forces never actually cared at all about women’s rights and the sexism and misogyny faced by women. By advancing transphobia, they hope to pry open other fronts in their decades-long wars against LGBT+ rights and women’s rights, for example, over school curriculums, abortion rights and so on.

Biological Essentialism

Transphobia from the right shares an underlying biological essentialism with arguments put forward by some feminists – mostly those who identify themselves as ‘radical feminists’, but also some socialist feminists as well. Having rejected the foundational feminist tenet that “biology is not destiny”, many now in effect argue the converse—biology is all.

Biological essentialism means that a person cannot “change sex”, that there are only two immutable sexes, and that consequently trans women remain potentially violent “men in drag”.

Yet, modern biological science offers a much more nuanced account of the sexed human body. This understanding of sex recognizes that the sex assigned at birth is neither immutable nor binary. People’s biological sex characteristics do change over time—they are not, as the transphobes claim, static. Changes occur throughout our lives, sometimes by choice and sometimes by circumstance, natural or otherwise. Moreover, how we categorize and give significance to sex and to its mutability is down to human culture and social relations.

Anti-trans critics who use “biology” have seldom actually studied the science. They grasp at one trait and make it the determining one, an ahistorical, immutable fact. They declare it is common sense. When this approach is tied to a moral crusade, as is the case with anti-trans discrimination, it becomes a powerful tool for those who want to control our production and reproduction for their own ends.

Luckily there is a tradition of biological science challenging these reductive, reactionary ideas. Biologists who point to the almost mind-boggling variety and diversity in natural production and reproduction. Scientists who remind us that who we are is “not in our genes”. We embrace a diverse interplay of biological factors, historical development, social upbringing and our own unique individual experience.

Regrettably some socialists have also capitulated to the view that trans rights conflict with women’s rights. In doing so they have provided political cover for the right’s anti-working-class politics and hostility to trans people.

We need solidarity between oppressed groups, not the opening up of divisions. Advances for trans rights also mean advances for women’s rights, LGBT+ rights and the rights of all oppressed groups. Victories for transphobic and trans-exclusionary ideas are emboldening for the right—they strengthen its attacks on other groups and on the working class as a whole.

Making abstract pleas for “debate and dialogue”, such left-wing organizations display a lack of basic empathy with trans and non-binary people, instead expecting them to debate their own existence. They fail to accept that trans rights are human rights. Instead, their biological essentialism leads them to deny that trans women are women and trans men are men and that non-binary identities are worthy of respect and dignity.

Trans oppression and women’s oppression

Capitalism from its beginnings has relied on exploitation and oppression to maintain the dominance of a small minority over the large majority of people. Exploitation and oppression take on various forms and degrees, and vary both over time, and between different societies.

Trans oppression arises from the same roots as women’s oppression, and in a similar way to gay and lesbian oppression. The origins of women’s oppression developed with the emergence of class societies and the consolidation of the nuclear family under capitalism. This happened as a consequence of the systematic oppression and dispossession of women and the subordination of women’s sexuality. Women’s oppression, heteronormativity, the gender binary, the commodification of women’s bodies and control over bodily autonomy are

deeply embedded in capitalist ideology, as are homophobia and transphobia.

Marxists seek to understand sex, gender and the oppression of women, and also gender-variance and non-heterosexual sex, through the lens of historical materialism, recognizing that the relationship between them is a complex interaction—each affects the other reciprocally.

There is a constant tension within capitalism; although certain legal rights and protections may be won in some societies by oppressed groups as a result of pressure from below (for example, same-sex marriage, equal pay laws and nominal equal rights for trans people), these are all historically and socially contingent. They do not essentially undermine the capitalist mode of production's reliance on the subordination of women for bearing and raising the next generation of workers.

Gender diversity across Turtle Island

Evidence for gender diversity throughout human history is widespread, and prior to colonization it was a feature of many Indigenous communities across Turtle Island (so-called Canada and the United States).

Cross-gender roles have been documented for men in 155 Indigenous tribes, and about a third of these societies also had a specific role for women who chose non-traditional productive activity.

As Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle wrote, “For a very long time prior to the colonial and postcolonial periods (this little blip on the trajectory of our history), Indigenous peoples brought into being and practiced a social organization that viewed gender in the same continuum, with the same sense of circularity and integral interrelations which we attached to everything in life...”

There is abundant evidence across different Indigenous societies showing that diversity in gender and sexual identities was not only accepted but celebrated.

“Being Two Spirit is being bestowed with the gift of sight and feeling. Two Spirits have the gift of seeing from both a male and female perspective and so in many cases it is easier to see into others as we can see into ourselves.”

- Marcy Angeles (Chiricahua Apache, Guamares and Aztec) artist and Indigenous Trans rights activist



Colonialism sought to destroy Indigenous cultures and erase anything that did not conform with its priorities of subordination of women and enforcing strict gender roles – something even the federal government recognized in its 2017 apology to LGBTQ2 people: “Since arriving on these shores, settlers to this land brought with them foreign standards of right and wrong – of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Suitable and unsuitable partnerships. They brought rigid

gender norms – norms that manifested in homophobia and transphobia. Norms that saw the near-destruction of Indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit identities. People who were once revered for their identities found themselves shamed for who they were. They were rejected and left vulnerable to violence.”

As the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls stated in its final report, “the process of colonization fundamentally tried to alter women’s and 2SLGBTQIA people’s identities and roles in their communities. Identity, as supported through language, story-telling, ceremony, and connection, underwent assault from all sides through the processes of colonization, including relocation, residential schools, and adoption, as well as the broader processes of isolating Indigenous people and restricting access to traditional territories...”

The movement struggling today against right-wing attacks on gender diversity can draw inspiration from the knowledge that societies that developed over millennia, long before the advent of capitalism, embraced and celebrated gender expression far richer than the deadening binary promoted today. This is the result of the determined resistance by generations of Indigenous people, a struggle which any movement for trans liberation and against capitalism must unconditionally support.



Peterborough stands against hate and supports Drag Queen Story Time

Socialists and the fight for trans rights

Opposition to trans rights is a touchstone issue for ideological opponents of equality and apologists for capitalism. The central aims of capitalism—continued economic growth and the maximization of profit—now pose a clear existential risk to humanity in an era of climate change, environmental catastrophes and pathogens such as Covid-19. Transphobia, just as with anti-

migrant racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism, is being deployed as a key weapon of the right to maintain its ideological and political control of society and minimize the potential for organized resistance by the working class.

The far-right has recently shifted its focus toward transphobic attacks including Drag Queen Story Time events in public spaces like libraries. They have been met and outnumbered again and again by community and labour groups in both large and small communities across Canada

In Peterborough Ontario, Coquitlam BC, Calgary, Alberta and Ottawa, members of labour unions, the LGBT community, faith groups and others have joined together against religious right and far-right attempts to shut down these events. In Montreal, McGill University students organized and shut down a talk by an LGB Alliance member and academic.

Socialists have led and participated in these events and must continue to defend all attacks on trans people and be ready to engage in the ideological battles about gender oppression.

Only an approach to human sexuality and gender variance that starts from the basic material factors of human societies—how human beings produce the things we need from the land and raw materials, how we organize to distribute these goods, who owns these things, and who controls what is produced—can provide a comprehensive understanding of how homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (and sexism) have emerged.



Trans liberation, as with liberation from other forms of oppression, is not possible within capitalism, even though particular trans rights can and should be fought for and vigorously defended in the here and now. Liberation requires the working class seizing political and economic power from the capitalist class in order to create the conditions for the genuine and permanent freedom of all to express the diverse varieties of human sexuality and gender expression that make people whole.

As well, it is essential to oppose the far-right in any of its attacks on trans rights by forming broad based coalitions to oppose them. When these attacks take place in the form of protests such as the attacks on drag events, that means mobilizing people to show up on the ground and counter demonstrate.

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