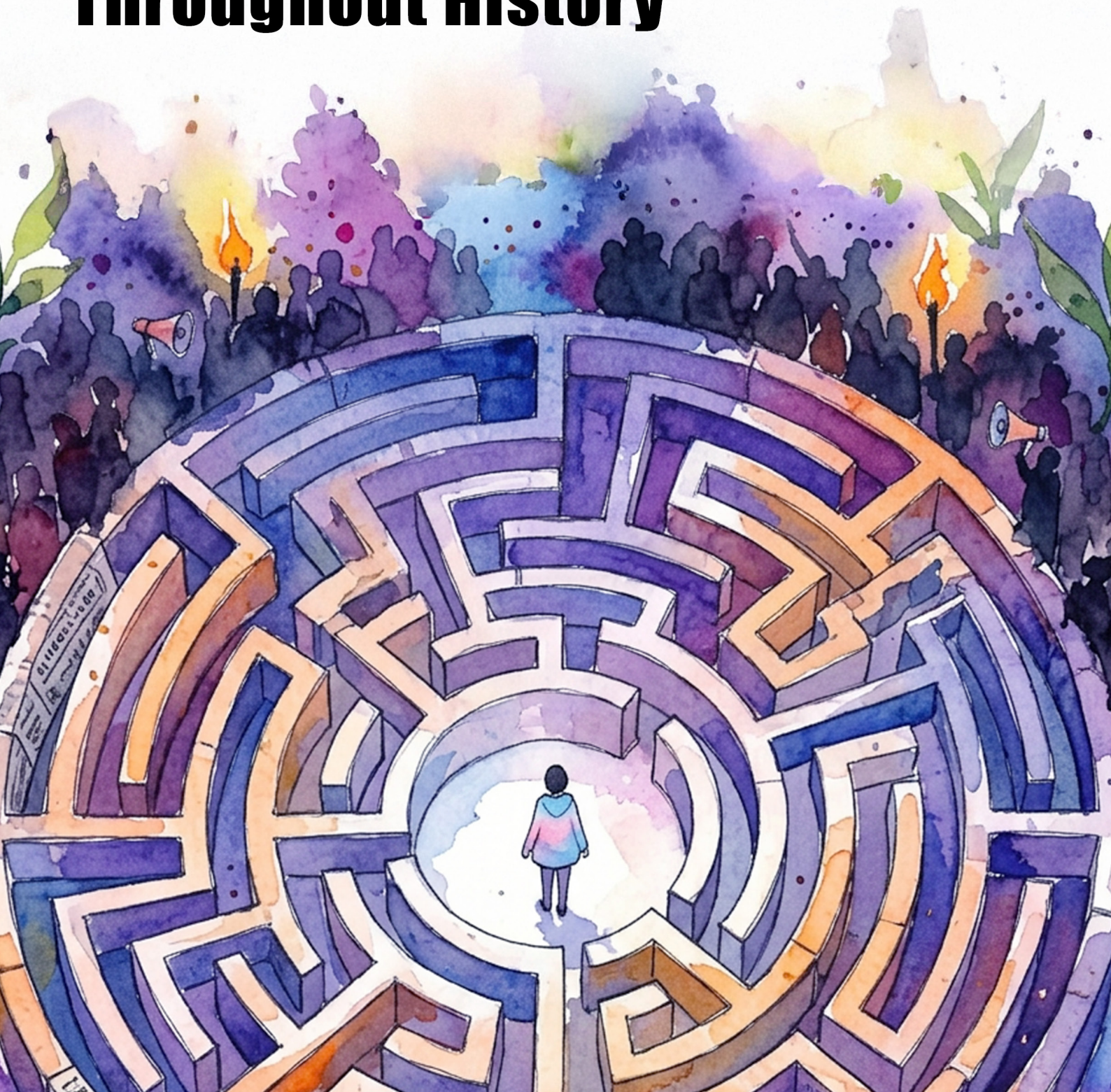


# Manufacturing Threat: How Trans Identities Have Been Politically Weaponised Throughout History



# About Kaleidoscope Trust

Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK-based international charity fighting for a future where LGBTI+ people everywhere can live free, safe, and equal lives. We are building a global movement to create this world for LGBTI+ people everywhere.

We work with political leaders in the UK and beyond to ensure global LGBTI+ issues are a priority. We ensure that activists have the resources, skills, and training they need to learn from one another in order to create an enabling environment and change hearts and minds. We bring together grassroots organisations with those in power to create that change.

Kaleidoscope Trust is a founding member of The Commonwealth Equality Network

(TCEN) and provides the operational and financial base for the network's Secretariat as its host. We have engaged in Commonwealth processes and with Commonwealth institutions, as a priority, for over a decade in support of our shared objectives with TCEN's other members.

We also host the Secretariat to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global LGBT+ Rights, which emerged from the Parliamentary Friends of Kaleidoscope Trust, established in 2013. Kaleidoscope Trust was also a civil society co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition from 2019-2022 and is a founding member and former co-chair of the UK Alliance for Global Equality.

# About the Global LGBTI+ Rights Commission

The Global LGBTI+ Rights Commission is a time-limited, international initiative designed by Kaleidoscope Trust to confront the alarming global rollback of LGBTI+ rights we now face. This independent commission will bring together experts, activists, and community voices from around the world to analyse current threats, understand root causes, and chart a path forward by:

- Bringing together diverse voices to ensure our findings are informed by lived experience as well as thematic expert insight.
- Influencing policy by producing working papers and a final report presenting a strategic global roadmap to inform the policy priorities of govern-

ments and international institutions. This work will seek to defend and advance global human rights.

- Amplifying stories and voices from across the community who are not in a position to speak out freely and safely. Through storytelling, testimony, and engagement, the Commission is not just about policy – it’s about supporting a global movement.

The Commission will produce working papers on key issues. These will be shared

for public consultation through a green/white paper model. A green paper is an initial discussion document inviting feedback and debate, while a white paper presents a more developed set of proposals based on that feedback. This process allows individuals and organisations to respond directly to the papers or to submit their own evidence and insights – all of which will be acknowledged and credited. This combination of research, consultation, and storytelling will ensure the Commission’s work is inclusive, transparent, and grounded in real-world voices.



**Learn more on our website.**

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# Executive Summary

Across the world, transgender people are being positioned at the centre of political, legal, and cultural conflict. In many cases, debates about trans rights are framed as questions of public safety, morality, or social stability, obscuring the broader political functions these narratives serve and the human rights being undermined. This working paper examines the phenomenon of trans-weaponisation: the strategic use of trans identities and issues to advance ideological agendas and consolidate power.

Drawing on historical analysis, critical discourse theory, and an extensive review of existing literature, this paper traces how trans-weaponisation has developed across distinct historical periods. Rather than understanding contemporary backlash as a sudden or isolated response, the work demonstrates that trans identities have long been mobilised as symbolic sites through which societies negotiate anxieties about gender, reproduction, race, and societal authority. This is neither accidental nor inevitable but rather shaped by identifiable political and cultural processes.

This paper begins by situating gender diversity within a broad global history. We then trace how modern Western transphobia emerged through the Enlightenment and Victorian eras, when scientific rationalism, colonial governance, and legal codification hardened binary understandings of sex and gender. Subsequent sections explore how gender nonconformity was displaced into controlled spaces

of spectacle in the early twentieth century, including performance culture and popular media, where limited visibility was permitted without recognition or rights. We then examine the escalation of trans-weaponisation during the World War II era, when eugenic ideologies reframed gender variance as a biological and political danger, enabling systematic persecution and the destruction of early trans knowledge.

Our analysis continues through the Cold War, a period in which trans and gender-nonconforming people were increasingly associated with political subversion, moral corruption, and national insecurity. Finally, we examine present-day trans-weaponisation, demonstrating how historical narratives are re-activated and adapted within modern legal systems, media ecosystems, and digital platforms.

Trans-weaponisation should not be understood solely as a dispute over identity or culture, but as a structural strategy that reflects deeper crises in social and political orders. The accompanying consultation period of this working paper invites evidence, perspectives, and lived experience – particularly beyond Western contexts. Contributions will be used to test the findings presented here and inform the next phase of the Global LGBTI+ Rights Commission's work.

# Purpose of this Consultation

This paper traces the history of trans-weaponisation, outlining each era as a distinct strand - or tactic - through which trans identities have been strategically framed in order to protect existing social and political institutions. In doing so, we will examine not only the defining features of each period but also how these eras overlap, interact, and build upon one another. Our aim is to uncover the conditions that give rise to each new form of weaponisation and to understand the broader functions these tactics serve within their respective socio-political contexts.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the history presented here will be predominantly shaped by Western perspectives. This focus stems largely from the availability of data. Accessible knowledge is heavily skewed toward the West, creating an almost unavoidable dependence on those sources. This imbalance is rooted in a long-standing data gap in the Global South, where colonisation, limited research investment, and uneven archival preservation have restricted both the production and global visibility of local knowledge. Therefore, based on the information we have available to us and on our expertise and as a Global North organisation, we will assume a Western perspective for the purposes of this paper.

However, the purpose of the consultation period is to bridge this gap with evidence submissions from individuals on the ground and/or organisations with perspectives we have not explored. Additionally, the consultation will aim to apply

the key takeaways to the modern day in order to understand the current tactics of trans-weaponisation. By opening up this consultation, we aim to:

- Test the findings of the report against the lived experiences of those most affected;
- Identify additional, modern examples and evidence not captured by the desk research;
- Gather perspectives on how future advocacy strategies can be strengthened at national, regional, and international levels.

We particularly welcome responses from:

- LGBTI+ rights activists and organisations;
- Civil society groups working on human rights, democracy, and equality;
- Academics and researchers in law, politics, and social sciences;
- International organisations, donor states, and development agencies;
- Individuals with lived experience of trans-weaponisation.

## How responses will be used

The evidence and perspectives gathered through the consultation period will inform and refine the next iteration of the

report and contribute to the development of future advocacy strategies by the Commission's Advisory Council. In the interest of transparency, a summary of responses will be published, setting out the key themes raised. Where permission is given, case studies and direct testimonies may be incorporated into future publications.

## How to respond

Respondents are encouraged to answer the consultation questions set out under each report section on our website. You do not need to answer every question; partial responses are welcome. Submissions may be made individually or on behalf of an organisation.

## List of consultation questions

### Section 1 Questions: Early Conceptions of Gender (Pre-Enlightenment to Victorian Era)

- Does this section accurately reflect how gender diversity was understood or integrated in historical contexts relevant to your region?
- Are there examples of pre-colonial or non-Western gender systems that challenge or complicate the narrative presented here?
- Are there historical periods, regions, or communities where trans-weaponisation has taken different forms than those described here?
- How did colonial governance affect indigenous understandings of gender in your context?
- Are there historical figures, movements, or sources that provide alternative perspectives on gender during this period?

- Do you see continuities between early scientific justifications of gender hierarchy and modern arguments used against trans rights?

### Section 2 Questions: Transness Through Spectacle

- Do you see lasting impacts from early cultural portrayals on contemporary stereotypes or myths?
- How have marginalised communities navigated visibility when recognition and rights were denied?
- Are there examples where cultural representation led to greater social acceptance or protection?
- How have class, race, or economic exclusion shaped who was pushed into spectacle-based visibility?
- Are there important cultural forms or traditions missing from this analysis?

### Section 3 Questions: WW2 Era Eugenics

- Does this section reflect how eugenic thinking influenced policy or social attitudes in your national context?
- Are there documented cases of trans or gender-nonconforming people being targeted under eugenic or "degeneracy" frameworks?
- How did medical or psychiatric classification affect the safety or legal status of gender-nonconforming people?
- How has the destruction or absence of historical records affected trans advocacy today?

- What lessons (if any) from this period are most relevant to current human rights protections?

#### **Section 4 Questions: Cold War Moral Panic and Political Subversion**

- Are there examples of trans or gender-nonconforming people being linked to political disloyalty or subversion in your historical cultural context?
- How did surveillance, policing, or intelligence agencies contribute to gender-based repression?
- Are these narratives still present in contemporary political rhetoric?

#### **Section 5 Questions: The 90s' Cultural Redistribution of Moral Panic**

- Have historical moral panics shaped perceptions of trans and gender-diverse communities in your country? What lessons could be applied internationally?
- How do media campaigns and moral panics create fear of hidden threats against LGBTI+ people, and how can organisations respond effectively?
- In what ways has institutional censorship contributed to the development of negative stereotypes of queer and gender-nonconforming people across different contexts?
- How have repeated media narratives around gender nonconformity influenced laws, social attitudes, and cultural norms globally? Which interventions have proven effective?

- How have artists and creators in restrictive environments used both direct and coded methods to express queer identity safely, and what can this teach us?
- How have LGBTI+ audiences historically reclaimed or subverted negative portrayals, and how can these strategies strengthen community empowerment across diverse settings?

#### **Section 6 Questions: Reclaiming the Narrative and the Emergence of Reactive Trans-weaponisation**

- How has the long history of trans resistance in your context shaped current strategies for asserting narrative and political authority?
- In what ways do contemporary forms of backlash or “reactive trans-weaponisation” manifest in your country or region?
- What lessons can be drawn from early trans-led organising, digital activism, and community knowledge-sharing for strengthening global trans movements today?
- In what ways do media representations of trans people as “excessively visible” or “disruptive” influence public attitudes and policy decisions in your context?
- What strategies have proved effective in challenging the framing of trans rights as “special treatment” or coercive, and how can these be adapted internationally?

- How do narratives of care, protection, or vulnerability function to justify restrictions on trans rights, and how can organisations expose and counter these strategies?
- What are the most significant ongoing threats to trans communities that emerge when gains in visibility, recognition, or rights provoke backlash?

#### **Section 7 Questions: Modern Populist Weaponisation of Transgender Identities**

- How have anti-trans narratives in your context been constructed through rhetoric, myth, or symbolic framing?
- In what ways do political actors use language to mobilise public opinion against trans and gender-diverse communities?
- Are there examples of “transvestigation” or similar conspiratorial narratives in your context, and what social or political functions do they serve?
- What flashpoints (elections, policy debates, public campaigns) have triggered intensified anti-trans rhetoric, and what were the consequences?
- How do economic, social, or cultural anxieties intersect with anti-trans mobilisation in your local context?
- How can civil society organisations track early warning signs of emerging backlash against trans and gender-diverse people?

- What strategies have proven effective in countering populist anti-trans narratives, symbolic threats, or moral panic in your local context?

#### **Section 8 Questions: Conclusion**

- How do patterns of trans-weaponisation observed in Western contexts resonate (if at all) with experiences in your country or region?
- What historical or contemporary mechanisms of social control against trans and gender-diverse people are most visible in your region?
- Are there examples of local trans activism that have successfully anticipated or countered cycles of weaponisation?
- How cycles of fear, surveillance, or moral panic shape the ability of trans and gender-diverse people to occupy public space or leadership roles?
- What support, collaboration, or resources are most needed to anticipate and counter anti-trans strategies while advancing LGBTI+ rights globally?

# A Note on Methodology

This paper maps the tactics of trans-weaponisation, tracing its development from the Enlightenment era through to contemporary forms of transphobia. By examining each historical period, we aim to show how strategies for marginalising and controlling trans bodies and identities have evolved, adapted, and accumulated over time. This analysis is grounded in a careful review of relevant literature, drawing on historical records, sociological studies, and critical theory to inform our understanding of these processes. Through this approach, we not only identify recurring patterns and methods of trans-weaponisation but also situate them within the broader social, political, and cultural contexts that shaped their emergence and persistence.

Specifically, through an in-depth literature review, this paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how language both reflects and reproduces social inequalities, tracing how ideolo-

gies are socially embedded through both written and spoken texts. Through this lens, each historical stage of trans-weaponisation will be analysed as a specific, discursive tactic that produces particular ideas about sex and gender to defend specific social and/or political structures.

Ultimately, this framework will allow us to see trans-weaponisation not as a series of reactions to trans people per se but as a symptom of deeper crises in the social order.

It is important to state, from the outset, that there is a significant historical data gap of trans people and communities. Therefore, while our literature review has been extensive, it is limited by the information available. A certain amount of gaps in the story we are about to tell are inevitable. This data gap - and thus the validity of this paper's methodology - will be improved through the accompanying global consultation.

# Glossary

gender. A person who does not conform to societal expectations of gender may not, however, identify as transgender.

**Gender identity:** A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else, which may or may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

**Homophobia:** The aversion, fear, or discrimination against homosexual individuals, which can manifest through negative attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices towards those who are attracted to people of the same sex. This can result in social exclusion, harassment, and violence against lesbian, gay, and other non-heterosexual people.

**Homosexual:** A person attracted to the same sex.

**ICCPR:** International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

**Intersex:** A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

**Intersectionality:** A theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of one's social and political identities (gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination.

**Biphobia:** Biphobia is the aversion, fear, or discrimination against bisexual individuals, which can manifest through negative attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices towards those who are attracted to both men and women.

**Bisexual:** A term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender. Bisexual people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including, but not limited to, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and many others.

**Civil society:** Refers to the space for collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values, generally distinct from government and commercial for-profit actors. This can include charities, nongovernmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, trade unions, social movements, coalitions, and advocacy groups.

**Cisgender:** Someone whose sense of gender identity is the same as the sex assigned at their birth.

**Gay:** Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. Also, a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality - some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.

**Gender expression:** How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender within the context of societal expectations of

**Intersexphobia:** The aversion, fear, or discrimination against intersex individuals, who are born with physical sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions of male or female.

**Lesbian:** Refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.

**LGBTI+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex.

**NGO:** Non-governmental organisation.

**Sex characteristics:** A person's physical characteristics relating to sex, including genitalia and other reproductive anatomy, chromosomes and hormones, as well as secondary physical characteristics emerging from puberty.

**Sexual orientation:** A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted; the fact of being het-

erosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; a person's sexual attraction to other people, or lack thereof.

**Trans/Transgender:** An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not conform to, the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender may also include people who belong to a third gender, or else conceptualise transgender people as a third gender.

**Transphobia:** The aversion, fear, or discrimination against transgender individuals, who have a gender identity or expression that differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This can manifest through negative attitudes, stereotypes, social exclusion, harassment, and violence against transgender people.

**UDHR:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an international document adopted by the United Nations General Assembly that enshrines the rights and freedoms of all human beings.



# Introduction

In contemporary politics, few issues have become as controversial and emotionally charged as transgender rights. Across the globe, in legislatures, media outlets, and online platforms, trans people's existence and rights are being debated as a question of morality, safety, and even national identity.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we must remember that this politicisation did not emerge in a vacuum. The weaponisation of trans identities -

namely, the strategic use of transgender identities and issues to advance ideological agendas - has deep historical roots.<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> From early nineteenth-century anxieties about modernity and civilisation to twenty-first-century culture wars, trans people have repeatedly been used as a canvas upon which broader social, cultural, and socio-economic fears about gender, sexuality, and race are projected.<sup>4</sup>

1 Faye, S. (2021). *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*. Available at: ISBN 978-0241423141

2 Glendening, M. (2023, June 9). *The Weaponisation of Hate*. *The Critic*. Available at: <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-weaponisation-of-hate/>

3 Ward et. Al. (2025). *Moral Panic and the Legislativ Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S.* *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

4 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). *The Weaponisation of Identity Politics*. *Legal Lens*. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

This paper traces the historical development of trans-weaponisation, arguing that the politicisation of trans identities has long functioned as a mechanism for sustaining dominant social orders under the guise of moral or cultural protection.<sup>5</sup> Understanding this history is essential not only to contextualise current debates but also to expose the enduring mechanisms through which gender nonconformity has been transformed into a political tool that hurts both trans individuals and broader society.<sup>6</sup>

This paper traces the historical trajectory of trans-weaponisation through seven key stages: beginning with the early eighteenth-century introduction of the gender binary; the Victorian codification of separate spheres; the twentieth-century cultural emergence of trans visibility in carnival and science fiction; the eugenic persecution of gender nonconformity during World War II; the Cold War's conflation of queerness with political subversion; the 90s rise of moral panic through pulp fiction and Satanic Panic; the backlash of the trans rights movement in the late twentieth century; and culminating in the reactionary populism that we see today.

It is important, once again, to recognise that the history outlined here will largely reflect Western perspectives. This is primarily due to the availability of sources, which are heavily concentrated in the West, thus creating an almost inevitable

5 Gill-Peterson, J. (2024). *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*. *Journal of Women and Culture*. Available at: <https://samples.overdrive.com/?crd=f3692073-4020-4575-9db0-b2d43ed7c4b4&epub-sample.overdrive.com>

6 Ward et. Al. (2025). *Moral Panic and the Legislativ Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S.* *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

reliance on them. This imbalance reflects a long-standing data gap in the Global South, where colonial legacies, limited research investment, and uneven archival preservation have constrained both the production and global visibility of local knowledge. Consequently, based on the information accessible to us and on our expertise as members of a Global North organisation, this paper adopts a Western lens.

The consultation period, however, is designed to help address this imbalance by inviting evidence submissions from individuals, institutions, or organisations on the ground whose experiences we rely on to complete this paper.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper draws upon post-structuralist and critical discourse theories to explore how trans-weaponisation has operated historically as a mechanism of power. Central to this framework is the argument that power functions not merely through explicit repression or coercion but through the production of knowledge and norms that shape how society understands what is real, natural, and legitimate. To analyse trans-weaponisation historically, this paper explores not only the actions being taken against trans people but the surrounding discourses through which societal structures are being threatened, destabilised, or defended.

It may feel counterintuitive to devote time to theory when the threats and dangers facing trans people today are so immediate and concrete. However, theory offers a crucial lens for understanding how these harms are constructed, justified, and reproduced. By understanding the theory, we can begin to understand the methodology of the other side. We can understand how they shape their narratives, how they manufacture fear, and ultimately how they strategically – and successfully – weaponise lives. In this sense, theory is the key. Theory, if used as a practical tool, allows us to decode the mechanisms behind each tactic of trans-weaponisation, allowing us to anticipate, challenge, and ultimately dismantle them.

For this reason, understanding the historical and contemporary weaponisation of trans identities requires more than tracing moments of distinct political backlash or cultural panic. Rather it demands a deeper examination of the discursive and cultural forces through which gender itself becomes a site of power that can be constructed, policed, and strategically manipulated. This section, therefore, draws on a series of interconnected theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Octavia Butler, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Roland Barthes.

Each thinker allows us to see a different layer of the problem resulting in a multi-

dimensional framework for analysing how transness is made politically legible and available for weaponisation.

### **Foucault:**

Before Foucault, power was largely conceptualised as top-down and repressive – a tool wielded by sovereigns, states, or institutions to silence or punish.<sup>7</sup> Foucault radically reconceptualised this view of power by framing it as productive rather than solely restrictive. In *Discipline and Punish*, he wrote that, “Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in this sense, power generates knowledge, norms, and categories of identity.

Foucault’s reconceptualisation is particularly relevant to this topic of discussion. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault challenges the idea that sexuality was repressed during the Victorian era. Instead, he argues that it was incessantly spoken about, classified, and managed through medicine, psychology, education, and religion.<sup>9</sup> These discourses did not silence sex; rather, they constructed it and as a result produced new norms that defined what counted as ‘normal’ or ‘perverse.’ Similarly, discourses around gender and transness do not simply describe reality; they produce it, establishing what is legitimate as ‘man,’ ‘woman,’ or ‘other.’<sup>10</sup>

Thus, through this lens, trans-weaponisation can be understood as a discursive tactic through which power defends threatened norms of sex and gender. Power operates not only by punishing trans people but by producing and reinforcing socialised norms that frame trans existence as pathological, deceptive, dangerous, and/or destabilising.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault also emphasises that power produces the very categories it appears to defend. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, he shows how identities such as the “homosexual,” the “pervert,” or the “hysterical woman” emerge not from nature but from dense networks of scientific, legal, medical, and religious discourse.<sup>12</sup> These categories are effects of power, not its preconditions.

Foucault’s later concepts of “biopower” and “governmentality” deepen this connection. Biopower describes how states manage populations through norms about reproduction, family, and health. Transness becomes weaponised precisely at the intersection of these anxieties where threats to birth rates and threats to the ‘natural family,’ destabilise the gender categories that biopolitical governance depends upon.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, governmentality – the ensemble of institutions, procedures, and techniques used by modern states to manage populations and shape

citizen conduct – helps explain how ordinary people internalise these norms and participate in policing trans bodies through bathrooms, schools, medical institutions, or the media. The weaponisation of transness is both top-down and diffused; it is embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

Foucault, thus, gives us the first layer: Power does not simply react to trans identities; it actively constructs the meanings through which ‘trans’ becomes legible as ‘pathology,’ ‘deviance,’ ‘deception,’ or ‘danger.’ As a result, trans-weaponisation is a discursive project that constructs transness as a problem requiring management, containment, or elimination.

### **Judith Butler:**

Building upon Foucault’s analysis of discourse, Judith Butler centres gender as a performative and regulatory structure through which norms are created.<sup>14</sup> In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, she argues that gender is produced through repeated acts that create the illusion of stability.<sup>15</sup> The categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ appear natural only because they are reiterated so consistently and so forcefully. Even ‘biological sex’ is not a pre-discursive fact but is itself shaped by the same cultural and discursive systems that define gender.<sup>16</sup> In this understand-

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7 Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

8 Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

9 Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

10 Kelly, Mark. (2014). *Foucault and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b28>

11 Ibid.

12 Hoy, David. (1986). *Foucault: a Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

13 Kelly, Mark. (2014). *Foucault and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b28>

14 Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

15 Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. Routledge

ing, gender can be redefined through changes in – or the policing of – social performance.

Trans identities intervene directly into this process. They expose the artificiality of the binary. They reveal that gender is not innate but a set of norms that must be constantly reenacted. This revelation often generates fear, anxiety, and ultimately backlash.

The source of this fear is explained in Butler's analysis of "intelligibility" where she outlines how bodies that fail to repeat normative gender scripts threaten the coherence of the binary system.<sup>17</sup> As a result, they are rendered unintelligible, monstrous, or deceptive, which justifies disciplinary interventions.

Here, we can see that Butler adds the second layer that outlines how trans-weaponisation is a policing of gender performance through which threatened norms attempt to reassert themselves.

### **Octavia Butler:**

In extending Judith Butler's framework, it is also essential to acknowledge scholars such as Octavia Butler who expose how

the politics of embodiment and identity are inseparable from histories of racialisation and colonial control.<sup>18</sup> This insight reminds us that the weaponisation of transness rarely operates in isolation; it is entangled with broader structures of racial, sexual, and colonial governance.

Octavia Butler's work exposes how regimes of control operate not only through discourse but through the governance of bodies deemed deviant, excessive, or incompatible with dominant visions of social order.<sup>19</sup> Writing at the intersection of speculative fiction, political theory, and Black feminist thought, Octavia Butler repeatedly interrogates how difference is managed through narratives of survival, progress, and civilisation.<sup>20</sup>

Across works such as *Lilith's Brood* and the *Patternist* series, Octavia Butler explores systems in which bodily autonomy is subordinated to external logics that are framed as necessary for collective survival.<sup>21</sup> Bodies are altered, regulated, or disciplined not through overt cruelty but through claims of benevolence, inevitability, or improvement. Crucially, these regimes present themselves as rational responses to crises, obscuring the violence they enact in the name of adaptation or

continuity.<sup>22</sup> This dynamic mirrors the logic through which trans bodies are weaponised – not always as explicit threats but as problems to be managed, corrected, or contained for the sake of social stability.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, Butler's work is particularly instructive in revealing how bodily governance is inseparable from histories of race, colonialism, and reproduction. Her narratives consistently foreground whose bodies are permitted to persist into the future, whose are conditionally tolerated, and whose are framed as expendable or obstructive to collective survival.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Butler allows us to understand trans-weaponisation as part of a broader colonial and racialised logic in which gender nonconformity becomes entangled with anxieties about degeneration, demographic decline, and the maintenance of civilisation itself.<sup>25</sup>

Importantly, Butler theorises power from the perspective of those subjected to it rather than those who wield it. Where Foucault maps the productive operations of power and Judith Butler destabilises the ontological status of gender norms, Octavia Butler examines how these forces are lived in bodies already marked by

structural vulnerability. Her work highlights how appeals to the future function as a form of coercion in the present, legitimising the regulation of bodies deemed incompatible with dominant imaginaries of continuity, purity, or progress.<sup>26</sup>

Octavia Butler, therefore, adds a crucial dimension where trans-weaponisation is never solely about gender; it is bound to race, conceptions of civilisation, and the politics of bodily autonomy within a broader context of colonial power and legacy. It is embedded within broader systems that determine whose bodies are allowed to exist freely, whose must justify their presence, and whose are rendered threats to the future itself.

### **Jacques Derrida:**

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction deepens this inquiry by demonstrating that language – the medium through which power operates – is inherently unstable.<sup>27</sup> For Derrida, meaning is never fixed but endlessly deferred through the relationships between signs.<sup>28</sup> When combined with Foucault's claim that discourse is a vehicle of power, this suggests that power itself is unstable.

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16 Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

17 Vipond, E. (2018). *Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing*. Taylor and Francis. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2019.1542813>

18 Butler, O. (2023) *Collected Works*. New York: Library of America.

19 Terry, J. (2019) *The Chronopolitics of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction*. Durham University. Available at: <file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/27425.pdf>

20 McIntyre et. al. (2010 November). *Reflections on Octavia E. Butler*. *Science Fiction Studies*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746443>

21 Nanda, A. (2013). *Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood*. Santa Clara University. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=engl>

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Terry, J. (2019) *The Chronopolitics of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction*. Durham University. Available at: <file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/27425.pdf>

25 Ibid.

26 McIntyre et. al. (2010 November). *Reflections on Octavia E. Butler*. *Science Fiction Studies*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746443>

27 Derrida, J. (2016). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

28 Ibid.

This instability is masked by the illusion that categories are natural, self-evident, or biologically anchored.<sup>29</sup> However, trans identities expose this instability with unusual clarity. They illuminate the flexibility of ideological boundaries that society desperately wants to present as natural. This is precisely what makes them politically potent and dangerous to entrenched power.

Returning to Judith Butler, her theory of gender performativity can be read as a deconstructive intervention into the gender binary itself.<sup>30</sup> By demonstrating that 'man' and 'woman' are not stable ontological categories but effects of repeated social acts, Butler exposes gender as a system that requires continuous reenactment to maintain its authority. In this sense, Butler does not merely describe how gender norms operate; she deconstructs the binary by showing that its apparent coherence relies on the exclusion of bodies and performances that fail to conform.<sup>31</sup> Trans identities do not sit outside the binary; they reveal the instability already at its core.

Derrida's framework helps explain why this exposure provokes such intense political backlash. Because meaning is never secure, categories such as 'male' and 'female' must be actively defended.<sup>32</sup>

From a deconstructive perspective, trans-weaponisation can be understood as a reaction where the more fragile a category becomes, the more aggressively it is policed.<sup>33</sup> However, these efforts do not necessarily restore stability; they merely conceal instability beneath increasingly-rigid frameworks.

Derrida, therefore, adds how trans-weaponisation arises from efforts to stabilise categories that are inherently unstable, revealing the deep dependency of power on the illusion of fixed meaning.

#### **Jean Baudrillard:**

Where Derrida highlights the instability of meaning, Jean Baudrillard reveals what happens when meaning is overtaken by media and simulation. He argues that modern life is dominated by simulacra – signs and images that no longer refer to

any stable reality but instead construct their own.<sup>34</sup> These simulacra provide the symbolic structures through which social life is rendered legible.<sup>35</sup>

This gives rise to "hyperreality," a condition in which the distinction between reality and its representations collapses. Curated social media feeds, sensation-alised news, political messaging, and algorithmic amplification all produce hyperreal environments in which simulations feel more real than lived experience.<sup>36</sup>

The weaponisation of transness flourishes in this hyperreal terrain.

Most people do not meet trans people in person; they encounter simulations or portrayals of transness produced by media, political rhetoric, and online outrage machines. These are not representations of trans lives; they are hyperreal constructions designed to evoke fear, anger, or moral panic regardless of their relationship to empirical reality.

As Baudrillard argues, we've moved from an age of representation – where a sign refers to a reality – to simulation – where the sign has no relation to any reality. The image or model of an event, person,

or place dictates our understanding of it before we have any 'real' experience.<sup>37</sup> When we apply this concept to the weaponisation of transness, we can see that it depends not on lived bodies but on simulacra and hyperreality. Lived experiences are increasingly replaced by commodified images. Consequently, power and media combine to produce a symbolic 'trans threat' that becomes more politically potent than the reality of trans existence.

Baudrillard's work adds a vital new layer to our analysis and explains that trans-weaponisation operates not only through discourse and norms, but through the curation of hyperreal simulations in which the image of transness eclipses trans people themselves.

#### **Roland Barthes:**

Finally, Roland Barthes helps explain how discourses about trans people circulate culturally and acquire symbolic power. His concept of 'myth' describes how complex ideas become simplified into ideological icons through media repetition. Myths do not describe the world, they naturalise political interpretations of it.<sup>38</sup> Contemporary narratives about trans people such as 'the bathroom predator,' 'the indoctrin-

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29 Turner, C. (2016). Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction. *Critical Legal Thinking*. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/05/27/jacques-derrida-deconstruction/>

30 Smith-Laing, T. (2017). An Analysis of Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. *Gender Studies*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912281718>

31 Smith-Laing, T. (2017). An Analysis of Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. *Gender Studies*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912281718>

32 Mendie, J. & Udofia, S. (2020 July). A Philosophical Analysis of Jacques Derrida's Contributions to Language and Meaning. *PINISSI Discretion Review*. Available at: DOI:10.26858/pdr.v4i1.14528

33 Ibid.

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34 Zalta, E. & Nodelman, U. (2019). Jean Baudrillard. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>

35 Ibid.

36 Shawlin, S. M. (2019). Critically analyze the theory of Jean Baudrillard. *Academia*. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically\\_analyze\\_the\\_theory\\_of\\_Jean\\_Baudrillard](https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically_analyze_the_theory_of_Jean_Baudrillard)

37 Zalta, E. & Nodelman, U. (2019). Jean Baudrillard. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>

38 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). Roland Barthes: Myth. *Critical Legal Thinking*. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

nated child,' or the 'gender cult' are not neutral descriptions. They are myths that convert political and social anxieties into seemingly self-evident truths.

Importantly, Barthes reminds us that meaning is not fully controlled by the speaker. Once a discourse circulates, it is interpreted, repeated, and reshaped by audiences, institutions, and cultural systems. The significance of a text or discourse emerges through the act of interpretation rather than its origin.<sup>39</sup>

Following Barthes' line of thinking helps us understand how weaponisation is amplified through media, where trans bodies become empty vessels onto which cultural anxieties are projected.<sup>40</sup> His notion of the "death of the author" also disrupts the idea that politicians or pundits generate meaning; rather, meaning emerges through circulation. Weaponisation of trans people and identities can, therefore, be understood as a social process not just a singular act.<sup>41</sup>

Politics is not upstream from culture. It is, in fact, actively shaped by it.

The purpose of outlining this theoretical framework is to highlight that the discrimination that trans and gender-noncon-

forming people have historically faced is not just felt through legislation; it is experienced culturally. Taken together, these theorists reveal that trans-weaponisation is not merely a political backlash or moral panic. It is a deeply embedded mechanism of power that is productive, embodied and discursively unstable.

As a result, this framework fundamentally shows us how not all power is loud and overt; sometimes it's quiet, even passive. This duality of power – its ability to be both all consuming and subversive – is what embeds social norms so deeply. In its essence, power is not merely imposed; it is something that is embodied and enacted in ordinary life. Establishing this conceptual grounding at the outset is crucial, particularly because the examples that follow may not align with the traditional or overt forms of transphobia that we have come to recognise in the modern day. Nonetheless, these unfamiliar and at times farfetched forms of marginalisation accumulate and interact throughout different historical periods, ultimately shaping the contemporary landscape of transphobia in profound and consequential ways. These theories provide the conceptual grounding for the historical analysis we cover in following sections and can be used to illuminate how seemingly dispa-

rate or farfetched forms of trans marginalisation accumulate and interact.

While reading this paper, elements of this theoretical framework will emerge throughout, which is why they are outlined here at the outset. However, these connections will not be explicitly high-

lighted in the chapters that follow, as theory is not the primary focus of those sections. Instead, the analysis will take the form of a primarily historical account. The final chapter will then bring everything together, offering a case study through which we can explore the theories introduced here from a practical perspective.

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39 Newton, K.M. (1997). Roland Barthes: 'The Death of the Author'. In: Newton, K.M. (eds). Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_25)

40 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). Roland Barthes: Myth. Critical Legal Thinking. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

41 Newton, K.M. (1997). Roland Barthes: 'The Death of the Author'. In: Newton, K.M. (eds). Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_25)



## Section 1:

# Early Conceptions of Gender

Despite the influx of contemporary debates and media discourse about transgender people, the long and complex history of trans and gender-diverse lives remains far less known. In reality, transgender and gender-diverse people are not a modern phenomenon. Not only have prehistoric graves – approximately 5000 years old – been found to contain biologically male skeletons with women’s clothing, but the oldest extant writings on Earth from ancient Mesopotamia – approximately 4000 years old – contain frequent references to people who were neither male nor female. Among them are men living as women, eunuchs, intersex

people, and more.<sup>42</sup> Even the medicalisation of gender variance has ancient roots – albeit in forms distinct from modern medicine – with the religious leaders of Ancient Scythian, known as Enarei, who were born male but lived as women and drank “feminising potions” made from licorice root extract and mare’s urine that acted as testosterone blockers.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, because the rigid gender binary and associated transphobia familiar in modern Western societies did not exist in most ancient civilisations, attitudes toward gender-nonconforming individuals varied, with many cultures integrating

gender diversity into their social and spiritual life. In other words, there are many ancient contexts in which gender-nonconforming people not only existed but were largely accepted.<sup>44</sup>

Examples of this acceptance are abundant. Among various First Nations peoples, understandings of gender were far from homogenous, and what determined a person’s acceptance was based on their contributions to the community rather than their identity.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the Ugandan Mudoko Dako people – effeminate males – were treated as women and could have their marriage to men uniformly recognised.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, across Africa some societies even revered transgender people as connections to the spirit world. For example, the Lugbara people were thought to be better equipped to carry out communications with spirits due to the duality of their gendered existence.<sup>47</sup>

Here, we can see that the centuries old history of transgender existence is not

merely anecdotal but a consistent pattern that spans the globe. As we continue to explore the histories from one context to another, the pattern deepens rather than diverges.

Across South Asia, we find the *hijras*, the third gender community of modern day India, who occupied recognised social and spiritual roles for centuries, participating in rituals of blessing and kinship that predate modern nation-states.<sup>48</sup> In the lands now recognised as Mexico, the Zapotec *muxe* tradition shows a similarly enduring presence, with *muxe* individuals integrated into communal life through craft, ceremony, and kin work.<sup>49</sup> In Polynesia, Māhū people held respected cultural and spiritual responsibilities, embodying forms of knowledge and relational care-taking that Western gender categories cannot neatly capture.<sup>50</sup> Among the Lakota, *winkte* individuals took on roles tied to ceremony and craft, often regarded as people who carried unique insight.<sup>51</sup>

42 Marshall, G. (2024, May 9). Ancient Transgender History. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@DrGwenMarshall/ancient-transgender-history-36835c35e009>

43 Marshall, G. (2024, May 9). Ancient Transgender History. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@DrGwenMarshall/ancient-transgender-history-36835c35e009>

44 Roxburgh, C. (2022, March 31). ‘Gender hegemony’: How colonialism distorted African perspectives of trans identity. Minority Africa. Available at: <https://minorityafrica.org/colonialism-gender-trans-identity-africa/>

45 Elkin et. al. (2023, March 2) The long and storied history of transgender people in Australia and beyond. ABC News. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-03/the-long-history-of-transgender-people-in-australia-and-beyond/102037662>

46 Roxburgh, C. (2022, March 31). ‘Gender hegemony’: How colonialism distorted African perspectives of trans identity. Minority Africa. Available at: <https://minorityafrica.org/colonialism-gender-trans-identity-africa/>

47 Roxburgh, C. (2022, March 31). ‘Gender hegemony’: How colonialism distorted African perspectives of trans identity. Minority Africa. Available at: <https://minorityafrica.org/colonialism-gender-trans-identity-africa/>

48 Nanda, S. (1999). Neither Man no Woman: The Hijras of India. City University of New York. Available at: [https://www.hansrajcollege.ac.in/hCPanel/uploads/elearning/elearning\\_document/Neither\\_Man\\_nor\\_Woman.pdf](https://www.hansrajcollege.ac.in/hCPanel/uploads/elearning/elearning_document/Neither_Man_nor_Woman.pdf)

49 Mirande, A. (2017). Behind the Mask: Gender Hybridity in a Zapotec Community. University of Arizona Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1k3s9w2>

50 Anderson, L. (2022 November 18). The Trans History Lesson Your Teachers Never Taught You. Seattle and The Pacific Northwest’s LGBTQIA+ News & Entertainment Source. Available at: <https://www.sgn.org/story/320706>

51 Omoni Hartemann, G. (2021, March 31). Stop Erasing Transgender Stories from History. Sapiens. Available at: <https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/transgender-people-exist-in-history/>

Furthermore, indigenous groups in what is now Indonesia, such as the Bugis, recognised a five-gender system including the *bissu*, whose ritual authority was tied to their gendered liminality.<sup>52</sup> In the ancient Sumerian cults of Inanna, *gala* clergy – assigned male at birth – performed roles entwined with lamentation, ritual, and gender variance.<sup>53</sup> Even in early medieval Europe there are records of ‘female husbands,’ eunuch servants, and monastic communities that carved out unexpected spaces for gender nonconformity.<sup>54</sup>

These are just a few examples from a far broader map. But taken together, these examples form a vast historical landscape of transgender history where we can see the presence of gender diversity across communities, borders, and even millennia.

However, the history most widely recognised today, disregards the cultural roots of trans people and tells an overwhelmingly Western-centric story that diverges sharply from the experiences of the Global South. Yet, it is often presented as universal. In reality, much of the systematic persecution of gender diversity emerged primarily in Christianised Europe during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras and spread globally through colonialism.<sup>55</sup>

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52 Anderson, L. (2022 November 18). The Trans History Lesson Your Teachers Never Taught You. Seattle and The Pacific Northwest's LGBTQIA+ News & Entertainment Source. Available at: <https://www.sgn.org/story/320706>

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Omoni Hartemann, G. (2021, March 31). Stop Erasing Transgender Stories from History. Sapiens. Available at: <https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/transgender-people-exist-in-history/>

To understand how we arrived at the current state of transphobia, we must examine these historical roots and trace the origins of the arguments that persist today. This exploration will assume a primarily Western perspective due to the data available and the expertise we have to tell this story. This may seem like a willfully ignorant perspective to assume given the explanation we have presented of the innately global nature of trans history and identity; however, there is full intention after consultation to expand this analysis into a true global understanding. We will be able to bridge the data gap we have outlined above and tell untold stories through evidence submissions from individuals and organisations operating on the ground in diverse cultural and political contexts. These evidence submissions will enable a more comprehensive, nuanced, and representative account of trans histories and experiences worldwide, bridging the limitations inherent in a Western-centered starting point.

## The Enlightenment Period

To begin, the Enlightenment period laid much of the groundwork for modern transphobia by redefining the scientific and philosophical understandings of gender. Yet, it is important to recognise that the worldview it replaced was not

neutral either. Before the Enlightenment, sex was viewed as dualistic, “Males and females were viewed as different forms of the same sex...the vagina was understood as an interior penis, the womb as a scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles.”<sup>56</sup> This framework did not imply equality but rather it positioned the male body as the fully realised form and the female body as a lesser, incomplete echo of it.

This hierarchical understanding was reinforced by dominant theological narratives of the time. For instance, the story of Eve being created from Adam’s rib circulated as cultural proof that women were derivative beings, secondary in both creation and purpose.<sup>57</sup> Within medieval and early modern Europe, this idea was stitched into legal, religious, and moral discourses, presenting female existence as contingent upon and subordinate to male authority.<sup>58</sup> The ‘one-sex’ model, therefore, naturalised misogyny by suggesting that women were quite literally men rendered

imperfect, a worldview that justified restricting women’s autonomy while keeping their social and intellectual potential under perpetual suspicion.<sup>59</sup>

With the Enlightenment came the rise of scientific thought, which, rather than challenging pre-existing hierarchies, often provided a new arena to justify and reinforce them.<sup>60</sup> During this period, the first anatomical drawing of a distinctively female skeleton was published between 1730 and 1790.<sup>61</sup> Natural scientists began to produce detailed taxonomies of behavioural and psychological differences between the sexes, based on evidence ranging from relative brain size to cellular physiology.<sup>62</sup> As a result, men and women began to be viewed as two dichotomous and distinct sexes, with differing brains, skeletons and nervous systems.<sup>63</sup> These anatomical studies ultimately argued that women had a smaller brain size in comparison to men which “demonstrated their unfitness for intellectual pursuits.”<sup>64</sup> Addi-

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56 Menon, A. (2023, July 14). The gender binary is white supremacy. Migrants’ Rights Network. Available at: <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2023/07/14/the-gender-binary-is-white-supremacy/>

57 Morris, H. (1993 May 21). Adams Rib. Institute of Creation Research. Available at: <https://www.icr.org/article/19885>

58 Roberts, L. (2024 October). Can the Story of Eve be Interpreted as Feminist. Philosophy and Divinity. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385267478\\_Can\\_the\\_Story\\_of\\_Eve\\_Genesis\\_2-3\\_be\\_Interpreted\\_as\\_Feminist](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385267478_Can_the_Story_of_Eve_Genesis_2-3_be_Interpreted_as_Feminist)

59 Ibid.

60 Cheadle, T. Science and the gender binary. Future Learn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/a-global-history-of-sex-and-gender/0/steps/171025>

61 Cheadle, T. Science and the gender binary. Future Learn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/a-global-history-of-sex-and-gender/0/steps/171025>

62 Ibid.

63 Menon, A. (2023, July 14). The gender binary is white supremacy. Migrants’ Rights Network. Available at: <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2023/07/14/the-gender-binary-is-white-supremacy/>

64 Wang, C. Early Modern Europe. Carleton College. Available at: [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://earlymoderneurope.hist.sites.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/women-and-gender-in-early-mode/thoughts-about-female-identity&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1764092423008175&usq=AOvVaw0eroy4qXR4Pk\\_b0ZWQvPZb](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://earlymoderneurope.hist.sites.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/women-and-gender-in-early-mode/thoughts-about-female-identity&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1764092423008175&usq=AOvVaw0eroy4qXR4Pk_b0ZWQvPZb)

tionally, women were deemed to be more emotionally intuitive and morally superior, due to their ability to bear children. This, in turn, made them fit for child-rearing.<sup>65</sup> Even these seemingly-positive qualities were weaponised, as women's emotional intuition and moral attentiveness became a justification for confining them to caregiving roles and limiting their participation in public, political, or intellectual life.

Therefore, what had previously been framed as a difference in degree was recast as a difference. The newly-framed 'natural' division became the foundation for justifying claims about gender roles.

Not all thinkers accepted this rigid dichotomy. Early feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and – later, during the Victorian era – Charlotte Perkins Gilman, actively challenged these assumptions. Wollstonecraft critiqued the idea that women were naturally inferior, arguing instead that perceived deficiencies were the result of limited education and social oppression.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Gilman rejected biological

determinism and emphasised the role of societal structures in shaping women's intellectual and creative capacities.<sup>67</sup> Their writings highlighted that the Enlightenment's understandings of gender were deeply selective, effectively codifying inequality under the guise of science and rationality.

The idea that the scientific codification of gender had political motivations gains further merit when we consider the broader philosophical developments occurring at the same time. Thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were grappling with questions about natural rights such as universal liberty, political representation, and individual autonomy.<sup>68</sup> However, when confronted with the question of women's inclusion, many of these theorists resisted extending these principles beyond men.<sup>69</sup> If equality was as universal as they reasoned, then women, too, should have access to political representation, education, and property rights.<sup>70</sup> However, prevailing social, legal, and religious norms made such inclusion unthinkable.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, the challenges being posed by feminist thinkers were seen as a radical threat.<sup>72</sup> For male-dominated institutions, the revolutionary idea of women's equality risked destabilising long-standing hierarchies in politics, education, religion, and the family.<sup>73</sup> In response, Enlightenment thinkers, as well as emerging scientists, embarked on a concerted effort to demonstrate that men and women were fundamentally different – both intellectually and morally – and that these differences justified women's exclusion from the public sphere.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the Enlightenment did not erase prior hierarchical thinking about sex and gender through scientific discovery; it transformed it and reinforced it with new arguments.<sup>75</sup>

Historian Thomas Lacquer further supports this idea by noting that, "No one was much interested in looking for evidence of two distinct sexes ... until such differences became politically important."<sup>76</sup> Every discourse – scientific, philosophical, literary, and legal – began

to function as a tool to enforce gender norms and safeguard hierarchies of power.<sup>77</sup> Gender was not just a description of bodies; it became a governing principle, shaping who could speak, work, vote, own property, or participate in civic life.

Ultimately, the Enlightenment did not mark a rupture from earlier forms of gender hierarchy; rather, it recast and codified them through the lens of emerging scientific and philosophical frameworks. By framing differences between men and women as 'natural' and immutable, Enlightenment thinkers and scientists made inequality appear to be scientifically inevitable rather than socially constructed, a legacy that continues to shape debates about sex, gender, and power today.<sup>78</sup>

## The Victorian Era

Charles Darwin furthered the scientific understandings of the previous era with his theory of evolution by natural selection; it reshaped how society understood biology, heredity, and the natural world.<sup>79</sup> Dar-

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65 Wang, C. Early Modern Europe. Carleton College. Available at: [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://earlymoderneurope.hist.sites.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/women-and-gender-in-early-mode/thoughts-about-female-identity&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1764092423008175&usg=AOvVaw0eroy4qXR4Pk\\_b0ZWQvPZb](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://earlymoderneurope.hist.sites.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/women-and-gender-in-early-mode/thoughts-about-female-identity&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1764092423008175&usg=AOvVaw0eroy4qXR4Pk_b0ZWQvPZb)

66 Moore et. al. (2012). Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199743483.003.0047>

67 Jimenez-Rodrigo, M. (2024). *Profession, Emotion, and Hope: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Origins of the Sociology of Gender*. Helsinki University Press. Available at: DOI: 10.33134/rds.432

68 Cheadle, T. Science and the gender binary. Future Learn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/a-global-history-of-sex-and-gender/0/steps/171025>

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

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72 Ibid.

73 Kim, D. (2013). *An Examination of the Role of Women in the Enlightenment*. University of Alberta. Available at: <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/constellations/index.php/constellations/article/view/19704/15198>

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Cheadle, T. Science and the gender binary. Future Learn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/a-global-history-of-sex-and-gender/0/steps/171025>

77 Grenfell, L. (2018 January 2). *Making Sex: Law's narratives of sex, gender and identity*. University of Adelaide Law School. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-121X.2003.tb00206.x>

78 Ibid.

79 Evans, S. (2017 February 16). *Preface of Darwin and Women*. Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/darwin-and-women/preface/95EEAD7A671A2521048DFBA3EEB7F5FD>

win's writings often echoed the prevailing assumptions of Enlightenment thinkers, including the belief in men's intellectual and physical superiority over women.<sup>80</sup> He argued that the intellectual, sensory, and physical capacities of females were generally inferior to those of males, interpreting such traits as natural counterbalances to masculine characteristics. In *The Descent of Man*, he depicted men as ambitious, assertive, and suited for leadership, while women were characterised as nurturing, delicate, and morally attuned.<sup>81</sup>

However, Darwin's views were not uncontested. Some naturalists, philosophers, and emerging feminist scientists challenged claims of inherent female inferiority. Figures like Francis Galton and Herbert Spencer debated whether observed differences were innate or socially conditioned.<sup>82</sup> Early feminist scholars and writers, such as Harriet Martineau, highlighted environmental and educational influences on intellectual development, arguing that disparities between men and women were not fixed but socially constructed.<sup>83</sup> Despite these critiques, Darwin's evolutionary framework gained widespread

traction, in part because it offered a unifying, empirically-grounded theory that explained human behavior, biology, and variation in one sweeping model.<sup>84</sup> Importantly, it also did not disrupt preconceived ideas upon which powerful social institutions rested. Therefore, Darwin's understanding and descriptions, while clearly scientifically groundbreaking, also reinforced existing social hierarchies and pushed scientific justifications during a new era: the Victorian era.<sup>85</sup>

The Victorian era came to consider gender to be biologically based and determinative of almost every aspect of an individual's potential and character.<sup>86</sup> This division was not simply cultural but rather it was presented as natural and inevitable, rooted in both biological and moral differences. The Victorian era moved beyond *de facto* regulation of these ideals and hardened the categories of 'male' and 'female' through codification by introducing the norm of 'separate spheres.'<sup>87</sup> This principle argued that men and women occupied distinct, complementary domains where men were naturally suited to the public sphere of work, politics, and intel-

lectual life, while women were relegated to the private sphere of home, family, and moral guidance.<sup>88</sup>

As a result, what it meant to be a woman or a man had strict guidelines during this time. For many women it meant a change to the historical dynamic in which it had been usual for women to work alongside their husbands, brothers, and/or fathers in family businesses, farms, and workshops.<sup>89</sup> Many families had a shop or office underneath their living quarters, making it easy for women to contribute to the daily work while also attending to their domestic duties. This work was not only practical but economically vital, particularly for working-class families, where women's labor contributed directly to household survival.<sup>90</sup> The new ideology, however, redefined women's labor as moral rather than productive, confining them to domestic duties and removing them from profit-generating activities.<sup>91</sup> This discourse was not merely prescriptive; it also functioned as an aspirational model, presenting domesticity and moral stewardship as the pinnacle of womanhood to which all women were encouraged to conform.

From an economic perspective, this redefinition served multiple purposes. For the bourgeoisie and emerging middle classes, restricting women to the domestic sphere reinforced the social distinction between men and women, whereby men became the sole earners, consolidating wealth, control, and status within the household.<sup>92</sup> The ideological separation of home and work also created a moral rationale for regulating working-class women's labor, casting wage-earning women as morally suspect while positioning middle and upper-class women as paragons of domestic virtue.<sup>93</sup> By relegating women to unpaid domestic work, households relied on their labor to sustain middle-class lifestyles without remunerating them, further consolidating wealth and class privilege through gender lines.<sup>94</sup>

The social enforcement of these spheres extended far beyond household expectations. Education, literature, religion, and law all reinforced these roles, accordingly shaping individual identity and social behavior from a young age.<sup>95</sup> Girls were taught domestic skills designed to prepare them for marriage, while boys were trained in leadership, critical thought, and professional skills, often through formal

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80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Paul, D. & Day, B. (2008). Innate Differences and the Regulation of Reproduction. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*. Available at: [https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js\\_mill.pdf](https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js_mill.pdf).

83 Watts, R. (2011). Harriet Martineau and the Unitarian Tradition in Education. *Oxford Review of Education*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23119460>

84 Paul, D. & Day, B. (2008). Innate Differences and the Regulation of Reproduction. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*. Available at: [https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js\\_mill.pdf](https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js_mill.pdf).

85 Ibid.

86 Steinbach, S. (2025, October 10). Victorian Era. *Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>

87 Hughes, K. Gender roles in the 19th century. *British Library*. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

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88 Ibid.

89 Hughes, K. Gender roles in the 19th century. *British Library*. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Davidson et. al. (2005). *Separate Spheres*. Oxford University Press. Available at: eISBN: 9780199891054

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Hughes, K. Gender roles in the 19th century. *British Library*. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

schooling or apprenticeships in trades and civic life.<sup>96</sup> Religious institutions reinforced these divisions by framing women's roles as morally tied to piety and obedience, while men were portrayed as rational, authoritative, and public actors.<sup>97</sup> Legal systems restricted women's property rights, curtailed their ability to participate in civic life, and criminalised behaviors that challenged gender norms, such as unmarried cohabitation, female assertiveness, or same-sex relationships.<sup>98</sup> Literature and popular culture further embedded these expectations. Conduct manuals like *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette* outlined the 'proper' behavior of women, while novels often depicted ambitious or independent female characters as cautionary figures whose defiance of societal norms led to personal ruin.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, theatrical productions, newspapers, and visual media reinforced the dangers of deviation from prescribed roles, portraying men who failed to embody masculinity as weak or unworthy.<sup>100</sup> Through this

multifaceted reinforcement, conformity was internalised as a social requirement.

For men, the new definitions of British masculinity during the Victorian era valued the noble, brave, and adventurous spirit of the loyal, male, imperial subject.<sup>101</sup> These values were communicated through virtually every aspect of British society, from religion to popular culture. If individuals did not consume messages of the new masculinity in a church pew, they consumed it in literature. "Penny dreadfuls" and works by British authors like Sir H. Rider Haggard infused swashbuckling adventure stories with indoctrination meant to perpetuate new ideals of masculinity at a time when rapid industrialisation and urbanisation were transforming society.<sup>102</sup> The shift from rural, agrarian life to industrial labor – coupled with new patterns of urban living – disrupted traditional male roles, creating uncertainty about what it meant to be a man.<sup>103</sup> Men who had once derived status and identity

from physical labor on family farms or in craft-based trades now faced regimented factory work, lower autonomy, and the anonymity of urban life.<sup>104</sup> These social and economic pressures produced anxiety and the fear that men might become "feminised" or morally degenerate.<sup>105</sup>

At its core, the codification of gender difference became a mechanism of governance, extending the Enlightenment era practice of rationalising inequality into everyday life.<sup>106</sup> Every norm, expectation, and requirement functioned as a tool to regulate behaviour and shape society according to the principles of male authority and female domesticity.<sup>107</sup>

Underlying this codification of gender was the belief that gender differences were essential to social stability.<sup>108</sup> If men and women transgressed their assigned spheres, men could become feminised and weak, and women could become overly ambitious or immoral.<sup>109</sup> As a result, families – the foundational units of soci-

ety – would suffer, and society itself would unravel.

This discourse came from multiple communities, including religious, legal, and the emerging modern medical/scientific profession. Many scientists believed that strict adherence to these guidelines was essential and that, if the distinction between the public and private spheres was blurred, men would become feminised, and this would lead to an evolutionary regression back to primitivism.<sup>110</sup> At this time, scientists and medical professionals were emerging as a new branch of elite authority and their influence extended beyond their professional expertise, with their pronouncements carrying both social and moral weight.<sup>111</sup> Unlike more established elites, such as aristocrats or clergy, Victorian scientists and doctors claimed – and were widely perceived by society to have – specialised knowledge that allowed them to define social norms as empirically grounded, morally legitimate, and universally applicable.<sup>112</sup>

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96 Davidson et. al. (2005). *Separate Spheres*. Oxford University Press. Available at: eISBN: 9780199891054

97 Ibid.

98 Glenny, R. (2025 November 28). *Victorian Separate Spheres: How Domestic Women and Public Men Shaped Gender Roles*. Sex History and Escort Hub. Available at: <https://thesexhistory.com/victorian-separate-spheres-how-domestic-women-and-public-men-shaped-gender-roles>

99 Hughes, K. *Gender roles in the 19th century*. British Library. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

100 Ibid.

101 Glenny, R. (2025 November 28). *Victorian Separate Spheres: How Domestic Women and Public Men Shaped Gender Roles*. Sex History and Escort Hub. Available at: <https://thesexhistory.com/victorian-separate-spheres-how-domestic-women-and-public-men-shaped-gender-roles>

102 Linsley, B. (2013). *Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and gender in the British Imperial consciousness*. Grand Valley Journal of History. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gvjh>

103 Glenny, R. (2025 November 28). *Victorian Separate Spheres: How Domestic Women and Public Men Shaped Gender Roles*. Sex History and Escort Hub. Available at: <https://thesexhistory.com/victorian-separate-spheres-how-domestic-women-and-public-men-shaped-gender-roles>

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104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Hughes, K. *Gender roles in the 19th century*. British Library. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

107 Glenny, R. (2025 November 28). *Victorian Separate Spheres: How Domestic Women and Public Men Shaped Gender Roles*. Sex History and Escort Hub. Available at: <https://thesexhistory.com/victorian-separate-spheres-how-domestic-women-and-public-men-shaped-gender-roles>

108 Linsley, B. (2013). *Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and gender in the British Imperial consciousness*. Grand Valley Journal of History. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gvjh>

109 Ibid.

110 Menon, A. (2023, July 14). *The gender binary is white supremacy*. Migrants' Rights Network. Available at: <https://migrants-rights.org.uk/2023/07/14/the-gender-binary-is-white-supremacy/>

111 Jones, C. *Women, Science, and Professional Identity c. 1860-1914*. University of London Press. Available at: <https://read.uolpress.co.uk/read/precarious-professionals-gender-identities-and-social-change-in-modern-britain/section/e6514a63-aca4-4372-bb0f-d442a112f6e7>

112 Ibid.

It's worth underlining that this conceptualisation not only created ideological divisions between what is 'man' and 'woman' but was also used to justify racial hierarchy during a time in which colonisation was at its peak.<sup>113</sup> Enlightenment era scientists argued that the degree of differentiation between males and females within a race determined that race's level of 'civilisation.'<sup>114</sup> White people were believed to have the greatest sexual differentiation and, therefore, occupied the top of the racial hierarchy, while other races, whose males and females were perceived as less differentiated, were deemed primitive or inferior.<sup>115</sup> Such pseudoscientific reasoning positioned binary gender roles as both a marker and mechanism of progress. For instance, White colonisers described the genitalia of Black women as animalistic and hypermasculine, interpreting this as evidence of savagery.<sup>116</sup> They concluded that non-White societies could only 'evolve' by adopting the rigid gender binaries of the West.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the cultiva-

tion of hypermasculinity through militarism and conquest was seen as essential to maintaining civilisation and served as a key justification for imperial expansion.<sup>118</sup>

The colonies served as a playground to exhibit this new masculine identity.<sup>119</sup> Colonisation effectively globalised understandings of the gender binary by forcibly reshaping education and religious institutions and introducing laws regarding marriage, land ownership, inheritance or sexuality that reinforced the ideas of separate spheres.<sup>120</sup>

The history of India, for example, highlights this process of gendered colonialism. The British Raj – the power of the British Crown that ruled present-day India and Pakistan from 1858 to 1947 – outlawed customs of gender and sexuality that had long been accepted throughout India in Section 377.<sup>121</sup> As part of the Indian Penal Code in 1860, the British criminalised sodomy. The British also

outlawed 'eunuchs,' India's transgender people, also known as *hijras*, calling them a "criminal tribe."<sup>122</sup> *Hijras* were once thought to bless fertility and would live with husbands and adopted children. However, under British rule, if a *hijra* was spotted in public, they could face up to two years in jail.<sup>123</sup> *Hijras* were also often associated with sodomy, a fact that further aggravated their prosecution rates. Moreover, British rulers considered *hijras* "ungovernable," painting them in connection to "filth, disease, contagion, and contamination," creating stigmas amongst Indian communities and subjecting *hijras* to violence and harassment.<sup>124</sup> They were no longer allowed to present themselves as they pleased – usually in feminine clothing – nor could they grow their hair.<sup>125</sup> If they did not submit to these rules, police forces would publicly strip them and cut their hair, subjecting them to humiliation and degradation.<sup>126</sup> Men who dressed as women to perform in theaters or who took on feminine gender roles were also policed by the British in an effort to stamp out any gender-nonconforming people.<sup>127</sup> Together, these policies reveal how British colonial rule systematically reshaped India's gender and sexual landscape, leaving lasting legacies of stigma and created a foundation of transphobia.<sup>128</sup>

These policies, however, did not remain confined to India. They served as a blueprint for similar laws across the British Empire, exporting the legal mechanisms of gender and sexual control to colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, thereby entrenching transphobia and heteronormativity on a global scale.

By asserting that strict gender differentiation was both biologically natural and socially necessary, Enlightenment science and Victorian codification created a dual mechanism of control: one that disciplined bodies within the West, and another that justified the imposition of imperial authority abroad. In this way, gender, race, and science became intertwined tools of governance, morality, and hierarchy, thus shaping the social and political order at home and across the Empire.

While these legal, social, and scientific frameworks affected the entire LGBTI+ community, transgender people – particularly trans women – were often the primary targets. Their visibility and the ways they embodied challenges to rigid gender norms made them focal points for policing, persecution, and social stigma. In this sense, trans bodies were not only sites of individual identity but also battlegrounds where broader anxieties about morality, order, and power were projected and enforced.

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113 Linsley, B. (2013). Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and gender in the British Imperial consciousness. Grand Valley Journal of History. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gvjh>

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Menon, A. (2023, July 14). The gender binary is white supremacy. Migrants' Rights Network. Available at: <https://migrants-rights.org.uk/2023/07/14/the-gender-binary-is-white-supremacy/>

117 Ibid.

118 Linsley, B. (2013). Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and gender in the British Imperial consciousness. Grand Valley Journal of History. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gvjh>

119 Linsley, B. (2013). Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and gender in the British Imperial consciousness. Grand Valley Journal of History. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=gvjh>

120 Gamlin, J. The Coloniality of Gender and Sexuality. Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research. Available at: <https://www.sdcelarbritishmuseum.org/exhibitions/the-intimate-lives-of-wixarika-people/what-is-the-coloniality-of-gender/>

121 Peacock, E. (2023, January 23). The Effect of British Colonial Law and Rule on Gender Binaries and Sexual Freedoms. The Center for Global Affairs, New York University. Available at: [https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga\\_review/british-colonial-rule-gender-binaries/](https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga_review/british-colonial-rule-gender-binaries/)

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122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Peacock, E. (2023, January 23). The Effect of British Colonial Law and Rule on Gender Binaries and Sexual Freedoms. The Center for Global Affairs, New York University. Available at: [https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga\\_review/british-colonial-rule-gender-binaries/](https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga_review/british-colonial-rule-gender-binaries/)

128 Ibid.

## Section 1: Key Findings

- Gender diversity has existed across cultures and historical periods, often integrated into social, spiritual, and economic life.
- Modern transphobia is not ahistorical but emerged through specific political, scientific, and colonial processes.
- The Enlightenment transformed earlier hierarchical models of sex into a rigid binary framed as biologically natural and immutable.
- Victorian science and social policy codified gender roles as essential to social stability, embedding them into law, medicine, and education.
- Colonial expansion exported these gender norms globally, displacing indigenous gender systems and criminalising gender diversity.

## Section 1 Questions: Early Conceptions of Gender (Pre-Enlightenment to Victorian Era)

- Does this section accurately reflect how gender diversity was understood or integrated in historical contexts relevant to your region?
- Are there examples of pre-colonial or non-Western gender systems that challenge or complicate the narrative presented here?
- Are there historical periods, regions, or communities where trans-weaponisation has taken different forms than those described here?
- How did colonial governance affect indigenous understandings of gender in your context?
- Are there historical figures, movements, or sources that provide alternative perspectives on gender during this period?
- Do you see continuities between early scientific justifications of gender hierarchy and modern arguments used against trans rights?



## Section 2: An Introduction to Transness through Spectacle

Despite the Victorian era's efforts to implement strict societal adherence to the gender binary, gender nonconformity persisted.<sup>129</sup> However, if the Enlightenment approached gender through the metaphysical and the Victorian period through science and classification, the turn of the twentieth century marked a new phase in which trans people were absorbed into the emerging discourses surrounding entertainment and mass commodification.<sup>130</sup> Gender-nonconform-

ing bodies became material for spectacle, staged curiosity, and commercial fascination within a broader context of growing exhibition capitalism.<sup>131</sup> This transition set the stage for the paradoxes that defined the early twentieth century, where visibility expanded not through recognition but through sensationalised cultural displays.

This shift occurred within the broader context of the Industrial Revolution, which transformed not only the material world

129 Hughes, K. Gender roles in the 19th century. British Library. Available at: <https://www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/>

130 Stephens, E. (2010). The Queer Space of the Freak Show. Academia Cultural Studies. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/1429499/\\_The\\_Queer\\_Space\\_of\\_the\\_Freak\\_Show\\_](https://www.academia.edu/1429499/_The_Queer_Space_of_the_Freak_Show_)

131 Ibid.

but the organisation of time and social life.<sup>132</sup> Society itself became a machine within which each individual had a role to play. Each person became a cog in the much bigger machine of both labour and social order. Gender-nonconforming individuals, however, did not easily fit the shape of the standardised social cogs.<sup>133</sup> Their lives and identities were often policed, constrained, or outright barred from conventional forms of employment, education, and public participation. This was, admittedly, a continuation of past historical eras.<sup>134</sup> Social discrimination, legal restrictions, and pervasive stigma limited their access to the standardised routines of work and productivity that defined the industrial machine.

Moreover, societal expectations around appearance, behavior, and domestic roles continued to be tightly codified; anyone who deviated risked exclusion, harassment, or dismissal. As a result, rather than integrate them, society repurposed these 'misfit' cogs as objects of fascination; their

difference became a source of entertainment, spectacle, and commodification.<sup>135</sup> These cogs were placed within the new context of "leisure time": a radical reorganisation of life that allowed people to consume culture in ways that were previously impossible.<sup>136</sup> It was within this newly found leisure time that exhibition capitalism rose and gender-nonconforming people were given their purpose within the industrial machine.<sup>137</sup>

It was here that trans people were introduced to broader society through a filter of spectacle and entertainment mediums such as carnival and science fiction, which both emerged at a greater scale during this time.<sup>138</sup> Through these mediums, cultural fascination with bodily difference and scientific possibility facilitated new-found visibility for trans people, despite persisting social norms around gender outside of these arenas.<sup>139</sup>

While carnival performance and science fiction emerged in very different cultural

spheres, they developed in parallel as imaginative spaces where gender variance could surface and be explored. Each offered its own carefully-bound space for experimenting with gender nonconformity. Yet, very rarely did they do so in the spirit of genuine inclusion.<sup>140</sup> carnival relied on bodily display and theatrical exaggeration, while science fiction often explored gender variance as a plot device. Despite these differences, both situated transness within registers of spectacle, deception, alienness, or scientific anomaly, shaping public fascination from a distance rather than fostering true recognition.<sup>141</sup>

## Carnival

Carnival culture in the 1920s offered rare - but temporary and often exploitative - permission for gender nonconformity.<sup>142</sup> Unfolding against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the economic instability it brought; for many gender-nonconforming people, carnival was not merely a space of self-expression, it was often one of the few spaces where they could earn

a living.<sup>143</sup> Discrimination in mainstream employment, legal vulnerability, and social ostracism meant that opportunities outside of carnival circuits were scarce or nonexistent, which in turn fed the exploitative nature of these entertainment venues.<sup>144</sup>



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Many carnivals and vaudeville shows featured "female impersonators" or "male impersonators" as marquee attractions.<sup>146</sup>

132 Thompson, E. P. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Pantheon Books. Available at: [https://www.bard.edu/library/pdfs/archives/Thompson-The\\_Making\\_of\\_the\\_English\\_Working\\_Class.pdf](https://www.bard.edu/library/pdfs/archives/Thompson-The_Making_of_the_English_Working_Class.pdf)

133 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

134 Ibid.

135 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

136 Thompson, E. P. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Pantheon Books. Available at: [https://www.bard.edu/library/pdfs/archives/Thompson-The\\_Making\\_of\\_the\\_English\\_Working\\_Class.pdf](https://www.bard.edu/library/pdfs/archives/Thompson-The_Making_of_the_English_Working_Class.pdf)

137 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

138 Lehman, H. (2012). *Carnival Labour: Gender, Performance, and Marginal Economies*. *Cultural Studies Review*. Available at: DOI: j.1468-0351.2012.00435.

139 Plunket, R. (2022, March 1). *The Unsettling World of Circus Freakshows Once Flourished in Sarasota*. *Sarasota Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2022/03/sarasota-history-circus-freakshows>

140 Csicsery-Ronay, I. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sevenbeautiesofs0000csic/page/n5/mode/2up>

141 Royston, Keth. (2021, December 16). *For decades, Carnival sideshows were a real 'Nightmare Alley'*. *Crime Reads*. Available at: <https://crimereads.com/for-decades-carnival-sideshow-were-a-real-nightmare-alley/>

142 Lehman, H. (2012). *Carnival Labour: Gender, Performance, and Marginal Economies*. *Cultural Studies Review*. Available at: DOI: j.1468-0351.2012.00435.

143 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

144 Royston, Keth. (2021, December 16). *For decades, Carnival sideshows were a real 'Nightmare Alley'*. *Crime Reads*. Available at: <https://crimereads.com/for-decades-carnival-sideshow-were-a-real-nightmare-alley/>

145 Post, S. (2019, January 22). *The Greatest Sideshow Cons and Gaffs Ever Imagined*. *Crime Reads*. Available at: <https://crimereads.com/the-greatest-sideshow-cons-and-gaffs-ever-imagined/>

146 Plunket, R. (2022, March 1). *The Unsettling World of Circus Freakshows Once Flourished in Sarasota*. *Sarasota Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2022/03/sarasota-history-circus-freakshows>

Audiences were fascinated by “gender illusionists,” who could convincingly present as another gender. Some were billed as “mystery acts” where the performer’s “true” sex was only revealed at the end, a gimmick that reinforced the novelty for spectators.<sup>147</sup> A famous example is Julian Eltinge, a cis man who rose to superstardom as a female impersonator. His proto-drag persona was so popular and accepted into the mainstream that he ran his own ladies’ magazine, sold cold cream to female fans, and counted royals and celebrities as superfans.<sup>148</sup> Similarly, traveling sideshows sometimes exploited trans and intersex people, marketing them as “Half Man - Half Woman” acts or “The Bearded Lady.”<sup>149</sup>



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These performances created spaces that were simultaneously havens of representation and prisons of spectacle. On one hand, carnival offered moments of respite for gender-nonconforming people from

147 Conger, C. (2011, October 4). Top 10 Famous Female Sideshow Freaks. HowStuffWorks. Available at: <https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/arts/circus-arts/10-female-sideshow-freaks.htm>

148 Demopoulos, A. (2024, June 18) ‘He was a perfect, beautiful woman’: the female impersonator who became a 1920s star. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/jun/18/julien-eltige-female-impersonator-gender-biography?>

149 Conger, C. (2011, October 4). Top 10 Famous Female Sideshow Freaks. HowStuffWorks. Available at: <https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/arts/circus-arts/10-female-sideshow-freaks.htm>

150 Silent Room. Mexico City Carnival. Available at: <https://silentroom.bandcamp.com/album/amazing-bearded-lady-live-chapultepec-park-mexico-city-carnival-4-20-17>

the constraints of everyday life where they were able to explore their identities and form community.<sup>151</sup> Yet, on the other hand, this freedom was profoundly limited. Gender variance was permitted only as part of the atmosphere of spectacle. Outside of these designated spaces, the same behaviors could provoke legal punishment, police harassment or social ostracism through press mockery.<sup>152</sup> Carnival’s permissiveness, thus, reinforced the idea that gender variance belonged to the realm of performance, not legitimate identity. In other words, the acceptance was conditional and tied to entertainment value and exoticism. Some have referred to it as a “theater of cruelty” that could not have existed without the willing – even if at times horrified and pitiful – participation of the audience.<sup>153</sup> Carnival was a way for people to indulge in cultural and social violations – such as gender nonconformity – while simultaneously reinforcing social norms by showcasing it as abnormal.

Taken together, carnival functioned not merely as a site of spectacle but as a marginal labour economy structured by exclusion.<sup>154</sup> For many gender-noncon-

forming people, participation in carnival circuits was not an expression of artistic freedom but a survival strategy in a society that denied them access to stable employment, housing, and legal recognition.<sup>155</sup> Industrial capitalism demanded legible, disciplined bodies that could be easily integrated into its systems of labour and social order; those whose gender presentation disrupted these expectations were routinely pushed out. Carnival profited from this displacement, transforming social illegibility into economic value and rendering marginalisation itself productive.<sup>156</sup>

Yet, this incorporation was deeply exploitative. Carnival labour remained precarious and tightly controlled, with promoters and managers dictating how gender variance would be framed.<sup>157</sup> Visibility was granted only insofar as it could be rendered intelligible as illusion, novelty, or anomaly. Performers’ livelihoods often depended on reproducing the very stereotypes that rendered them illegitimate outside the carnival space, reinforcing a cycle in which acceptance was conditional and revocable.<sup>158</sup> In this context, visibil-

151 Plunket, R. (2022, March 1). The Unsettling World of Circus Freakshows Once Flourished in Sarasota. Sarasota Magazine. Available at: <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2022/03/sarasota-history-circus-freakshows>

152 Plunket, R. (2022, March 1). The Unsettling World of Circus Freakshows Once Flourished in Sarasota. Sarasota Magazine. Available at: <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2022/03/sarasota-history-circus-freakshows>

153 Royston, Keth. (2021, December 16). For decades, Carnival sideshows were a real ‘Nightmare Alley’. Crime Reads. Available at: <https://crimereads.com/for-decades-carnival-sideshow-were-a-real-nightmare-alley/>

154 Chauncey, G. (1994). Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

155 Ibid.

156 Ibid.

157 Lehman, H. (2012). Carnival Labour: Gender, Performance, and Marginal Economies. Cultural Studies Review. Available at: DOI: [j.1468-0351.2012.00435](https://doi.org/10.1468-0351.2012.00435).

158 Ibid.

ity did not translate into recognition or security but functioned as a mechanism through which difference was extracted and managed.<sup>159</sup>

Carnival's economic logic overlapped closely with other informal economies, most notably sex work, revealing a shared reliance on the commodification of desire, difference, and social taboo. Many performers and participants in carnival – especially those whose bodies or gender expressions placed them outside normative labour markets – supplemented their income through sex work, blurring the boundaries between performance and survival.<sup>160</sup> In both spheres, bodily difference became a form of currency, as the same transgressive energy that made gender-nonconforming bodies desirable on the parade route was mobilised in private or semi-public transactions, where desire was bought and sold.<sup>161</sup> Yet, this visibility rarely translated into social legitimacy or protection; instead, it entrenched systems in which these bodies were consumable yet ultimately disposable.<sup>162</sup> Carnival – like sex work – crystallised a

representational logic in which gender variance was tolerated only as spectacle and labour. This logic would reverberate across other cultural forms as gender nonconformity continued to be mediated through performance rather than social recognition.<sup>163</sup>

## Science Fiction

Emerging alongside these developments, science fiction engaged with gender variance in parallel to carnival, albeit through narrative rather than bodily display.<sup>164</sup> Whereas carnival staged the body, science fiction used gender variance as a plot device, exploring gender nonconformity through imaginative worlds, allegory, and speculative transformation.<sup>165</sup>

In early to mid-1900s science fiction, trans people were not truthfully represented, but themes of gender transformation, ambiguous sex, and fluid identity appeared frequently. They were often filtered through the genre's fixation on oddity, otherness, bodily change, and the 'what

if?' of human evolution.<sup>166</sup> This "otherness" often manifested as 'alienness,' not only in the literal sense of extraterrestrial beings but as a figurative device to mark gender variance as something outside the bounds of the conventional – and accepted – human experience.<sup>167</sup>

By framing transness as alien, science fiction could explore questions of identity without directly confronting societal norms. Trans characters were used as an imaginative tool to explore alien worlds, future societies, or scientific experimentation.<sup>168</sup> Through these stories, gender change could happen, but only in narratives so fantastical that they posed no challenge to contemporary norms.<sup>169</sup> Thus, similarly to carnival, science fiction became a distanced laboratory for ideas about otherness, often reinforcing the notion that non-normative bodies and

identities belonged to worlds far removed from ordinary life.

Science fiction not only created a discursive distance from trans identities but also distorted the lived realities of trans people in ways that shaped public perceptions. For instance, a recurring trope in science fiction involved characters changing sex through scientific or supernatural mechanisms.<sup>170</sup> These transformations were typically involuntary and framed as temporary states to be corrected, echoing medical and psychiatric ideas of transness as pathology.<sup>171</sup> Stories such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* used gender transformation to interrogate social roles in surreal and playful terms, while Ray Cummings' *The Girl in the Golden Atom* linked fantastical gender shifts to broader explorations of scale and reality.<sup>172</sup>

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159 Ibid.

160 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

161 Ibid.

162 Lehman, H. (2012). *Carnival Labour: Gender, Performance, and Marginal Economies*. *Cultural Studies Review*. Available at: DOI: j.1468-0351.2012.00435.

163 Lehman, H. (2012). *Carnival Labour: Gender, Performance, and Marginal Economies*. *Cultural Studies Review*. Available at: DOI: j.1468-0351.2012.00435.

164 Csicsery-Ronay, I. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sevenbeautiesofs0000csic/page/n5/mode/2up>

165 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as-cultural-mirrors-from-antiquity-to-digital-communities/>

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166 Morgan, C. (2010). *Changing Images of Trans People in Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*. *Cheryl's Musings*. Available at: <https://www.cheryl-morgan.com/writing/essays/changing-images-of-trans-people-in-science-fiction-and-fantasy-literature/>

167 Csicsery-Ronay, I. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sevenbeautiesofs0000csic/page/n5/mode/2up>

168 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as-cultural-mirrors-from-antiquity-to-digital-communities/>

169 Morgan, C. (2010). *Changing Images of Trans People in Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*. *Cheryl's Musings*. Available at: <https://www.cheryl-morgan.com/writing/essays/changing-images-of-trans-people-in-science-fiction-and-fantasy-literature/>

170 Nevins, J. And Martinez, M. (2011, December 9). *Sex Change in the Pulps: Demonic Shapeshifters, Feminist Conspiracies, and Wacky Erotic Shenanigans*. *Gizmodo*. Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/sex-change-in-the-pulps-demonic-shapeshifters-feminis-5866806?>

171 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as-cultural-mirrors-from-antiquity-to-digital-communities/>

172 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as-cultural-mirrors-from-antiquity-to-digital-communities/>

### **Orlando - Virginia Woolf (1928)**

In *Orlando*, Woolf follows a nobleman who becomes a woman over several centuries, navigating shifting social norms and expectations, blending historical realism with surreal fantasy. This narrative uses gender transformation to interrogate social roles and to highlight the fluidity of identity, allowing readers to engage with non-normative gender while avoiding a direct confrontation with contemporary social rigidity.

### **The Girl in the Golden Atom - Ray Cummings (1922)**

In Ray Cummings' *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, a scientist discovers a microscopic world where scale and perspective are radically altered, and characters experience fantastical gender shifts. By situating gender variance within this speculative and imaginative context, Cummings frames it as part of a broader exploration of wonder and novelty rather than as a reflection of lived social realities. The story illustrates how early science fiction distanced gender-nonconforming identities, transforming them into elements of spectacle and narrative curiosity instead of integrating them into everyday human experiences.

In both stories, these transformations functioned less as expressions of identity and more as sources of novelty or narrative tension. By not centering real human experience, science fiction stories were able to further reinforce distance rather than recognition of true transness.<sup>173</sup>

However, it is important to note that some feminist authors used such plot devices strategically to explore constraints imposed by gender.<sup>174</sup> For many writers who are now understood to have been queer or lesbian, speculative gender transformation offered one of the few socially-acceptable avenues to examine identity, de-

173 Stableford, B. (2007). *Science Fact and Science Fiction An Encyclopedia*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Science-Fact-and-Science-Fiction-An-Encyclopedia/Stableford/p/book/9781138868823>

174 Csicsery-Ronay, I. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sevenbeautiesofs0000csic/page/n5/mode/2up>

sire, and social roles.<sup>175</sup> In this sense, even as the narratives maintained distance from real-world trans experiences, they could simultaneously act as subtle acts of transgression and reclamation, allowing authors to push against societal limitations while remaining within the bounds of mainstream publication.<sup>176</sup>

Similarly, echoing the same 'freak-show' discourses that shaped carnival culture, science fiction frequently portrayed "hermaphroditic" or androgynous characters as uncanny, deceptive, or morally ambiguous.<sup>177</sup> Intersex bodies were framed as

speculative anomalies, reinforcing a view of bodily diversity as inherently strange. One of the most striking early examples is Robert A. Heinlein's short story, "All You Zombies" (1959), in which the protagonist's intersex condition is revealed through a time-travel paradox and becomes the central plot twist and a source of bewilderment for the reader rather than a lived identity with emotional nuance.<sup>178</sup> The narrative treats this biological ambiguity almost as a puzzle to be solved, underscoring the alienness of intersex embodiment rather than exploring it as an authentic experience.<sup>179</sup>

### **"All You Zombies" - Robert A. Heinlein (1959)**

In Robert A. Heinlein's short story "All You Zombies," the protagonist is revealed to be intersex, and the narrative unfolds through a complex time-travel paradox in which the character is simultaneously their own mother and father. This intricate plot foregrounds bodily ambiguity and gender transformation primarily as a puzzle or narrative twist rather than as a lived identity with emotional depth. By framing intersex embodiment as a temporal and logical curiosity, Heinlein's story exemplifies how science fiction of the era often rendered gender variance as alien, anomalous, or sensational rather than integrating it into social reality. The story illustrates the same distancing logic seen in earlier carnival and speculative fiction, where gender nonconformity is visible and fascinating, but only within a controlled framework of spectacle and narrative abstraction, leaving recognition and social legitimacy largely absent.

175 Ibid.

176 Ibid.

177 Nevins, J. And Martinez, M. (2011, December 9). *Sex Change in the Pulp: Demonic Shapeshifters, Feminist Conspiracies, and Wacky Erotic Shenanigans*. Gizmodo. Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/sex-change-in-the-pulps-demonic-shapeshifters-feminis-5866806?>

178 Stableford, B. (2007). *Science Fact and Science Fiction An Encyclopedia*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Science-Fact-and-Science-Fiction-An-Encyclopedia/Stableford/p/book/9781138868823>

179 Ibid.

Therefore, in some ways, this distortion was not entirely negative. By situating gender variance in fantastical or speculative contexts, science fiction offered a space where writers could engage with ideas of transformation, fluidity, and non-normative identity without risking social censure.<sup>180</sup> For some readers and authors, these stories represented a rare opportunity to think through gender in ways that would have been unacceptable or even taboo in more realistic narrative mediums.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, for some early readers, these speculative representations could spark curiosity, empathy, or imaginative identification with non-normative gender, planting seeds for later recognition of trans experiences.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, for some queer readers, these speculative narratives provided one of the first spaces where they could encounter artistic works that reflected aspects of their own experiences or desires, even if filtered through fantasy or allegory.<sup>183</sup> In this sense, science fiction served simultaneously as a distancing lens for the general public and a quietly affirming space for many marginalised readers seeking representation.

However, it is important to remember that these tropes did not exist within a vacuum and that they served as many people's first introduction to gender variance: not through the reality of trans life but through exaggerated depictions tied to horror, comedy, or the unreal. What some

may consider to be isolated stories, all culminate into a foundation of trans understanding in broader society. For some, these stories distorted understanding, linking transness to mutation, monstrosity, or alien deviation from the human norm, but this was not a universal experience. For others, early encounters with gender variance in science fiction provoked a sense of curiosity or imaginative engagement with identities that were otherwise socially invisible. What is crucial, however, is that even when these portrayals did not explicitly instill transphobic ideas, they ideologically primed a generation to perceive gender-nonconforming people as inherently 'other,' as outside the normative human experience. In this sense, science fiction both opened a space for the exploration of non-normative identities while simultaneously laying the groundwork for cultural attitudes that could distance and reject those same identities.

By the 1950s and 1960s, as medical and scientific advancements brought greater visibility and understanding of gender transition, science fiction faced a subtle shift in which the boundaries between the fantastical and the real became blurred, forcing authors to negotiate the depiction of gender variance in ways that could no longer rely solely on imaginative abstraction. Public attention to figures like Christine Jorgensen – one of the first women to publicly undergo sex

reassignment surgery – and emerging research in sexology prompted writers to approach gender transition with greater, albeit cautious, seriousness. Works such as Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* and Bertram Chandler's "The Cage" explored social roles, identity, and bodily transformation beyond purely sensationalist or allegorical purposes. Even so, these narratives often framed gender variance as exceptional or experimental, reflecting a lingering tension where authors wanted to engage with trans and gender-nonconforming experiences, but cultural norms constrained how directly these stories could depict authentic lives. In this sense, the genre was evolving by moving from purely fantastical alienness toward tentative recognition. Yet, it continued to inherit many of the discursive frameworks that had previously distanced trans identities.<sup>184</sup> As a result, despite these efforts, science fiction maintained a strong reliance on sensationalism, scientific novelty, and allegory, illustrating the genre's embedded tropes and transphobic assumptions inherited from earlier decades.<sup>185</sup>

Here, we can see that, although carnival performance and science fiction belonged to different cultural spheres, they participated in similar representational logics. Both framed gender variance as spectacle, as something to be looked at, questioned, or marveled over from a safe distance. Carnival accomplished this through bodily display and the aesthetics of performance, while science fiction achieved it through narrative abstraction and metaphor. In each case, transness was not approached as an identity but as a narrative device, an illusion, an oddity, or an imaginative provocation.<sup>186</sup> This shared framing affirmed the idea that non-normative gender exists outside ordinary human experience and, therefore, belongs to the realm of spectacle.<sup>187</sup>

These portrayals reinforced ideas in which being cisgender was regarded as 'the norm,' while nonconforming bodies represented deviance.<sup>188</sup> However, this logic did not arise in isolation. Revisiting the Enlightenment and Victorian eras reveals that the framing of cisgender bodies as the norm and nonconforming bodies as

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180 Stableford, B. (2007). *Science Fact and Science Fiction An Encyclopedia*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Science-Fact-and-Science-Fiction-An-Encyclopedia/Stableford/p/book/9781138868823>

181 Csicsery-Ronay, I. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sevenbeautiesofs0000csic/page/n5/mode/2up>

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

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184 Koseoglu, Berna. (2021, November). The Change in the Reflection of Gender Roles from Proto-Science Fiction to Science Fiction with the Rise of Feminism: Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* and Mary Robinette Kowal's *The Calculating Stars*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. Available at: doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.10n.6p.16

185 Koseoglu, Berna. (2021, November). The Change in the Reflection of Gender Roles from Proto-Science Fiction to Science Fiction with the Rise of Feminism: Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* and Mary Robinette Kowal's *The Calculating Stars*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. Available at: doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.10n.6p.16

186 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as->

187 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 190-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/8g84mm305#toc>

188 Gender Libs. (2025, February 5). *Metamorphosis of Identity: Gender Transformation Fictions as Cultural Mirrors from Antiquity to Digital Communities*. Available at: <https://www.genderlibs.org/blog/2025/02/metamorphosis-of-identity-gender-transformation-fictions-as->

deviant is part of a larger, ongoing cycle.<sup>189</sup> During the Enlightenment, scientific and philosophical discourses codified rigid hierarchies between men and women, presenting binary gender as natural, immutable, and morally justified.<sup>190</sup> Victorian science and social thought reinforced these divisions, linking biology, morality, and social authority, as well as regulating bodies through ideologies such as the 'separate spheres.'<sup>191</sup>

In this broader historical context, early science fiction and carnival can be interpreted as cultural extensions of the same logic. This imaginative experimentation with gender can be seen as a direct evolution from the Victorian fascination with the scientific study of sex and gender. Just as nineteenth-century researchers catalogued bodily differences, questioned the boundaries of male and female, and speculated about sexual inversion, carni-

val and science fiction authors continued this curiosity, transposing its narrative into broader entertainment realms. In each instance - scientific inquiry, Victorian codification, carnival, or science fiction - the cisgender experience was established as the baseline of humanity, and any variation was labelled as 'other,' 'exotic,' or 'threatening.'

Revisiting these eras underscores how early cultural encounters with gender variance, even when playful, fantastical, or allegorical, inherited and perpetuated long-standing epistemological frameworks. By situating non-normative bodies as spectacle or anomaly, these portrayals maintained a cycle of othering that began in Enlightenment and Victorian thought and carried it forward into the cultural imagination, shaping how audiences perceive and respond to trans and gender-nonconforming people across time.

### **Section 2 Key Findings:**

- As rigid gender norms intensified, gender nonconformity was not eliminated but displaced into controlled spaces of spectacle.
- Carnival and performance cultures permitted limited visibility while reinforcing gender variance as illusion, novelty, or deception while early science fiction explored gender transformation through fantasy and allegory, distancing it from lived reality.
- These cultural forms shaped public understanding of transness as exceptional, unreal, or inherently 'other'.
- These representations laid the cultural groundwork for later moral panics and political backlash.

### **Section 2 Questions: Transness Through Spectacle**

- Do you see lasting impacts from early cultural portrayals on contemporary stereotypes or myths?
- How have marginalised communities navigated visibility when recognition and rights were denied?
- Are there examples where cultural representation led to greater social acceptance or protection?
- How have class, race, or economic exclusion shaped who was pushed into spectacle-based visibility?
- Are there important cultural forms or traditions missing from this analysis?

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189 Cheadle, T. Science and the gender binary. Future Learn. Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/a-global-history-of-sex-and-gender/0/steps/171025>

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.



## Section 3: WW2 Era Eugenics

The World War II era marked a turning point in the history of trans-weaponisation by institutionalising methods of persecution at a time of massive geopolitical upheaval. During this period, we saw full mobilisation against gender variance not just as a problem to be managed but one to be eradicated. The fear and mandate to control driving these actions did not come strictly from the perceived threat of gender variance; rather it came from what gender variance meant within a rapidly evolving society.

In the years before the Nazi regime's rise to power, transgender people existed within a relatively-tolerant social climate.<sup>192</sup> Early 1900s Germany was remarkably progressive for its time, standing out as a relative haven for trans and gender-nonconforming people amid a wider geopolitical landscape that was far less accepting.<sup>193</sup> This was particularly true of Weimar Berlin, which was home to the world's first transgender clinic, a flourishing queer print culture, and even governmental structures such as "transvestite

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192 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

193 Schillace, B. The Forgotten History of the World's First Trans Clinic. Scientific American. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-forgotten-history-of-the-worlds-first-trans-clinic/>

certificates" that granted legal permission to dress according to one's gender identity.<sup>194</sup>

Yet, the ascent of Nazism transformed this landscape. Through the lens of eugenics, transgender and gender-nonconforming people came to be seen not only as deviant but as biological threats to the nation, justifying their surveillance, sterilisation, and physical eradication.<sup>195</sup>

This period emerged within a deeper crisis of modernity itself. If the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were defined by the question of what it meant to be a man in an age of machines, industrial discipline, and imperial expansion, the interwar years confronted a far more destabilising challenge as society struggled to understand how to move forward after the 'war to end all wars' had failed, economies had collapsed, and the image of the post-war utopia had been shattered.<sup>196</sup>

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194 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

195 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

196 Murray, H. (1991). Reviewed Work: Modernity and the Holocaust Zygmunt Bauman. German Politics and Society. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23735154>

197 Kuhl, S. (1994). The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism. Oxford University Press. Available at: [https://ia601805.us.archive.org/19/items/stefan-kuhl-the-nazi-connection-eugenics-american-racism-and-german-national-soc\\_202012/Stefan%20K%C3%BChl%20-%20The%20Nazi%20Connection\\_%20Eugenics%2C%20American%20Racism%2C%20and%20German%20National%20Socialism%20%20%20%281994%2C%20Oxford%20University%20Press%2C%20USA%29.pdf](https://ia601805.us.archive.org/19/items/stefan-kuhl-the-nazi-connection-eugenics-american-racism-and-german-national-soc_202012/Stefan%20K%C3%BChl%20-%20The%20Nazi%20Connection_%20Eugenics%2C%20American%20Racism%2C%20and%20German%20National%20Socialism%20%20%20%281994%2C%20Oxford%20University%20Press%2C%20USA%29.pdf)

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

200 Rosenthal, S. (2024, February 12). Pseudoscience has long been used to oppress Transgender people. Scientific American. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pseudoscience-has-long-been-used-to-oppress-transgender-people/>

Within this volatile terrain, facism – and the following Nazism – arose and offered an explicitly nihilistic response to this crisis.<sup>197</sup> Rather than preserving and restoring humanity, facism sought to burn down existing social orders and rebuild them according to a violently-purified vision of the human race.<sup>198</sup> This vision was grounded in eugenics, racial hierarchy, and rigid gender norms that treated deviation not as difference but as existential sabotage. Within this framework, gender variance was reinforced as a fundamentally-threatening phenomenon.<sup>199</sup>

These ideas were not revolutionary for the time and, in fact, were a culmination of a long historical incubation of ideas that began in the Victorian era and that, by the late nineteenth century, had taken root across Europe and the United States as a global scientific movement aimed at improving the human race.<sup>200</sup> By the early 1900s, eugenics had expanded to encompass sexual and gender minorities,

not simply as a matter of moral condemnation, but as a perceived threat to the biological and social continuity of the nation.<sup>201</sup> Central to this logic were three interlocking assumptions.

First, heredity was deterministic and traits that were deemed undesirable – whether criminality, ‘sexual deviance,’ or gender nonconformity – were understood as inheritable.<sup>202</sup> Second, productivity and reproductive potential were conflated with social worth; individuals who did not or could not participate in heteronormative reproduction were considered biologically and socially deficient.<sup>203</sup> Third, deviation was understood as contagious or socially corrupting, which meant gender-nonconforming individuals were thought to be capable of influencing others, destabilising family structures, and weakening broader national cohesion.<sup>204</sup>

Consequently, sexual inverts, homosexuals, and eventually those classified as “transvestites,” as well as individuals who were heterosexual but failed to conform to strict gender norms, were framed as unfit, degenerate, and dangerous to the future of the race.<sup>205</sup>

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201 Ibid.

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203 Paul, D. & Day, B. (2008). Innate Differences and the Regulation of Reproduction. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*. Available at: [https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js\\_mill.pdf](https://www.dianebspaul.com/uploads/2/3/2/9/23295024/js_mill.pdf).

204 Ibid.

205 Rosenthal, S. (2024, February 12). Pseudoscience has long been used to oppress Transgender people. *Scientific American*. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pseudoscience-has-long-been-used-to-oppress-transgender-people/>

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

Eugenics, in this sense, functioned as both a predictive and preventative social technology, seeking to identify and ultimately eliminate the propagation of perceived biological and social threats.<sup>206</sup> Sterilisation, confinement, and other coercive interventions were, therefore, justified as measures to protect the future of the nation and preserve the productivity of society by preventing the accumulation of what eugenicists saw as hereditary defects.<sup>207</sup> While these methods often targeted sexual and gender minorities, it was part of a broader initiative that also affected ethnic communities, the poor, and people with disabilities; it reflected an intersectional logic in which several social hierarchies were being mutually reinforced. Within this system, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals faced compounded vulnerabilities; they were targeted not only for deviating from gender norms but also for their position within broader structures of oppression, where factors such as class, race, or disability further intensified their marginalisation.<sup>208</sup>

By the twentieth century, across liberal democracies as well as authoritarian

regimes, eugenicists began to advocate for sterilisation, confinement, and elimination as necessary tools to protect the purity and productivity of society.<sup>209</sup> We saw this with regards to leading figures in Britain, such as Karl Pearson, arguing that national strength required the sterilisation of all “degenerates,” explicitly including sexual minorities. The institutionalisation of these beliefs started in the US. In 1907 California passed the first law permitting compulsory sterilisation of those considered sexually perverse.<sup>210 211</sup> What had once emerged in the late nineteenth century had now rapidly gained institutional legitimacy across Europe and the United States.

These ideas coincided with sexology’s attempts to name and codify gender variance. Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term “transvestite” in 1910, insisting that gender expression should be understood as distinct from sexual orientation.<sup>212</sup> But medical classification also made gender

variance legible to police, courts, and public institutions, giving eugenics an avenue through which they could formally mobilise against those who they deemed degenerate based on gender variance.<sup>213</sup> The attempt to protect or understand gender-nonconforming people, thus, existed in tension with the demands of scientific rigor and the expansion of administrative power, in which scientific knowledge became legible and legibility made vulnerability inevitable.<sup>214</sup> In short, medicalisation produced both a toolkit for potential protection and a system that could be – and ultimately was – weaponised against those it sought to understand.<sup>215</sup>

The Nazi regime was ultimately responsible for intensifying this weaponisation, transforming already institutionalised eugenic ideas into a centrally-coordinated system of state policy implemented on a massive scale.<sup>216</sup>

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209 Rosenthal, S. (2024, February 12). Pseudoscience has long been used to oppress Transgender people. *Scientific American*. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pseudoscience-has-long-been-used-to-oppress-transgender-people/>

210 Lair, L. O. (2016). *Disciplining Diagnoses: Sexology, Eugenics, and Trans Subjectivities*. University of Kansas. Available at: [file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/Lair\\_ku\\_0099D\\_14517\\_DATA\\_1%20\(3\).pdf](file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/Lair_ku_0099D_14517_DATA_1%20(3).pdf)

211 Ibid.

212 Lair, L. O. (2016). *Disciplining Diagnoses: Sexology, Eugenics, and Trans Subjectivities*. University of Kansas. Available at: [file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/Lair\\_ku\\_0099D\\_14517\\_DATA\\_1%20\(3\).pdf](file:///Users/ktpc23/Downloads/Lair_ku_0099D_14517_DATA_1%20(3).pdf)

213 Ibid.

214 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (2021). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/magnus-hirschfeld-2>

215 Ibid.

216 Kuhl, S. (1994). *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism*. Oxford University Press. Available at: [https://ia601805.us.archive.org/19/items/stefan-kuhl-the-nazi-connection-eugenics-american-racism-and-german-national-soc\\_202012/Stefan%20K%C3%BChl%20-%20The%20Nazi%20Connection\\_%20Eugenics%2C%20American%20Racism%2C%20and%20German%20National%20Socialism%20%20%20%281994%2C%20Oxford%20University%20Press%2C%20USA%29.pdf](https://ia601805.us.archive.org/19/items/stefan-kuhl-the-nazi-connection-eugenics-american-racism-and-german-national-soc_202012/Stefan%20K%C3%BChl%20-%20The%20Nazi%20Connection_%20Eugenics%2C%20American%20Racism%2C%20and%20German%20National%20Socialism%20%20%20%281994%2C%20Oxford%20University%20Press%2C%20USA%29.pdf)



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The Nazis were drawn to eugenics because it offered both a scientific and bureaucratic framework for achieving their vision of racial purity and social order.<sup>218</sup> Eugenics translated ideological goals into measurable, administrable criteria and effectively provided tools to not only define who was 'fit' to reproduce but also to rationalise coercive interventions such as sterilisation, confinement, and ultimately extermination.<sup>219</sup> In this sense, eugenics was not an abstract theory



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but a methodology that allowed the Nazi regime to pursue its broader purpose of reshaping the population along lines of racial and political loyalty, and transforming human biology into a mechanism for consolidating power.<sup>220</sup> It served simultaneously as evidence, method, and justification.

### The Problem of Transvestism

As one author of a 1938 treatise on the "problem of transvestitism" wrote, before Hitler's rise "not much could be done" about transgender people; now, under the Nazi state, they could be imprisoned in concentration camps or forcibly castrated. Such individuals, he argued, possessed an "asocial mindset" and engaged in "criminal activity," justifying "draconian measures by the state."<sup>222</sup>

Though transgender people were not the primary target of the Nazi regime nor of the Holocaust, this did not mean they were safe. Trans magazines were shut down, "transvestite certificates" were revoked, and police increasingly equated trans women with homosexuality, which was already a criminalised and persecuted category.<sup>223</sup> Gender nonconformity was not only deemed to be an undesirable trait but became evidence of political unreliability, and transgender people came to be conflated with spies, saboteurs, and swindlers who, sexologists claimed, used cross-dressing to evade identification.<sup>224</sup> Thousands of individuals were arrested, interrogated, or sent to

concentration camps on the grounds of gender noncompliance.<sup>225</sup>

For individuals assigned female at birth, the situation was more ambiguous but still dangerous; although it may have spared them some immediate danger, the unequal targeting of male and female trans people was itself profoundly misogynistic, reflecting a broader belief that women were inherently less threatening and politically marginal.<sup>226</sup> Yet, the regime's obsession with racial purity and the ideal of the eugenically-superior mother meant that masculinity in "Aryan" women was perceived as a racial threat.<sup>227</sup> Gestapo cases from 1939-1943 reveal that accusa-

217 Socialist Worker. 2009. Gay People in Nazi Germany: How hate triumphs. Available at: <https://socialistworker.co.uk/in-depth/gay-people-in-nazi-germany-how-hate-triumphs/>

218 Ibid.

219 Ibid.

220 Ibid.

221 Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. 6 May 1933: Looting of the Institute of Sexology. Available at: <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/6-may-1933-looting-of-the-institute-of-sexology/>

222 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

223 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

227 Ibid.

tions of sabotage or disloyalty were often accompanied by references to women's "masculine" appearance or suspected lesbianism.<sup>228</sup> Gender nonconformity was treated not merely as moral failure but as evidence of racial degeneration and political subversion.

One of the most enduring legacies of Nazi persecution was the destruction of transgender knowledge itself. The burning of the Institute for Sexology in 1933 erased decades of progressive research, medical records, and community histories.<sup>229</sup> With those texts destroyed, the literature that survived was predominantly written by hostile authors such as criminologists, police officials, and eugenicists who framed trans people as mentally ill, criminal, or socially dangerous.<sup>230</sup> This epistemic violence had long-term consequences and left postwar scholars, doctors, and the public with a biased archive in which transphobic frameworks dominated.

The burning of this knowledge was an intentional assault on the intellectual infrastructure that challenged Nazi assump-

tions about sex, gender, and normalcy. By erasing these archives, the Nazis sought to obliterate rival frameworks for understanding human diversity and to assert control over what counted as legitimate scientific knowledge.<sup>231</sup> The Institute's holdings included not only pioneering research but also records of early gender-affirming care, social networks, and community histories that could have provided future generations with alternative narratives and evidence-based medical insight.<sup>232</sup> Destroying them silenced voices, severed connections to community, and prevented the empirical study of gender variance from developing outside of approved narratives.<sup>233</sup>

Decades later, researchers and activists still search for remnants of these materials in libraries around the world, underscoring how profound this erasure was and how challenging it has been to reconstruct what was lost.<sup>234</sup>

We can see the extent and impact of the legacy of erasure when we consider that Germany did not formally recognise transgender victims of the Holocaust until

2023.<sup>235</sup> Trans people were both written out of Holocaust history and portrayed as individuals who could not have been victims at all. Unlike Jewish, Roma, disabled, Jehovah's Witness, and other communities – whose suffering was systematically and rightfully documented – transgender and gender-nonconforming victims were frequently omitted from survivor testimonies, official records, and memorial projects.<sup>236</sup> This erasure was reinforced by the rigid frameworks of both Nazi authorities and postwar historians; within records,

many trans victims were misgendered, recorded under their assigned sex at birth, or subsumed under broad categories such as "homosexuals" or "asocials."<sup>237</sup> In addition, the stigma and criminalisation of gender variance during and after the war silenced survivors, leaving historians with few personal accounts to preserve.<sup>238</sup> The resulting invisibility is a powerful reminder that historical memory is not neutral; rather, it is the selective preservation of what is remembered.

### The Pink Triangle

The pink triangle was originally used by the Nazi regime to identify and stigmatise homosexual men in concentration camps, marking them as 'asocial' and subjecting them to brutal treatment, including forced labor, medical experiments, and execution. Though primarily associated with gay men, it also symbolically encompassed transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who were conflated with homosexuality under Nazi definitions.<sup>239</sup>

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228 Ibid.

229 Schillace, B. The Forgotten History of the World's First Trans Clinic. *Scientific American*. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-forgotten-history-of-the-worlds-first-trans-clinic/>

230 Schillace, B. The Forgotten History of the World's First Trans Clinic. *Scientific American*. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-forgotten-history-of-the-worlds-first-trans-clinic/>

231 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (2021). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/magnus-hirschfeld-2>

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

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235 Marhoefer, L. (2023, September 21). New Research Reveals How the Nazis Targeted Transgender People. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/new-research-reveals-how-the-nazis-targeted-transgender-people-180982931/>

236 Carlo, A. (2021, April 7). Why it took decades for LGBTQ stories to be included in Holocaust History. *Time*. Available at: <https://time.com/5953047/lgbtq-holocaust-stories/>

237 Ibid.

238 Ibid.

239 Newsom, J. (2024, January 27). The Nazi Persecution of Queer and Trans People. The Pink Triangle Legacies Project. Available at: <https://www.pinktrianglelegacies.org/learn/history>

In the decades following the Holocaust, the pink triangle was largely absent from mainstream memory, reflecting the continued erasure of LGBTI+ victims. From the 1970s onward, activists and scholars reclaimed it as a symbol of resistance, re-

membrance, and queer pride, transforming it from a marker of oppression into an emblem of solidarity and resilience. Today, it serves as both a memorial to victims and a reminder of the ongoing struggle against homophobia and transphobia worldwide.



### Section 3 Key Findings:

- Eugenic ideologies reframed gender nonconformity as a biological and social threat requiring eradication. Nazi persecution intensified existing European and American eugenic frameworks rather than inventing new ones.
- Medical classification made trans people legible to the state, enabling surveillance, sterilisation, imprisonment, and violence.
- The destruction of early trans research created a long-term epistemic gap that continues to shape policy and public discourse.
- This period institutionalised the idea that gender variance undermines national strength, reproduction, and social order.

### Section 3 Questions: WW2 Era Eugenics

- Does this section reflect how eugenic thinking influenced policy or social attitudes in your national context?
- Are there documented cases of trans or gender-nonconforming people being targeted under eugenic or “degeneracy” frameworks?
- How did medical or psychiatric classification affect the safety or legal status of gender-nonconforming people?
- How has the destruction or absence of historical records affected trans advocacy today?
- What lessons (if any) from this period are most relevant to current human rights protections?

## Section 4: Cold War Paranoia

While Nazi persecution was devastating for trans and gender-nonconforming communities within Germany and Eastern Europe more broadly, World War II simultaneously catalysed the global growth of queer and trans subcultures on a global scale during the subsequent post-war rebuilding efforts. Millions of men and women left rural, restrictive environments for the first time, encountering anonymity, mobility, and new social worlds in urban centers.<sup>240</sup> Port cities, in particular,

became hubs of exchange where sailors, military personnel, migrants, and entertainers circulated, bringing with them networks of social experimentation.<sup>241</sup>

This newfound freedom was amplified by the emotional and physical aftermath of the war. Trauma, grief, and the fracturing of pre-existing familial and community networks drove many to seek intimacy, companionship, and belonging outside of their traditional networks.<sup>242</sup> The desire

240 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: ISBN 9780786723355

241 Wendel, G. (2025, June 2). *Situating the Critical History of Gay Neighborhoods and Urban Planning: A Review of the Literature*. Ohio State University. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/088541222513464>

242 Ibid.

for connection and recognition intensified the social experimentation made possible by displacement, as individuals explored the boundaries of identity and social norms in ways that had been impossible in pre-war rural or small-town settings.<sup>243</sup>

Much like the Industrial Revolution, the growing urbanisation of cities provided the environment for these explorations.<sup>244</sup> Housing shortages, boarding houses, and single-room occupancies enabled non-nuclear living arrangements, while entertainment districts such as cabarets, theaters, and dance halls flourished and created environments in which non-normative socialisation could flourish.<sup>245</sup>

In this way, wartime displacement, emotional upheaval, and urbanisation intersected to produce a social environment in which social boundaries could be explored. It was in this environment that new forms of visibility, community, and mobility arose and allowed for more open displays of homosexuality and gender variance.<sup>246</sup>

At the same time, dominant cultural narratives began shifting, so that status and power were increasingly moving away from class and towards social mobility.<sup>247</sup> The Industrial Revolution's logic of self-made opportunity extended into the post-war era, positioning the male head of household – the “king of his own home” – as a new marker of social prestige.<sup>248</sup> This emphasis on mobility and domestic authority reshaped the stakes of social experimentation, as individuals navigated both newfound freedoms and emerging hierarchies.<sup>249</sup>

As a result of this growing environment of experimentation, after 1945, the public became increasingly aware of homosexuality; yet, this visibility coincided with a growing societal panic.<sup>250</sup> The war had dramatically destabilised gender norms not only socially and culturally – through increasing exposure to diverse and non-traditional social networks – but also structurally – through the organisation of work within society. With men serving overseas, women were required to fill the labour gap and entered industrial labor

in unprecedented numbers, producing a period of temporary gender flexibility.<sup>251</sup> After 1945, many women continued to work, and young people remained in cities, intensifying a sense that traditional gender roles were eroding permanently.<sup>252</sup>

These wartime changes created a sense of both political and moral panic. Social scientists of the 1940s and 1950s responded with what scholars describe as a “domestic containment” ideology, arguing that family instability could weaken the nation – especially within the context of a growing communist threat.<sup>253</sup> Popular magazines, advice literature, and policy-makers all reinforced the idea that any deviation from traditional gender roles was socially dangerous, thus continuing the cultural trend that had taken place during the Victorian era.<sup>254</sup> Just as the nineteenth century used cultural saturation to socialise and enforce the ideology of separate spheres, the post-war era used the same tactics to reinforce the importance of traditional gender roles.

Within this framework, trans and gender-nonconforming people came to symbolise a broader cultural instability. If women working outside the home signaled the erosion of gender hierarchy, trans people's very existence challenged the idea that gender was natural and fixed.<sup>255</sup> This challenge was interpreted not just as a moral threat but as an economic one as well. The economic logics that underpinned Cold War ideologies about gender roles argued that capitalist labour systems relied on the continuous reproduction of workers both daily and across generations.<sup>256</sup>

In other words, the family is not merely a private institution but a crucial mechanism through which capitalism maintains a stable workforce.<sup>257</sup> Within the family unit, women reproduce labour power by bearing and raising children – who will ultimately enter the workforce – and by providing unwaged domestic labour that sustains existing workers.<sup>258</sup> The idealised nuclear family model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker that emerged most visibly in the mid-twentieth

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243 Ibid.

244 Ibid.

245 Ibid.

246 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: ISBN 9780786723355

247 Rogers, H. (2021). *Patienthood and the Female Body in US Cold War Literature*. University of Kent. Available at: <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/89818/>

248 Ibid.

249 Ibid.

250 Chauncey, G. (1994). *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books. Available at: ISBN 9780786723355

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251 Ritter, G. (2009). *Domestic Containment or Equal Standing?: Gender, Nationalism, and the War on Terror*. *Journal of Policy History* 21(4). Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/363478>.

252 Ibid.

253 Ibid.

254 Ibid.

255 Rogers, H. (2021). *Patienthood and the Female Body in US Cold War Literature*. University of Kent. Available at: <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/89818/>

256 Laville, H. (2013, January 28). *Gender and Women's Rights in the Cold War*. Oxford Academic. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0030>

257 Ritter, G. (2009). *Domestic Containment or Equal Standing?: Gender, Nationalism, and the War on Terror*. *Journal of Policy History* 21(4). Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/363478>.

258 Laville, H. (2013, January 28). *Gender and Women's Rights in the Cold War*. Oxford Academic. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0030>

century was deeply intertwined with these economic logics, as it stabilised labour markets by promoting a predictable system in which the next generation of workers was raised.<sup>259</sup> This dynamic helps explain why deviations from normative gender and family roles were perceived as threats not just to morality but to economic order. Capitalist labour systems relied on the reproduction of stable - nuclear and heteronormative - families who raised the next generation of workers. From this perspective, if gender roles were fluid, then the economic order built atop those roles would be equally precarious.<sup>260</sup>

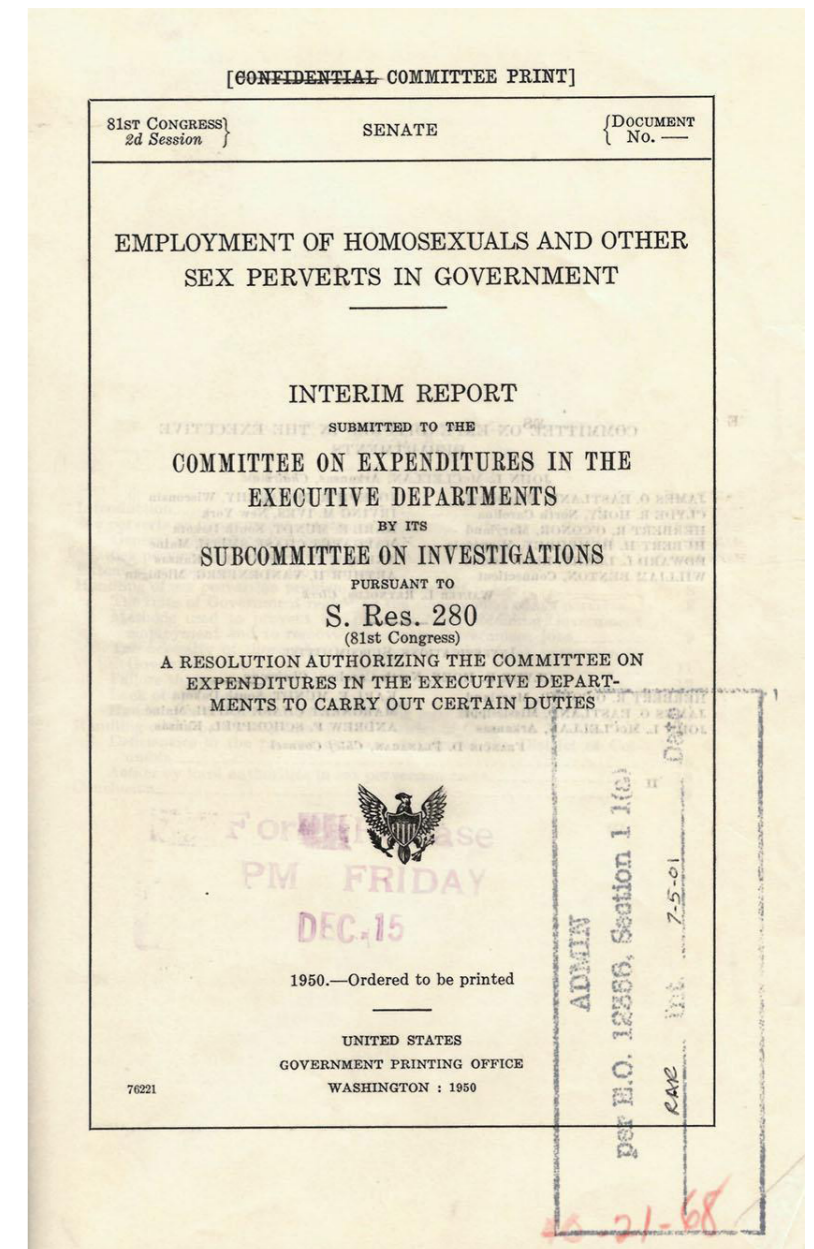
This entanglement of gender norms with economic stability set the stage for a political logic in which deviations from prescribed roles were not only socially disruptive but also ideologically suspect, allowing fears of gender nonconformity to be cast in explicitly-political terms as evidence of communist sympathies and

subversive intent during the early Cold War.<sup>261</sup>

By the late 1940s, many politicians had explicitly linked ideological deviance with gender deviance, drawing a clear, perceivable connection between communism and the broader LGBTI+ community, particularly the trans community.<sup>262</sup> Commentators argued that communists and gender-nonconforming people shared traits such as moral weakness, psychological disturbance, godlessness, a tendency to recruit others, and existence within secretive subcultures.<sup>263</sup> The constant pairing of “communists and queers” in congressional reports and popular discourse crystallised this logic.<sup>264</sup> It rendered gender nonconformity inherently suspicious and an indicator of political unreliability and moral degeneracy.<sup>265</sup> Within this ideological climate, trans people were portrayed as especially threatening due to their perceived ability to ‘disguise’ themselves. If communists were enemies who lacked

visible markers, trans individuals were imagined as even more deceptive and were characterised as people who embodied disguise itself.<sup>266</sup> The leap from “gender deviation” to “potential spy” relied on Cold War anxieties about infiltration, secrecy, and hidden danger.<sup>267</sup> These parallels helped justify state surveillance of anyone who challenged normative gender roles.<sup>268</sup>

There is a deeply ironic twist in this rhetoric, if we consider how queer culture was also used as a rhetorical weapon by Moscow. Soviet political discourse and legal codes in the Stalin era criminalised male homosexuality and framed it as a form of bourgeois decadence and moral corruption - the very things Soviet propagandists associated with fascism and Western capitalism.<sup>269</sup> Stalinist policy labelled homosexuality as a mental disorder and a “decadent bourgeois morality,” justifying repression in the name of social order.<sup>270</sup> Whether in Pravda or in criminal statutes - like Article 121 of the 1934 criminal



259 Ritter, G. (2009). Domestic Containment or Equal Standing?: Gender, Nationalism, and the War on Terror. *Journal of Policy History* 21(4). Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/363478>.

260 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

261 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

262 Adkins, J. Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare. *Prologue Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>

263 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

264 Adkins, J. Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare. *Prologue Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>

265 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

266 Ritter, G. (2009). Domestic Containment or Equal Standing?: Gender, Nationalism, and the War on Terror. *Journal of Policy History* 21(4). Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/363478>.

267 Ibid.

268 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

269 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. *International Socialism*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

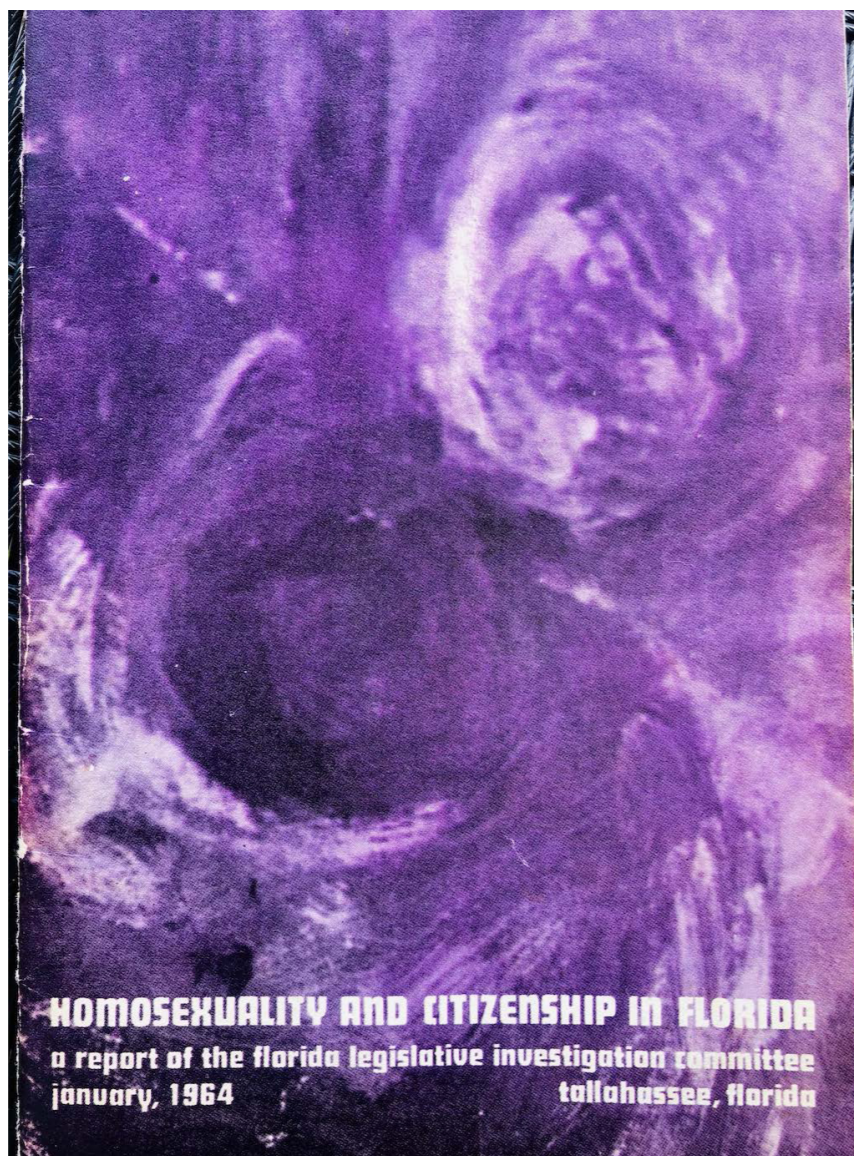
270 Mole, R. (2015). Introduction to ‘Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities’. University College London. Available at: [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10037717/9/Mole\\_Introduction%20%2813.11.2017%29.pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10037717/9/Mole_Introduction%20%2813.11.2017%29.pdf)

271 Adkins, J. Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare. *Prologue Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>

code - homosexuality was constructed as symptomatic of a corrupt social order that the socialist state claimed to oppose.

What this comparison reveals is that the focus was never truly on trans people themselves, but on the panic they could be made to symbolise. The same rhetoric was deployed in completely opposite geopolitical contexts because the threat being invoked was abstract, not concrete. In both Washington and Moscow, trans - and LGBTI+ existence more broadly - functioned as a convenient vessel for anxiety.<sup>272</sup> LGBTI+ people served as a visible signifier of invisible dangers and as a scapegoat for societal fears. The tactic of linking gender nonconformity to subversion worked regardless of the local context because what mattered was not the individuals themselves, but the power of fear to justify control, repression, and surveillance. In this sense, trans people were less the target than the symbol - a malleable

figure through which states could project and manage collective panic.



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272 Miles, L. Transgender Oppression and Resistance. International Socialism. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/isj2/2014/isj2-141/miles.html>

273 Fehler, B. (2020, July 6). The Purple Pamphlet - A Shadowy History in the Sunshine State. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@bfehler/the-purple-pamphlet-a-shadowy-history-in-the-sunshine-state-123a16f6724d>

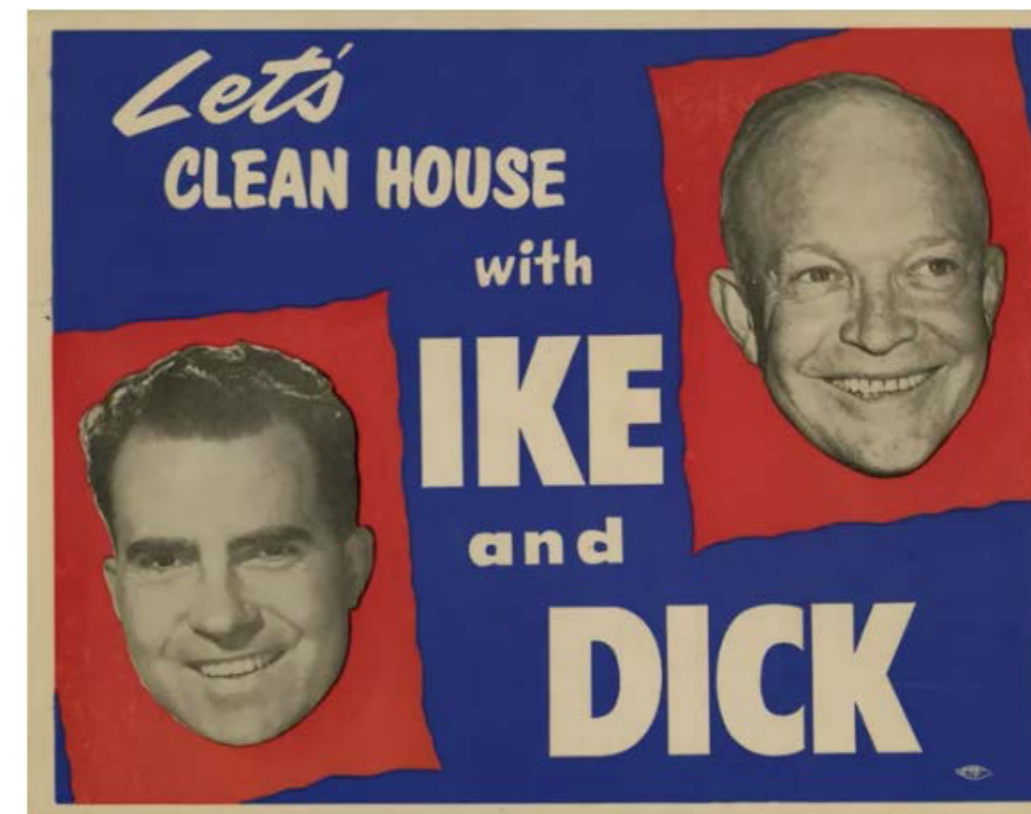
274 Adkins, J. Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare. Prologue Magazine. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>

275 Ibid.

As the Cold War intensified, so did the panic surrounding trans people; the conflation of LGBTI+ people and communists hit its peak with the Lavender Scare. While the well-known Red Scare dominates historical narratives, the less prominent Lavender Scare led to thousands of federal workers being purged from government positions despite having no communist links.<sup>274</sup>

Although much of the scrutiny stemming from the Lavender Scare was targeted at sexual orientation, it also reinforced broader gender policing.<sup>275</sup> Anyone who deviated from expected gender norms risked suspicion, partly because official definitions of risk were so porous.<sup>276</sup> Congressional investigations in the early 1950s - such as the report "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government" - labelled both same-sex attraction and a broad array of non-normative behaviours as disqualifying for federal employment.<sup>277</sup>

Federal agencies systematically scanned personnel records and interrogated employees about alleged immoral conduct;



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unmarried status, nonconforming dress, or other deviations from heteronormative gender presentation could be used to infer ideological unreliability.<sup>279</sup> Investigators reportedly scrutinised voice, mannerisms, and dress as markers of homosex-

276 Ibid.

277 Ibid.

278 National Park Service. Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare. Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/lavender-scare.htm>

279 The National Archives Foundation. The Lavender Scare. Available at: <https://archivesfoundation.org/newsletter/the-laven->

uality or 'perversion,' effectively policing gender expression as well as sexuality.<sup>280</sup> Because homosexuality and other non-normative behaviours – often associated with gender variance – were classified as

a 'security risk,' government employees were questioned about their private lives, sometimes without legal counsel. Many individuals were forced to resign rather than face public outing.<sup>281</sup>

### The Curious Case of Roy Cohn

Roy Cohn, Chief Counsel to Senator Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare and a key architect of the Lavender Scare, exemplifies the contradictions of Cold War moral panic. Although a closeted gay man, Cohn wielded state power to investigate, publicly accuse, and purge federal employees suspected of homosexuality or communist sympathies. His personal concealment of his sexuality highlights the intense social pressures and dangers faced by queer individuals at the time, despite his enforcement of policies that targeted the very community he was a part of.

After leaving government service, Cohn became a high-profile lawyer and power broker in New York, known for his aggressive tactics, fearsome loyalty tests, and cultivation of influential clients. Among these clients was Donald Trump, who employed Cohn in the 1970s and 1980s as his personal attorney and political advisor.

His legacy illustrates how the enforcement of gender and sexual norms intersected with political strategy, personal ambition, and the cultivation of influence in both government and private sectors.<sup>282</sup>

Cases such as that of civil servant Madeleine Tress – an economist in the Department of Commerce who was interrogated

and lost her job in the late 1950s because of her perceived queerness – illustrate how these policies blurred sexual orienta-

tion with broader anxieties about nonnormative identities.<sup>283</sup> The public arrests of government workers in Atlanta in 1953 for alleged sodomy further highlight these anxieties and reinforced a culture in which any departure from expected gender norms could trigger punitive action.<sup>284</sup>

The government justified these purges by arguing that queer and gender-nonconforming people were especially vulnerable to blackmail due to social stigma.<sup>285</sup> Additionally, federal agencies assumed that anyone who could conceal aspects of their identity might also conceal political loyalties.<sup>286</sup> Trans people were, therefore, conceptualised as uniquely threatening due to conflated ideas that, if one could 'pass' as a specific gender, one might also 'pass' as loyal while harboring subversive intentions.<sup>287</sup>

The Lavender Scare unfolded within the broader climate of McCarthyism: a period defined by pervasive suspicion, loyalty tests, and the aggressive policing of ideo-

logical conformity.<sup>288</sup> While the Lavender Scare focused on queer and gender-nonconforming federal employees, the Red Scare targeted alleged communists more broadly.<sup>289</sup> Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies, most notably his Chief Counsel Roy Cohn, cultivated a culture in which alleged communists were publicly denounced, investigated, and purged from positions of influence.<sup>290</sup> The Lavender Scare and McCarthyism used the same investigative techniques – such as loyalty tests and public denunciations – underscoring the methodological similarities between the two campaigns.<sup>291</sup>

However, it is important to note that the Lavender Scare was not a separate campaign but a logical extension of McCarthyist ideology whereby the state's obsession with identifying hidden threats made nonnormative sexuality and gender inherently suspect.<sup>292</sup> Here, we can see that queer and trans individuals became targets not by chance but because societal norms had already cast them as moral-

283 Adkins, J. Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare. Prologue Magazine. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>

284 Ibid.

285 Ibid.

286 Ibid.

287 Haynes, S. (2020, December, 22). You've Probably Heard of the Red Scare, but the Lesser-Known, Anti-Gay 'Lavender Scare' Is Rarely Taught in Schools. Time. Available at: <https://time.com/5922679/lavender-scare-history/>

288 McCarthyism and the Red Scare. (2025). The University of Virginia Miller Center. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mccarthyism-red-scare>

289 Ibid.

290 Ibid.

291 Ibid.

292 McCarthyism and the Red Scare. (2025). The University of Virginia Miller Center. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-p>

der-scare/

280 Ibid.

281 Ibid.

282 Rosenfeld, J. (2025). Roy Cohn. Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-McCarthy>

ly and politically suspect. In a culture that equated heteronormativity and gender variance with reliability, gender nonnormativity was perceived as inherently risky and secretive. The Lavender Scare, therefore, functioned as a gendered extension of McCarthyism where it transformed existing prejudices into instruments of state control and turned already marginalised individuals into convenient stand-ins for the nation's broader fears of hidden enemies.<sup>293</sup> In this way, the Lavender Scare acted as a gendered scapegoat for McCarthyism, as society's fear of hidden enemies demanded visible targets. Trans and queer individuals – who were already under social suspicion – were positioned as convenient proxies.<sup>294</sup>

Outside of government institutions, this growing convergence of anti-communist and anti-queer hysteria created a broader social climate where suspicion became a default stance. Under McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare, everyone was assumed to be hiding something, and appearances could no longer be trusted. Loyalty tests and investigations trained society to see potential threats in familiar faces, fostering a pervasive paranoia where 'evil' could look just like anyone.<sup>295</sup> Such tests were not incidental but a favored tool of authoritarian governance, shifting the burden of proof onto individuals and compelling constant performances of compliance as a condition of belonging.

### From Colonial Encounter to Domestic Panic

Layered onto these domestic anxieties was the persistent reality of imperial power and colonial encounter, which continued to structure how difference was seen, interpreted, and feared. US soldiers' encounters with publicly visible gender-nonconforming individuals overseas – particularly in Southeast Asia – contributed directly to domestic fears about trans people during the early Cold War. Soldiers frequently reported experiences with individuals now recognised as part of the modern *kathoey*, or 'ladyboy,' phenomenon in military publications, letters home, and popular media. These accounts often framed gender-nonconforming and trans people, as well as drag culture, as deceptive or 'tricky,' feeding anxieties that gender nonconformity could mask hidden intentions or threats.

The circulation of these stories demonstrates that Cold War paranoia about loyalty, sexuality, and gender performance was not purely domestic. It was also shaped and amplified by international encounters, media representations, and global perceptions of gender variance. The fear that appearances could not be trusted became both a domestic and transnational lens through which trans people were imagined as potential subversives or predators, linking moral panic at home to global experiences of nonnormative gender.<sup>296</sup>

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293 Haynes, S. (2020, December, 22). You've Probably Heard of the Red Scare, but the Lesser-Known, Anti-Gay 'Lavender Scare' Is Rarely Taught in Schools. Time. Available at: <https://time.com/5922679/lavender-scare-history/>

294 Ibid.

295 Ibid.

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296 Miklikova, V. (2020). The Boom of Thai Sexual Industry during the Vietnam War and Now. Security Outlines. Available at: <https://securityoutlines.cz/the-boom-of-thai-sexual-industry-during-the-vietnam-war-and-now/>

#### Section 4 Key Findings:

- During the Cold War, gender nonconformity became associated with political deviance and national insecurity.
- Trans and gender-nonconforming people were framed as deceptive, infiltrative, and morally corrupting.
- State surveillance and cultural paranoia linked gender variance to espionage, communism, and social decay.
- Legal and psychiatric systems reinforced these narratives through criminalisation and pathologisation.
- This era entrenched the association between transness and threat within state security discourse.
- Many contemporary political narratives echo Cold War logics of infiltration and moral collapse.

#### Section 4 Questions: Cold War Moral Panic and Political Subversion

- Are there examples of trans or gender-nonconforming people being linked to political disloyalty or subversion in your historical cultural context?
- How did surveillance, policing, or intelligence agencies contribute to gender-based repression?
- Are these narratives still present in contemporary political rhetoric?



## Section 5: The 90s' Cultural Redistribution of Moral Panic

As the Cold War drew to a close, the Communist enemy that had shaped American imagination for nearly half a century had disappeared. Yet, the aftermath did not usher in an age free of paranoia; instead, the panic that had consumed society for decades was redistributed toward domestic life, particularly the imagined sanctity of suburbia.<sup>297</sup> Scholars of moral panic have long argued that such periods of geopolitical transition often produce heightened concern over internal threats, as societies seek new figures onto which unresolved fears can be projected.<sup>298</sup>

In the American context, this redirection took place through a renewed obsession with the protection of children, the home, and heterosexual family life. The suburban household became both a symbol and a battleground. In many ways, this was an extension of 1950s Cold War logic, when loyalty and conformity were policed within the domestic sphere; now, this fear had a new texture, steeped in suburban angst where the threat could be lurking behind white picket fences, in the neighbor next door, or even in one's own living room. Cultural forms such as Satanic Panic narratives and pulp fiction functioned as

297 Jenkins, P. (1992). Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain. NCJRS Virtual Library. Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/intimate-enemies-moral-panics-contemporary-great-britain>

298 Victor, J. (1993). Satanic Panic: the creation of a contemporary legend. Chicago: Open Court. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/satanicpaniccrea00vict>

vehicles through which Cold War paranoia was rearticulated in moral terms rather than explicitly geopolitical.<sup>299</sup> The enemy was no longer communist but still corrupting. No longer foreign but still hidden. This shift laid the groundwork for the intensified suspicion of gender non-conformity that characterised the 1980s and 1990s.

This moral architecture did not emerge spontaneously. It was shaped by decades of institutionalised censorship and ideological alignment between cultural institutions such as Hollywood and the US state. We can see this clearly through the Hollywood Production Code – commonly known as the Hays Code – that governed American film from 1930 until its gradual decline in the 1960s.<sup>300</sup> The Code prohibited the depiction of what it termed as “sexual perversion,” a category that explicitly encompassed homosexuality and implicitly included gender nonconformity.<sup>301</sup> As a result, filmmakers developed a

visual and narrative shorthand to signify or imply deviance without naming it.<sup>302</sup>

This practice of queer coding relied on exaggerated mannerisms, aesthetic excess, vocal inflection, and ambiguous gender presentation.<sup>303</sup> Importantly, such coding rarely appeared in neutral or positive contexts.<sup>304</sup> Queer-coded characters were overwhelmingly villains, criminals, or otherwise morally-suspect figures.<sup>305</sup> Film historians, such as Vito Russo and Richard Dyer, have documented how this association functioned not merely as representation but as instruction, teaching audiences how to read queerness as danger.<sup>306</sup>

Hollywood’s role in disseminating these narratives cannot be separated from its geopolitical function. Culture can often be an extension of a state’s soft power. During and after World War II, the US military actively collaborated with film studios, offering funding, equipment, and access in exchange for script approval and

ideological alignment.<sup>307</sup> Scholars, such as Tanner Mirrlees and Tony Shaw, have demonstrated that Hollywood functioned as a key instrument of American soft power, exporting narratives that aligned cultural norms with state interests.<sup>308</sup> The portrayal of deviance as an internal threat dovetailed neatly with Cold War imperatives of vigilance and conformity.

However, queer coding cannot be understood solely as a top-down imposition of repression. Paradoxically, Hollywood has long been a more accepting queer space than wider society. Many writers, directors, costume designers, and performers working under the Hays Code were themselves LGBTI+ or gender-nonconforming.<sup>309</sup> For some, depictions of LGBTI+ individuals as villains offered the only available space for expression. Leaning into excess, theatricality, and ambiguity allowed queer creators to smuggle elements of their experience into mainstream culture, even if those elements were framed negatively.<sup>310</sup> In later reinterpretations, many of these once-feared villains have been reclaimed by queer audiences: transformed from moral warnings into icons of style, defiance, and camp.

For some viewers, these characters now occupy a central place in the gay cultural canon, not despite their excess or transgression but precisely because of it.

This ambivalence complicates any simplistic reading of queer coding as uniformly transphobic. As scholars like Alexander Doty argue: Queer audiences often read these figures against the grain, finding recognition where heterosexual viewers saw menace.<sup>311</sup> Yet, this subversive potential existed alongside – and was often overwhelmed by – dominant readings that linked queerness to criminality and deception. By repeatedly associating gender nonconformity with duplicity, Hollywood helped sediment a cultural logic in which trans and gender-nonconforming people were imagined as threats precisely because they could not be easily categorised.

These representational patterns had real consequences. Across decades of film and television, trans and gender-nonconforming characters were framed as impostors, manipulators, or psychologically-unstable individuals. Cross-dressing was rarely depicted as identity; it was a ruse.

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299 Victor, J. (1993). *Satanic Panic: the creation of a contemporary legend*. Chicago: Open Court. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/satanicpanicrea00vict>

300 Rainbow&Co. (2023). *The Hays Code and Queer Coding Villains in Hollywood*. Available at: <https://rainbowandco.uk/blogs/what-were-saying/the-hays-code-and-queer-coding-villains-in-hollywood-films?srsltid=AfmBOoqtKX0RbN3-wP0uhjnJrl-3NJgD43LsYGnL3qxV2LcwpNyunujpY>

301 Ibid.

302 Cleghorn, S. (2017, November 6). *The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters*. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiecleghorn/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62>

303 Rainbow&Co. (2023). *The Hays Code and Queer Coding Villains in Hollywood*. Available at: <https://rainbowandco.uk/blogs/what-were-saying/the-hays-code-and-queer-coding-villains-in-hollywood-films?srsltid=AfmBOoqtKX0RbN3-wP0uhjnJrl-3NJgD43LsYGnL3qxV2LcwpNyunujpY>

304 Ibid.

305 Rainbow&Co. (2023). *The Hays Code and Queer Coding Villains in Hollywood*. Available at: <https://rainbowandco.uk/blogs/what-were-saying/the-hays-code-and-queer-coding-villains-in-hollywood-films?srsltid=AfmBOoqtKX0RbN3-wP0uhjnJrl-3NJgD43LsYGnL3qxV2LcwpNyunujpY>

306 Ibid.

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307 Cleghorn, S. (2017, November 6). *The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters*. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiecleghorn/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62>

308 Kalleher, P. (2022, February 23) *The long, potted history of LGBT+ Hollywood – from queer silent film to the problematic present*. Pink News. Available at: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/02/23/hollywood-lgbt-film-cinema-television-history/>

309 Cleghorn, S. (2017, November 6). *The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters*. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiecleghorn/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62>

310 Kalleher, P. (2022, February 23) *The long, potted history of LGBT+ Hollywood – from queer silent film to the problematic present*. Pink News. Available at: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/02/23/hollywood-lgbt-film-cinema-television-history/>

311 Cleghorn, S. (2017, November 6). *The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters*. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiecleghorn/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62>

This trope reinforced a broader political narrative that trans people were dangerous because they could “pass,” hide, and infiltrate protected spaces.<sup>312</sup>

There are many cultural examples that demonstrate this. For instance in *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates’ cross-gender identification is framed as pathology and violence, a template that would echo for decades. Later films such as *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) also explicitly linked gender nonconformity to murder, presenting revelation of gender variance as horror itself.<sup>313</sup> These portrayals primed audiences to read trans bodies as sites of concealment and threat, a framing that would resurface with particular force during periods of moral panic.<sup>314</sup>

The Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s represented the most explicit re-activation of Cold War paranoia in a new domestic form.<sup>315</sup> Centred on allegations that satanic cults were abusing children in daycare centres and suburban homes, the

panic mobilised familiar themes of secret networks, ritual corruption, and infiltration of trusted institutions.<sup>316</sup> Sociologists, such as Jeffrey Victor and Mary de Young, have shown that these claims were unsupported by evidence; yet, they resulted in extensive investigations, sensational media coverage, and devastating miscarriages of justice.<sup>317</sup>

The McMartin Preschool trial remains the most infamous example. Beginning in 1983, staff at the preschool were accused of physically and sexually abusing children as part of elaborate, ritualistic ceremonies, including claims of underground tunnels, animal sacrifices, and satanic rituals.<sup>318</sup> Allegations spiralled into a seven-year legal ordeal involving hundreds of charges, all of which were eventually dismissed. Despite the absence of corroborating evidence, the case entrenched the idea that danger could lurk behind ordinary facades and became emblematic of the Satanic Panic era, feeding widespread fears of hidden threats in everyday settings.<sup>319</sup>

Although trans people were not the primary targets of these accusations, they were uniquely vulnerable within this climate. Conservative commentators and talk-show hosts frequently conflated gender nonconformity with predation, echoing older Cold War associations between deviation and subversion.<sup>320</sup> Trans bodies – already culturally constructed as deceptive – fit seamlessly into narratives of hidden evil. Media coverage amplified these fears; for instance, Geraldo Rivera’s 1988 special, *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan’s Underground*, warned of shadowy networks of abusers, reinforcing the idea that danger could be invisible and everywhere. Such portrayals helped cement a cultural logic in which anything perceived as nonnormative – whether in sexuality or gender – was framed as potentially threatening.<sup>321</sup> These fear-inducing portrayals affected all LGBTI+ people – even those who ‘passed’ – because the notion that evil could look ‘normal’ meant that the paranoia it generated knew no bounds nor expiration.

This vulnerability was not incidental. By the 1980s, the ideological groundwork

had been laid. Decades of cultural messaging had linked gender nonconformity with secrecy, instability, and moral corruption. In a panic organised around the fear of hidden predators, trans people were easily cast as symbolic threats.<sup>322</sup> As Susan Stryker and Joanne Meyerowitz note, trans identities were routinely framed not as expressions of selfhood but as disguises, reinforcing the belief that those who crossed gender boundaries must be hiding deviant intent.<sup>323</sup>

The Satanic Panic, thus, functioned as a post-Cold War encore of contemporary trans-weaponisation. It reaffirmed the idea that protecting children required heightened surveillance of those who did not conform to normative gender roles, positioning trans people as objects of suspicion rather than citizens entitled to protection.<sup>324</sup>

These same anxieties played out vividly in the pulp thrillers and neo-noir films of the late 1980s and 1990s. With the decline of formal censorship, filmmakers no longer relied solely on implication.<sup>325</sup> Instead, they increasingly depicted explicitly trans

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312 Ibid.

313 Rainbow&Co. (2023). The Hays Code and Queer Coding Villains in Hollywood. Available at: <https://rainbowandco.uk/blogs/what-were-saying/the-hays-code-and-queer-coding-villains-in-hollywood-films?srltid=AfmBOoqtKX0RbN3-wP0uhjnJrl-3NJgD43LsYGNL3qxV2LcwpNyunujpY>

314 Cleghorn, S. (2017, November 6). The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters. Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiecleghorn/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62>

315 Booth, J. (2025, March 26). A New Satanic Panic .Yale Journal of Law and Feminism Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5195331>

316 Victor, J. (1993). Satanic Panic: the creation of a contemporary legend. Chicago: Open Court. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/satanicpaniccrea00vict>

317 Ibid.

318 Ibid.

319 Booth, J. (2025, March 26). A New Satanic Panic .Yale Journal of Law and Feminism Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5195331>

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320 Victor, J. (1993). Satanic Panic: the creation of a contemporary legend. Chicago: Open Court. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/satanicpaniccrea00vict>

321 Casey, M. (2015, July 31). How the daycare child abuse hysteria of the 1980s became a witch hunt. The Washington Post. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-modern-witch-hunt/2015/07/31/057effd8-2f1a-11e5-8353-1215475949f4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-modern-witch-hunt/2015/07/31/057effd8-2f1a-11e5-8353-1215475949f4_story.html)

322 Booth, J. (2025, March 26). A New Satanic Panic .Yale Journal of Law and Feminism Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5195331>

323 Ibid.

324 Victor, J. (1993). Satanic Panic: the creation of a contemporary legend. Chicago: Open Court. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/satanicpaniccrea00vict>

325 Benschhoff, H. and Griffin, S. (2006). Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. Available at: [https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-02-08\\_62029f27ac931\\_QueerImagesAHistoryofGayandLesbianFilminAmericabyHarryM.Benschhoff-lib.org\\_.pdf](https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-02-08_62029f27ac931_QueerImagesAHistoryofGayandLesbianFilminAmericabyHarryM.Benschhoff-lib.org_.pdf)

or trans-coded characters through what media scholars describe as the “trans reveal” trope.<sup>326</sup>

In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Buffalo Bill’s gender identity is framed as confusion and monstrosity even as the film attempts to distance itself rhetorically from transphobia. *Dressed to Kill* (1980) presents its killer’s trans identity as the root of violent compulsion. *The Crying Game* (1992), while more sympathetic, still treats the revelation of Dil’s transness as a shocking narrative rupture, positioning trans identity as destabilising knowledge.<sup>327</sup>

Across these films, transness functions less as lived reality and more as narrative weapon. It produces fear, surprise, and moral tension to purposefully keep

the audience off balance. The repetition of these tropes reinforced cultural associations between gender variance and danger, extending Cold War fears of infiltration into a post-war cinematic language.<sup>328</sup>

Together, the Satanic Panic and the pulp thriller cycle of the 1990s demonstrate that Cold War anxieties did not fall with the Soviet Union. They were repurposed. Trans and gender-nonconforming people became symbolic stand-ins for the hidden enemy: figures onto whom unresolved fears about secrecy, contamination, and social collapse could be projected. Understanding this lineage is essential for recognising contemporary trans-weaponisation not as a new phenomenon, but as a revival of deeply-entrenched cultural scripts.

### Section 5 Key Findings:

- The end of the Cold War shifted paranoia trends inward, focusing on domestic spaces and suburban life.
- Protection of children, the home, and heterosexual family structures echoed Cold War-era surveillance and conformity logic within the domestic sphere.
- Institutional censorship, including the Hollywood Production (Hays) Code, shaped portrayals of sexuality and gender, forbidding explicit depictions of homosexuality and implicitly suppressing gender nonconformity.
- Hollywood served US soft power while media frequently portrayed trans and gender-nonconforming people as impostors, manipulators, or psychologically unstable, reinforcing societal fears of concealed threats.
- Media coverage often conflated trans identities with predation, reinforcing fears of non-normative gender as a threat.

### Section 5 Questions:

#### **The 90s’ Cultural Redistribution of Moral Panic**

- Have historical moral panics shaped perceptions of trans and gender-diverse communities in your country? What lessons could be applied internationally?
- How do media campaigns and moral panics create fear of hidden threats against LGBTI+ people, and how can organisations respond effectively?
- In what ways has institutional censorship contributed to the development of negative stereotypes of queer and gender-nonconforming people across different contexts?
- How have repeated media narratives around gender nonconformity influenced laws, social attitudes, and cultural norms globally? Which interventions have proven effective?
- How have artists and creators in restrictive environments used both direct and coded methods to express queer identity safely, and what can this teach us?
- How have LGBTI+ audiences historically reclaimed or subverted negative portrayals, and how can these strategies strengthen community empowerment across diverse settings?

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326 Ibid.

327 Kalleher, P. (2022, February 23) The long, potted history of LGBT+ Hollywood - from queer silent film to the problematic present. Pink News. Available at: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/02/23/hollywood-lgbt-film-cinema-television-history/>

328 Serano, J. (2007). Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. *Hypatia A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. Available at: doi 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01052\_1.x



## Section 6: Reclaiming the

# Narrative and the Emergence of Reactive Trans-weaponisation

The emergence of a trans-led rights movement in the early 2000s is often narrated as a sudden cultural awakening, enabled by liberalisation, visibility, or generational change. Such accounts obscure the deeper conditions that made this moment possible. Even before the 2000s, trans and queer communities were establishing a broader social presence in the mainstream: from drag culture in the

1970s and the ball houses of the 1980s to the explosion of queer-led blogs and websites in the 1990s.<sup>329</sup> Rather than representing a break from earlier decades, the 2000s constitute a reconfiguration of long-standing dynamics of surveillance, suspicion, and resistance that had structured trans existence throughout the Cold War and its aftermath.<sup>330</sup> What changed is not the presence of paranoia but its effectiveness as a unilateral mode of control.<sup>331</sup>

329 Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Seal Press.

330 Meyerowitz, J. (2002). *How Sex Changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1c7zfrv>

331 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, trans people were positioned as objects of classification, containment, and speculation.<sup>332</sup> They appeared intermittently in media, medicine, and law as figures of deception, tragedy, or threat and rarely as agents of meaning.<sup>333</sup> Yet, resistance existed well before the consolidation of a recognisable “trans rights movement.” Early confrontations with police at Cooper’s Donuts in Los Angeles in 1959 and at Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966 demonstrate that trans people – particularly trans women of colour – were already contesting the conditions of their criminalisation decades

before the contemporary rights framework emerged.<sup>334</sup> These acts of resistance were accompanied by efforts – however constrained by social and institutional limits – to represent themselves on their own terms, asserting identities and experiences that challenged prevailing narratives of deception, tragedy, or invisibility.<sup>335</sup> Alongside the Stonewall uprising of 1969, these moments are frequently absorbed into a generalised narrative of gay liberation.<sup>336</sup> However, their relevance lies not in their symbolic status but in the tactical lineage of collective refusal, public disruption, and the rejection of imposed silence they establish.<sup>337</sup>

332 Namaste, V. K. (2000). *Invisible Lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. University of Chicago Press. Available at: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo3683192.html>

333 Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203955055/transgender-studies-reader-susan-stryker-stephen-whittle>

334 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

335 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

336 Eskridge, W. N. (1999) *Gaylaq: Challenging the apartheid of the closet*. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/gaylawchallengin0000eskr/page/n487/mode/1up>

337 Ibid.

## Trans Women of Colour at Stonewall

While the Stonewall uprising of 1969 is frequently remembered as the starting point of gay liberation, some historical and community accounts erase the contributions of trans women of colour. Figures such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Storme Delarverie all played critical roles in resisting police harassment and catalysing collective action. Yet they were frequently sidelined or excluded from mainstream LGBTI+ organising in the early years that followed. Trans women's experience illuminates a persistent tension within the movement where the prioritisation of gay and lesbian visibility has often come at the expense of trans voices, particularly those at the intersections of race and class.<sup>338</sup>

Building on the groundwork of earlier resistance, the decades that followed the Stonewall uprising did not produce immediate institutional gains for trans people. Instead, they intensified forms of exposure that were rarely self-directed. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s is a prime example where lesbian, gay, and trans communities were forced into unprecedented visibility, often under conditions of moral panic and state neglect.<sup>339</sup> As a result, organisations such as ACT UP developed confrontational political strategies, media literacy, and legal advocacy techniques that would later inform trans activism directly.<sup>340</sup> At the same time, trans-specific organising – including groups such as Transgender Nation – emerged to address the exclusions trans people faced within the broader queer movement.<sup>341</sup> While these developments did not dismantle the persisting paranoia, they taught communities how to operate within it by building a foundation of organisation, strategy, and collective resilience.<sup>342</sup>

By the 1990s, trans visibility was increasingly shown through accounts of violence perpetrated against trans people. The murders of trans people – disproportionately trans women of colour – were increasingly framed in media discourse as sensational aberrations or cautionary tales.<sup>343</sup> However, the murder of Rita Hester in 1998 and the subsequent establishment of the Transgender Day of Remembrance also exemplify how collective memory began to be mobilised as a political tool.<sup>344</sup> Cultural representations of the era – including popular films of the 1990s such as *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry* – familiarised mainstream audiences with trans characters primarily through narratives of secrecy, victimisation, and inevitable violence.<sup>345</sup> While these stories marked an important step toward recognising trans lives, they often remained constrained by a narrow framing where the only trans stories told or communicated broadly were tragic. This meant that visibility remained reactive. Trans people were named, mourned, and discussed, but rarely recognised as narrators of their own social meaning.<sup>346</sup>

These conditions form the substrate of the 2000s movement. The trans rights activism that follows is not born into neutrality;

it emerges within an affective landscape shaped by secrecy, fear, and institutional distrust, but equipped with organisational knowledge, rhetorical skill, and a growing insistence on epistemic authority. This continuity of trans participation within the broader LGBTI+ rights movement underscores that trans people were never newcomers or burdens within the movement but rather long-standing participants whose expertise and agency were central to shaping activism.

The defining shift of the early 2000s is not simply that trans people become more visible, but that they increasingly claim the authority to define themselves.<sup>347</sup> This represents an epistemic reversal with significant political consequences. Where earlier representations of transness were mediated through medical experts, journalists, filmmakers, or legal institutions, trans activists in the 2000s began to challenge not only exclusion but interpretive control itself.

This shift is visible in the proliferation of trans-led organisations and advocacy groups that foreground lived experience as a source of knowledge. Unlike earlier models that relied on sympathetic intermediaries, these organisations articu-

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338 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

339 Gould, D. B. (2009). *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's fight against AIDS*. University of Chicago Press. Available at: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo6943529.html>

340 Ibid.

341 Currah, P., Juang, R. M., & Minter, S. P. (2006). *Transgender Rights*. University of Minnesota Press. Available at: <https://www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Transgender-Rights-Intro-Minter-chapter.pdf>

342 Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Seal Press.

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343 Snorton, C. R. & Haritaworn, J. (2013). Trans necropolitics. *Social Text*, 31(2). Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003206255-33/trans-necropolitics-riley-snorton-jin-haritaworn>

344 Namaste, V. K. (2000). *Invisible Lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. University of Chicago Press. Available at: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo3683192.html>

345 Phillips, J. (2012). Transgender representation and the spectacle of suffering. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2). Available at: [https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/129621941/Humphrey\\_GF2016\\_I\\_think\\_journalists\\_sometimes\\_forget\\_just\\_people\\_analysing\\_effects\\_UK\\_trans\\_media.pdf](https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/129621941/Humphrey_GF2016_I_think_journalists_sometimes_forget_just_people_analysing_effects_UK_trans_media.pdf)

346 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

347 Ibid.

lated demands directly, often rejecting frameworks that required pathologisation or exceptionalism.<sup>348</sup> Language became a central terrain of struggle. Terms for identity, embodiment, and transition were debated, refined, and disseminated within trans communities before being taken up elsewhere. This marked a departure from earlier periods in which naming functioned primarily as a regulatory act imposed from above.<sup>349</sup>

This insistence disrupted the emotional economy that sustained earlier tolerance; sympathy no longer suffices when trans people demand rights, resources, and institutional change. The shift from being pitied to being listened to marks a critical escalation, one that reconfigures the relationship between trans communities and power.<sup>350</sup>

During this time, the role of digital media cannot be understated in the conversation of increased visibility. Just as the Victorian era printing press transformed who could produce knowledge, and the telegraph of the Industrial Revolution reshaped the speed and reach of information, the early Internet introduced a new mode of authorship. For the first time,

trans individuals were not merely subject of debate, but rather they could become authors presenting the reality of their experiences. What the Internet enabled was a redistribution of narrative power. Blogs, forums, and early social media platforms allowed trans people to share information, organise collectively, and produce archives of experience outside traditional institutional channels.<sup>351</sup> These platforms created new relational geographies, connecting individuals across distances and enabling the formation of social networks that were previously impossible. This undermined longstanding gatekeeping structures that had controlled how trans lives were understood and discussed.

Historically, access to trans knowledge was fragmented and closely monitored. Medical literature, psychiatric evaluations, and journalistic accounts functioned as the primary sources of information, each filtered through professional authority.<sup>352</sup> Digital spaces disrupted this monopoly. Peer-to-peer knowledge production flourished, particularly around healthcare access, legal navigation, and identity formation.<sup>353</sup> Trans histories that had been marginalised or erased could be documented and circulated within communities themselves on a broader scale.<sup>354</sup>

This shift dramatically increased representation and visibility, but it also brought new pressures where individuals who had never previously been able to represent themselves were now expected to speak for a whole community. As a result, the inevitable flaws of one individual could be misinterpreted and magnified as a collective shortcoming.

This shift had direct implications for paranoia as a governing logic. Up until this point, society had a relatively narrow, socially-reinforced understanding of trans people. The successful portrayals of trans people as deviant throughout previous eras depended on secrecy, asymmetrical information, and the presumption that hidden truths required expert interpretation.<sup>355</sup> When trans people spoke openly, publicly, and collectively about their lives, the mystique that sustained suspicion began to erode. However, this did not eliminate anxiety. Instead, it relocated it. The perceived threat was no longer about what trans people were hiding, but what they were openly asserting.<sup>356</sup>

The explosion of digital representation created a kind of information chaos where a proliferation of voices and experiences resisted easy comprehension or categorisation. Traditional frameworks could no longer contain the complexity of lived

trans realities, leading to both opportunity and anxiety for audiences and institutions accustomed to legible, simplified narratives.

Digital space, thus, became a double-edged terrain. It enabled unprecedented self-definition while simultaneously exposing trans activism to intensified scrutiny and reaction as well as creating new spaces for paranoia to hide and recruit new members.<sup>357</sup> The collapse of interpretive gatekeeping did not dissolve power; it forced it to reorganise.

Contrary to narratives that frame backlash as a response to cultural change alone, the most intense opposition to trans rights in the 2000s emerged around moments of institutional recognition; anti-trans legislation campaigns and public policy debates – especially concerning healthcare access, anti-discrimination protections, and definitions of legal gender – consistently intensified opposition because they translated symbolic inclusion into material consequences that reshape everyday life.<sup>358</sup> Legal and policy gains function as flashpoints precisely because they translate symbolic inclusion into material consequences.

In the United States, early victories in employment protections, identity documen-

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348 Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Seal Press.

349 Ibid.

350 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

351 Ibid.

352 Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Seal Press.

353 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

354 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

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355 Haynes, S. (2020, December, 22). You've Probably Heard of the Red Scare, but the Lesser-Known, Anti-Gay 'Lavender Scare' Is Rarely Taught in Schools. *Time*. Available at: <https://time.com/5922679/lavender-scare-history/>

356 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

357 Ibid.

358 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

tation, and healthcare access signaled a worrying shift from informal tolerance to enforceable rights.<sup>359</sup> These developments are often incremental and uneven, yet they provoke disproportionate response. The objection is not merely to the presence of trans people but to the redistribution of authority that recognition entails.<sup>360</sup> When institutions are required to acknowledge trans identities, the question of who defines reality becomes unavoidable.

A brief comparative glance at the United Kingdom underscores the structural nature of this dynamic. Cases such as *P v S and Cornwall County Council* (1996) and *Goodwin v United Kingdom* (2002) establish protections against discrimination and affirm the legal recognition of trans people.<sup>361</sup> While arising in a different legal context, these decisions generate similar anxieties about documentation, privacy, and social order.<sup>362</sup> The resonance of these concerns across national boundaries suggests that backlash is not simply a product of local culture wars but of shared institutional pressures.<sup>363</sup>

Importantly, these legal developments are often framed by opponents as impositions rather than protections.<sup>364</sup> Rights are recast as mandates and inclusion as coercion. This rhetorical shift lays the groundwork for a new mode of trans-weaponisation, one that no longer relies on depicting trans people as marginal or deviant but as powerful and intrusive.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, a distinct rhetorical pattern began to crystallise. Trans people were increasingly portrayed not as vulnerable minorities but as agents of social disruption.<sup>365</sup> This inversion represents a fundamental transformation in how paranoia operates. This pattern is not accidental. Authoritarian factions have historically-targeted marginalised groups – whether ethnic, religious, or social minorities – casting them as hidden sources of power or social disruption precisely because they occupy lower social status, creating a formulaic scapegoating dynamic that amplifies fear and consolidates authority.<sup>366</sup>

Earlier forms of trans-weaponisation relied on suspicion, secrecy, and the policing of boundaries. The new configuration is reactive. It responds to trans agency by reframing it as overreach. Demands for recognition are characterised as authoritarian, and protections are framed as special treatment. The language of rights is redeployed against those who seek them, often through appeals to freedom of speech, religious liberty, or the protection of children.<sup>367</sup>

This inversion is effective because it aligns with broader narratives of institutional distrust and perceived loss of control. As trans activists claim space within legal, educational, and medical systems, these institutions themselves become targets of increased anxiety.<sup>368</sup> The trans figure functions as a proxy through which fears about cultural change, demographic shifts, and declining authority are expressed.<sup>369</sup>

Crucially, this is not a return to earlier moral panics. It is a recalibration. Trans people are no longer framed primarily as pathological or deceptive but as excessively visible, excessively demanding, and excessively influential.<sup>370</sup> The threat

is no longer hidden. It is systemic. At the same time, older paternalistic tropes persist, framing trans people as incapable of self-determination – ‘mentally ill,’ ‘confused,’ or unable to make decisions for themselves – so that excessive visibility and systemic influence are simultaneously coupled with claims of vulnerability and incompetence.<sup>371</sup>

The persistence of this backlash cannot be explained through policy analysis alone. Its durability lies in effect. Fear, nostalgia, resentment, and moral anxiety circulate through media narratives, political discourse, and everyday conversation, sustaining opposition even in the absence of empirical support.<sup>372</sup>

The concern is manipulated in two forms. First, there is an ostensible concern for the trans individual, framed as protection from harm, confusion, or irreversible decisions. This form of concern presents itself as compassionate and cautious, positioning restriction as care and surveillance as safeguarding.<sup>373</sup> Second, there is a manufactured concern for women and girls, who are depicted as newly ‘threatened’ by the recognition of trans people’s rights.

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359 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. Social Problems. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

360 Ibid.

361 Jenkins, P. (1992). Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain. NCJRS Virtual Library. Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/intimate-enemies-moral-panics-contemporary-great-britain>

362 Ibid.

363 Ibid.

364 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. Social Problems. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

365 Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press. Available at: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/imagining-transgender>

366 Hall, S. et al. (1978). Policing the Crisis. Macmillan. Available at: <https://sociologywynham.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/policing-the-crisis.pdf>

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367 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. Legal Lens. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

368 Ibid.

369 Ibid.

370 Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge. Available at: [https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-undoing\\_gender.pdf](https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-undoing_gender.pdf)

371 Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Seal Press.

372 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. Legal Lens. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

373 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. Legal Lens. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

In this framing, women and girls are cast as a vulnerable population whose safety and dignity must be defended, even if that defense requires the curtailment of another group's rights.<sup>374</sup> Yet, this rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the persistent neglect of other pressing women's issues – such as gender-based violence, the pay gap, and access to reproductive rights – highlighting that the concern is less about women than about controlling social narratives. The more pertinent question then becomes: What is being distracted from or concealed by this performance of protection? Often, these campaigns redirect attention from broader inequalities or institutional failure while simultaneously constructing trans rights as a convenient scapegoat to mobilise moral panic and reinforce hierarchical authority.

These effects are not accidental. They are cultivated through repetition and simplification. Complex social transformations are compressed into emotionally-charged symbols that can be easily circulated and readily understood. The trans figure, once again, becomes a focal point onto which anxieties about family, nation, sexuality, and social change are projected.<sup>375</sup> How-

ever, this projection is particularly potent because it operates under the guise of concern rather than overt hostility. By weaponising the language of care, protection, and common sense, it disarms critique and obscures the underlying power dynamics at play.<sup>376</sup> What appears as reasonable worry or moral responsibility functions instead as a mechanism for exclusion, allowing fear to masquerade as empathy and discrimination to present itself as prudence.<sup>377</sup>

Importantly, this discursive strategy allows backlash movements to position themselves as defensive. Opposition is framed as reluctance, scepticism, or moderation, even as it seeks to roll back existing protections. The language of balance and common sense masks a deeper investment in preserving interpretive control.<sup>378</sup>

The trans rights movement of the 2000s exposes a critical limitation of paranoia as a mode of governance. Paranoia depends on the stability of its object. When the object begins to speak, organise, and define itself, suspicion alone is insufficient; it must be supplemented by new strategies of containment.<sup>379</sup> This instability, then,

makes escalation predictable; as trans communities assert narrative and political authority, actors invested in preserving control respond by intensifying scrutiny, inventing new legal and rhetorical mechanisms, and amplifying moral and cultural anxieties. Opposition is, therefore, not a reactionary accident but a structural imperative where each gain in recognition or self-definition triggers a calibrated – often more expansive – response, ensuring that backlash escalates, evolves, and persists over time.<sup>380</sup>

Trans activism in this period does not merely seek inclusion within existing frameworks. It challenges the assumption that legitimacy flows from institutional recognition downward. By asserting narrative authority, trans people destabilise the epistemic hierarchies that sustained earlier forms of control.<sup>381</sup> The resulting backlash is not an aberration. It is an adaptation.

This adaptation marks the emergence of reactive trans-weaponisation as a distinct phenomenon. It is characterised by inversion, mobilisation, and the strategic deployment of grievance. It does not seek to erase trans existence entirely; it seeks to manage its consequences.<sup>382</sup>

The 2000s, thus, represent a hinge moment in the history of trans-weaponisation. They mark the transition from para-

noia as a preemptive tool of exclusion to paranoia as a reactive strategy of containment. Trans people move from being objects of speculation to subjects of political action, and power responds by reconfiguring the terms of the threat.

This shift has enduring implications. It explains why contemporary backlash is so intensely focused on language, institutions, and authority. It clarifies why gains provoke reaction, and why visibility alone cannot secure safety. Most importantly, it situates current conflicts within a longer trajectory, revealing them not as unprecedented crises but as the latest iteration of a recurring strategy.

Unlike the previous sections – where each historical era could be analysed with the benefit of hindsight – this conclusion may feel less satisfying. It may seem as though we are just beginning to grapple with the core of this moment of backlash we are facing, and many questions remain unresolved. That is because this is an era that is still evolving. In terms of our historical understandings, we are often constrained by the canon we have to work with – the predetermined records, narratives, and frameworks. Up until now, we have been trying to interpret history with someone else's tools. Now, it is up to us to build our own cannon, one that provides the ammunition to write our own stories, assert our own authority, and shape both how

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374 Serano, J. (2007). Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. *Hypatia A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. Available at: doi 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01052\_1.x

375 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. *Legal Lens*. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

376 Serano, J. (2007). Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. *Hypatia A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. Available at: doi 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01052\_1.x

377 Ibid.

378 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. *Legal Lens*. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

379 Foucault, M. (2003). Society must be defended. Picador. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>

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380 Currah, P., Juang, R. M., & Minter, S. P. (2006). *Transgender Rights*. University of Minnesota Press. Available at: <https://www.ncrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Transgender-Rights-Intro-Minter-chapter.pdf>

381 Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203955055/transgender-studies-reader-susan-stryker-stephen-whittle>

382 Ibid.

we understand our present and move towards our future.

This is precisely why, following the publication of this paper, we are launching an open consultation where we will be able to hear directly from the movement

and document the ongoing strategies, experiences, and knowledge of LGBTI+ individuals themselves. The story of reactive trans-weaponisation is not finished, it is being written everyday by those on the frontlines.

### **Section 6 Key findings:**

- The 2000s trans rights movement built on decades of earlier resistance, visibility, and organising; it was a continuation, not a sudden awakening.
- Early trans activism, including uprisings and community organising, established tactics of refusal, disruption, and self-representation.
- Trans women of colour played central roles in early resistance but were frequently sidelined within broader LGBTI+ organising, highlighting persistent intersectional exclusions.
- Digital platforms redistributed narrative authority, enabling trans communities to share knowledge, organise collectively, and assert self-definition.
- The HIV/AIDS crisis and subsequent organising (e.g., ACT UP, Transgender Nation) taught communities strategies of political confrontation, media engagement, and collective resilience.
- Contemporary backlash is part of a recurring structural pattern: gains in trans visibility and agency often provoke strategic opposition, highlighting the need for continued advocacy and protective strategies.
- Gains in recognition and institutional inclusion trigger predictable backlash; visibility alone does not guarantee safety or social acceptance.

### **Section 6 Questions: Reclaiming the Narrative and the Emergence of Reactive Trans-weaponisation**

- How has the long history of trans resistance in your context shaped current strategies for asserting narrative and political authority?
- In what ways do contemporary forms of backlash or “reactive trans-weaponisation” manifest in your country or region?
- What lessons can be drawn from early trans-led organising, digital activism, and community knowledge-sharing for strengthening global trans movements today?
- In what ways do media representations of trans people as “excessively visible” or “disruptive” influence public attitudes and policy decisions in your context?
- What strategies have proved effective in challenging the framing of trans rights as “special treatment” or coercive, and how can these be adapted internationally?
- How do narratives of care, protection, or vulnerability function to justify restrictions on trans rights, and how can organisations expose and counter these strategies?
- What are the most significant ongoing threats to trans communities that emerge when gains in visibility, recognition, or rights provoke backlash?



## Section 7: A Case Study of the Modern Populist Weaponisation of Transgender Identities

In politics, rhetoric is rarely ornamental; it constructs the terrain upon which social and political reality emerges. Before laws are drafted, before budgets are cut, before violence spikes, language quietly redraws the map of who belongs and who threatens.<sup>383 384</sup> Populist and authoritarian leaders understand this well. They don't just argue for policies; they manufacture crises, create enemies, and rehearse exclusion in public speech long before it

becomes formalised in law or embedded within culture.<sup>385</sup> This section moves from theory to application, using the US as a case study to show how the dynamics outlined earlier – such as discourse, power, myth-making, and securitisation – operate in practice.

Unlike the previous sections, which take a historical approach, this section will be putting the theories outlined in the

introduction into action. By drawing on Foucault, Judith Butler, Octavia Butler, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Barthes, this section foregrounds the discursive and cultural processes that make gender a site of power – policed, contested, and mobilised for political ends. The aim is not abstract analysis but a concrete framework for decoding each tactic of trans-weaponisation, showing how rhetoric, myth, and media saturation operate together to produce social and political effects before policy even arrives. In this sense, theory is a practical tool that equips us with the tools needed to anticipate, challenge, and counter the strategies that target trans and gender-diverse communities today.

Specifically, this section will be looking at the 2016 and 2024 Trump campaigns. While these campaigns are neither the only nor the most consequential examples of anti-trans mobilisation, they are appropriate given this paper's Western-centered scope. Additionally, these cases provide a highly-visible and widely-recognised illustration of the dynamics we wish to explore.<sup>386</sup> While similar strategies occur internationally, this case is chosen for its accessibility, recognisability, and relevance to the Western political context examined here. Through consultation, we hope analysis of a more varied set of examples will come forward, and that this

framework provides a starting point for that process.

Read through a Foucauldian lens, this rhetorical process is not merely persuasive but productive. Power, as Foucault argues, does not operate solely through repression or prohibition; it produces the categories, norms, and objects through which reality becomes intelligible.<sup>387</sup> Political rhetoric, in this sense, does not respond to pre-existing social threats. It actively constructs them. The emergence of transgender people as a political problem in the United States can, therefore, be understood not just as a reaction to social change but as a discursive project through which the much more broadly threatened norms of sex, gender, and social order are actively reasserted. The societal debate is massive, but the battleground is chosen and purposefully narrowed.

Over the past decade, the rise of anti-trans rhetoric offers a particularly clear illustration of this process. Long before legislative assaults on trans-inclusive healthcare or education accelerated, transgender people were first made visible as a problem to be solved. The category of the "trans threat" did not predate this discourse; it emerged through it.<sup>388</sup> The 'enemy,' in other words, appeared first in language.

383 Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended*. Picador. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>

384 Hall, S. et al. (1978). *Policing the Crisis*. Macmillan. Available at: <https://sociologytwynham.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/policing-the-crisis.pdf>

385 Ibid.

386 Akram, S. (2025). *Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric*. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

387 Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended*. Picador. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>

388 Ward et. Al. (2025). *Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S.* *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

If we were to use Foucauldian terms, this discourse did not reveal danger; it produced it.<sup>389</sup> Trans women, in particular, were constituted not as individuals but as a category of risk through repetition, conjecture, and moralised framing. Following Barthes work, the “bathroom predator,” therefore, functions as a political myth, condensing diffused anxieties about gender, sexuality, and safety into a figure that appears self-evident and natural.<sup>390</sup> Its utility is not simply discursive and, once established, this myth no longer requires empirical validation; it demands regulation and extermination.

Through repetition, amplification, and emotional framing, a small and diverse population was transformed into a symbolic threat, circulated through speeches, campaign slogans, and media ecosystems until it felt familiar, even commonsensical. Agenda-setting research demonstrates that repeated cues can elevate an issue regardless of its material prevalence.<sup>391</sup> Following Barthes, these repeated portrayals function as political myths; simplified, ideological icons such as the ‘bathroom predator’ that convert complex anxieties about gender and safety into seemingly self-evident truths. Important-

ly, meaning is not fully controlled by the speaker; the significance of these myths emerges through circulation and cultural interpretation. However, read through a Baudrillardian lens, this process does more than elevate salience; it produces hyperreality. Mass media, here, functions not merely as a channel but as a mechanism of construction where the “mass message” creates the perception of threat even before any lived encounter.<sup>392</sup>

Despite transgender people constituting a small fraction of the population, repeated references in political speech and partisan media created a perception of ubiquity untethered from lived experience. Most audiences did not encounter trans people themselves but encountered endlessly repeated simulations of transness – stylised images of threat, disorder, or moral danger that no longer referred to any empirical reality. Frequency, rather than factual relevance, became the driver of perceived importance. In Barthes’ and Baudrillard’s terms, the sign eclipsed the referent and the hyperreal “trans threat” emerged, more politically potent than the reality of trans lives themselves and sustained by circulation, repetition, and cultural interpretation rather than evidence.<sup>393 394</sup>

This dynamic was amplified by the broader socio-economic context of the time. In 2016, the United States was still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, and economic anxiety dominated public concern.<sup>395</sup> Anti-trans rhetoric, while not aligned with voters’ immediate material priorities, functioned as a symbolic tool to channel deeper cultural and emotional fears. By framing trans identities as threats to social order, safety, and traditional norms, campaigns mobilised affective responses that complemented broader insecurities, redirecting attention from economic grievances to perceived cultural instability.<sup>396</sup> Mass media, repetition, and moralised framing intensified this effect, producing a hyperreal perception of danger that felt urgent and widespread, despite the small size of the trans population.<sup>397</sup> In this way, the 2016 campaign illustrates how trans-weaponisation operates by leveraging symbolic threats to shape perception and behaviour, even when the issues at hand are not materially salient.

This process also aligns closely with Foucault’s concept of governmentality. By saturating the public sphere with references

to transgender people as a problem population, political actors shaped how citizens were invited to think, feel, and act in relation to gender variance.<sup>398</sup> The effect was not coercion but internalisation. Transness became something to monitor, debate, and manage, even for individuals with no direct contact with trans people themselves.

The Trump campaigns of 2016 and 2024 sit squarely within this dynamic. Across these cycles, rhetoric functioned less as persuasion than as early signalling. It shaped public imaginaries of danger and belonging well in advance of policy enactment, offering a preview of broader weaponisation strategies to come.<sup>399</sup> Political communication research helps explain why this approach is so effective. Populist discourse consistently operates through sharp oppositions, such as “the people” versus “them,” safety versus threat, normality versus deviance. Language does not merely describe these divisions; it produces them.<sup>400</sup>

Political linguists note that once a group is framed using the grammar of risk, rather than rights, policy trajectories shift ac-

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389 Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended*. Picador. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>

390 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). Roland Barthes: Myth. *Critical Legal Thinking*. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

391 Hall, S. et al. (1978). *Policing the Crisis*. Macmillan. Available at: <https://sociologytwynham.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/policing-the-crisis.pdf>

392 Zalta, E. & Nodelman, U. (2019). Jean Baudrillard. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>

393 Ibid.

394 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). Roland Barthes: Myth. *Critical Legal Thinking*. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

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395 Price, S.F. et al. (2020). The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Elections on transgender and Gender Diverse People. *Sex Res Social Policy*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34925634/>

396 Ibid.

397 Shawlin, S. M. (2019). Critically analyze the theory of Jean Baudrillard. *Academia*. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically\\_analyze\\_the\\_theory\\_of\\_Jean\\_Baudrillard](https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically_analyze_the_theory_of_Jean_Baudrillard)

398 Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

399 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump’s Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

400 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

cordingly.<sup>401</sup> Transgender people were increasingly discussed using securitising language, threat verbs, spatial metaphors of invasion, and protective frames centred on children. This linguistic shift marks the moment at which transness moves from a civil rights issue into the domain of security governance. This transition is shown by the exponential increase in anti-trans bills introduced across US legislatures following heightened hostile rhetoric and by analyses revealing that proposed legislation embeds securitising threat language long before enactment.<sup>402</sup> Read alongside Judith Butler's account of gender as a regulatory fiction maintained through repetition and policing, this shift also helps explain why appeals to protection and normalisation so often reappear precisely when gender norms are unsettled.<sup>403</sup> The work of securitisation is done not only to justify intervention but to reassert the boundaries of intelligible gender itself.

Empirical studies of Trump's speeches underscore this pattern. A UCLA analysis of campaign rhetoric found a marked increase in terms that linguistically-construct out-groups across election cycles,

alongside intensified negative framing.<sup>404</sup> Sociolinguistically, such language positions certain populations not simply as different but as dangers to "you," to "the people," to the imagined moral centre of the nation.<sup>405</sup> Emotionally-charged and adversarial speech becomes the engine of mobilisation, particularly in election contexts where fear travels faster than nuance.

Longitudinal analyses of state-level legislation also show that the sharp increase in anti-trans bills after 2020 was preceded by several years of intensifying rhetorical hostility at the national level.<sup>406</sup> This sequencing supports a Foucauldian reading of discourse as a precondition for governance rather than its byproduct. Rhetoric did not accompany legislative action; it prepared the conditions under which such action could proceed with minimal resistance.<sup>407</sup> From a Barthesian perspective, once the story took root, it evolved beyond its original political context, shifting as it circulated and acquiring new layers of meaning.<sup>408</sup> The rhetoric now pervades culture, shaping perceptions, anxieties, and social norms independently

of elite intent. It is no longer simply a tool imposed from above; it has become a circulating myth that structures how people interpret gender, authority, and belonging.

Trump's own rhetorical trajectory further illustrates the instrumental nature of this weaponisation. In 2016, when asked about North Carolina's proposed bathroom bill, Trump dismissed the issue entirely, "There have been very few complaints... People go. They use the bathroom that they feel is appropriate."<sup>409</sup> At this stage, transness had not yet been fully constituted as a usable symbolic threat within his populist repertoire. This highlights a key feature of populist weaponisation where, if a target does not serve the immediate goal of winning votes or consolidating support, it may remain dormant or ignored. The mobilisation of LGBTI+ people is often transactional, a means to an end rather than a primary objective.<sup>410</sup> Weaponising their identities is deployed strategically to signal loyalty, stoke affective engagement, or distract from other issues; it is rarely the ultimate goal in itself.

Over time, however, trans identities were folded into a broader narrative of cultural threat. During the 2016 campaign, Trump's messaging focused heavily on immigration and economic grievances.<sup>411</sup>

Over subsequent cycles, the scope widened. Gender nonconformity and cultural change entered the frame, not always explicitly, at first, but as part of an expanding constellation of anxieties. Economic insecurity, shifting gender norms, and identity politics were collapsed into a single external menace.<sup>412</sup> Transness, in this telling, became one more sign that the world had slipped out of recognisable order. This framing should feel familiar, as it echoes the Cold War-era rhetoric in which deviations from rigid social norms were cast as indicators of societal decay and moral corrosion. Then, the language of threat framed 'sexual deviance' as evidence of ideological weakness; now, transness occupies a similar symbolic position, recast as 'woke' excess – a harbinger of cultural collapse as well as a sign that familiar hierarchies and certainties are dissolving. Across these periods, the underlying logic of making gender the canvas onto which broader societal fears are projected is the same.

Once in office and as the political utility of anti-trans discourse became clearer, this position reversed sharply. Within months, his administration rescinded Obama-era federal protections for transgender students, and later advanced policies permitting federally-funded agencies to exclude LGBTI+ parents. This shift is further exemplified by the 2017 ban on transgender

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401 Ibid.

402 Ibid.

403 Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge

404 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

405 Ibid.

406 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

407 Kelly, Mark. (2014). *Foucault and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b28>

408 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). Roland Barthes: Myth. *Critical Legal Thinking*. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

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409 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

410 Ibid.

411 Price, S.F. et al. (2020). The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Elections on transgender and Gender Diverse People. *Sex Res Social Policy*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34925634/>

412 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. *Social Problems*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

individuals serving in the military. Brought together, these decisions signalled a rapid pivot from rhetorical signaling to formal policy action. This shift illustrates a central Foucauldian insight that power does not defend fixed moral positions. It adapts discourses according to their capacity to produce order, loyalty, and governable subjects.<sup>413</sup>

This move aligns with a broader pattern observed by scholars of right-wing populism globally. Gender and sexual minorities are frequently framed as destabilising forces precisely because they unsettle fixed ideas of identity, hierarchy, and belonging. In many contexts, this manifests through so-called “anti-gender” movements that depict concepts like gender identity as existential threats to social cohesion.<sup>414</sup> The language varies by country, but the structure is strikingly consistent. At a deeper level, this makes sense within authoritarian logic where regimes that seek to consolidate power rely on reducing individuality and enforcing conformity. Those who visibly resist or destabilise norms – especially around bodies, gender, and identity – become primary targets.<sup>415</sup> Seen this way, it is unsurprising that trans and gender-diverse people were among

the first populations to be singled out in these campaigns.

In the United States, this discourse often coalesces around the idea of “gender ideology.” Here, gender diversity is cast not as lived reality but as a moral hazard, especially to children and families. This framing draws on classic dynamics of moral panic, a sociological process in which a group is constructed as disproportionately dangerous relative to any empirical evidence.<sup>416</sup> As we have seen, throughout history these dynamics repeatedly emerge whenever societal anxieties are projected onto marginalised bodies – from the rigidly-policed separate spheres of the Victorian era to the eugenics campaigns of the Nazi period to the Satanic Panic and pulp horror of the 1990s – demonstrating how fear, rather than evidence, often drives political and cultural action.

This is because, once panic takes hold, political mobilisation becomes easier.<sup>417</sup> Protection, tradition, and safety can be invoked to justify exclusion while presenting hostility as responsibility. Following Judith Butler, this panic can be read as a response to the exposure of gender’s performative instability. Bodies that fail to

repeat normative scripts threaten the coherence of the binary itself and are, therefore, rendered deceptive, monstrous, or dangerous.<sup>418</sup>

Electoral research suggests that emotionally-primed voters require less policy detail to remain mobilised. By establishing transgender people as a moral and cultural threat early in the rhetorical cycle, campaigns reduce the need for coherent legislative platforms later.<sup>419</sup> Fear be-

comes the infrastructure on which electoral loyalty is built.

Research on elections worldwide shows how effective this strategy can be. Politicians routinely deploy fears of ‘gender ideology’ to position sexual and gender minorities as threats to national values, winning support from constituencies already unsettled by rapid cultural change.<sup>420</sup> The emotional work is done by the rhetoric long before voters encounter a specific policy proposal.

### European Anti-Gender Movements and Their Influence on the US

Scholars of moral entrepreneurship observe that, once a narrative proves electorally useful, it becomes portable across contexts. European anti-gender movements, particularly in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and France, have long framed gender diversity as a threat to children, family, and national identity. These movements were among the first to deploy moral panic and symbolic enemies to generate public support for restrictive policies. These anti-gender frames – developed in European populist movements – were rapidly adapted to US political discourse once they proved to be electorally useful; this demonstrates how symbolic enemies can be imported, localised, and redeployed independent of domestic empirical conditions.<sup>421</sup>

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413 Hoy, David.(1986). Foucault: a Critical Reader. Oxford: Blackwell.

414 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. Social Problems. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

415 Cannon Loren. (2024). The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

416 Ward et. Al. (2025). Moral Panic and the Legislative Attack on Transgender Rights: state-level pathways to anti-trans law making in the U.S. Social Problems. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf076>

417 Ibid

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418 Butler, J. (1993) Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”. Routledge

419 Cannon Loren. (2024). The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

420 Ibid.

421 Ibid.

By the 2024 Trump campaign, this strategy crystallised into a slogan that circulated widely across rallies, merchandise, and digital advertising. Trump and allied Republican organisations spent an estimated \$65 to \$95 million on anti-transgender television advertising in the final months of the campaign alone.<sup>422</sup> The scale of this messaging far exceeded any plausible relationship to the size or social impact of the trans population itself.

One of the most prominent examples was the “Kamala is for they/them, President Trump is for you” television advertisement commissioned by the Trump campaign and allied Republican groups. These ads took a 2019 interview clip in which Vice President Kamala Harris expressed support for gender-affirming care for incarcerated transgender people and juxtaposed it with visuals designed to signal cultural excess and moral threat; the punchline slogan recast her perceived position as alien or hostile to “you,” the normative viewer.<sup>423</sup> The campaign ran more than 30,000 times across battleground states and aired during widely-viewed broadcasts – such as NFL and college football games and NASCAR races – far exceeding the frequency of many other

ads in the campaign cycle and illustrating a deliberate amplification strategy.<sup>424</sup>

Though deceptively simple, this phrase exemplifies a highly-efficient populist tactic documented across electoral contexts. A political opponent is linguistically fused to a marginalised out-group, while the speaker claims exclusive alignment with a presumed normative majority.<sup>425</sup>

This ad is important not because it was the most persuasive on policy – studies indicate it had mixed or minimal effect on voting intention – but because of what its circulation tells us about the role of discourse in political rhetoric.<sup>426</sup> Research on the campaign shows that, despite transgender rights ranking low among voters’ self-reported priorities, the sheer volume of anti-trans messaging shifted the public narrative environment by attaching trans identities to threat frames and cultural anxiety, eroding support for trans people independently of direct policy debates.<sup>427</sup>

From a theoretical standpoint, this scale of messaging exemplifies how the media ecosystem functions as a producer of political reality rather than a passive reflector of it.<sup>428</sup> The ad’s saturation did not follow a

groundswell of public concern; it helped manufacture that concern by repeatedly inserting a constructed ‘trans threat’ into everyday cultural space. In other words, culture is upstream from politics and intensive media flows shaped what counted as salient political information in advance of legislative or electoral decision-making.

Through a Baudrillardian lens, this represents the production of hyperreality.<sup>429</sup>

Most voters did not encounter trans people; they encountered endlessly repeated simulations of transness as threat, excess, and disorder. These images no longer referred to lived realities. They functioned as self-sustaining signs, politically potent precisely because they were detached from empirical experience. This disconnect from reality is proven when we consider the fact that approximately 9.3% of the US identifies as LGBTI+, and less than 1% identify as trans.<sup>430</sup>

### In-Groups and Out-Groups

Populist strategies often rely on dividing the world into in-groups (‘us’) and out-groups (‘them’). The in-group is framed as virtuous, deserving, and protective of tradition, while the out-group is a moral, cultural, or political threat. Importantly, out-groups rarely pose concrete harm; their function is symbolic. They mobilise emotional loyalty, simplify complex anxieties by providing a visible target, and define the boundaries of belonging through adherence to prescribed norms. In anti-trans populism, trans and gender-diverse people are cast as the out-group, depicted as threatening children, social order, and cultural values. This symbolic framing allows leaders to activate broad affective responses and shape perceptions of danger without engaging in detailed policy debate, turning identity itself into a mechanism of political control.<sup>431</sup>

422 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump’s Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

423 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump’s Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

424 Ibid.

425 Ibid.

426 Ibid.

427 Ibid.

428 Shawlin, S. M. (2019). Critically analyze the theory of Jean Baudrillard. *Academia*. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically\\_analyze\\_the\\_theory\\_of\\_Jean\\_Baudrillard](https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically_analyze_the_theory_of_Jean_Baudrillard)

429 Shawlin, S. M. (2019). Critically analyze the theory of Jean Baudrillard. *Academia*. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically\\_analyze\\_the\\_theory\\_of\\_Jean\\_Baudrillard](https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically_analyze_the_theory_of_Jean_Baudrillard)

430 Transgender Legislation Tracker. (2026). Available at: <https://translegislation.com/>

431 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump’s Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

Linguistically, the slogan performs several operations simultaneously. It collapses gender diversity into a single pronoun pair, strips it of grammatical function, and reconstitutes it as a symbolic marker of cultural alienation. 'They' comes to signify trans people, but also elites, liberals, anyone who is not 'you' or even the global cabal. A catch-all for perceived outsiders or threats. 'You,' by contrast, anchors the reader as the heteronormative majority, as America itself, and as the guardian of traditional values. At its core, the slogan

operates by layering multiple anxieties. Gender acts as the topline fear, while political, cultural, and global anxieties are evoked simultaneously. This multi-level ambiguity allows it to resonate broadly, signal transphobia without naming targets explicitly, and generate affective loyalty grounded in belonging and moral positioning. 'They/them' ceases to denote people and instead comes to signify elite imposition, moral confusion, and loss of control. The phrase "for you" does not specify policy.<sup>432</sup> It asserts ownership of belonging.

They / Them (Out-group / Threat)	You (In-group / Anchor)
Trans people (gender nonconformity)	Heteronormative self / listener
Liberals / 'woke' elites	Traditional American identity
Anyone outside your moral/cultural circle	'Normal' values, morality, and lifestyle
Global cabal / shadowy controllers	Nation, community, home, belonging
Cultural and social othering	Safety, familiarity, legitimacy

432 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

From a Derridean perspective, the aggression of this construction signals fragility rather than certainty.<sup>433</sup> The more unstable the category becomes, the more forcefully it is defended through exclusion. Yet, the category remains fundamentally ambiguous. Who counts as 'you' – and what actions or beliefs are required to belong – is never fully defined. This ambiguity allows populist rhetoric to continually adjust the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion while maintaining the appearance of moral clarity.<sup>434</sup> The binary is shored up by expelling ambiguity, even as ambiguity is inseparable from the category itself.

Research on populist slogans shows that such constructions rely on recognition rather than persuasion. They function as affective shortcuts, activating pre-existing anxieties without requiring explanation.<sup>435</sup> In this formulation, voters are invited to feel rather than evaluate. Belonging is framed as zero-sum and protection as conditional.

Crucially, the slogan also allows transphobic signalling without explicit hostility. By avoiding overt slurs or policy references,

it maintains rhetorical deniability while still mobilising exclusionary sentiment. This ambiguity also provides a built-in shield against criticism. The lack of slurs means that, when challenged, proponents can dismiss concerns as oversensitivity or misunderstanding, framing opponents as "missing the point" rather than addressing the harm of the slogan.<sup>436</sup> This ambiguity is a defining feature of contemporary populist communication, enabling broad circulation across mainstream and extremist spaces alike.

Such othering is a recurring feature of right-wing populist rhetoric. Studies show that simplified identity markers – pronouns, labels, or slogans – are frequently used to generate emotional resonance, especially among voters who feel their cultural position is under siege.<sup>437</sup> This resonance can be particularly powerful among voters who, on average, have supported equality and human rights, yet feel unsettled by rapid social change, shifting norms, or generational shifts.<sup>438</sup> Populist messaging offers a simple emotional framework in which complex anxieties about identity, belonging, or societal transformation can be expressed and

433 Mendie, J. & Udofia, S. (2020 July). A Philosophical Analysis of Jacques Derrida's Contributions to Language and Meaning. *PINISSI Discretion Review*. Available at: DOI:10.26858/pdr.v4i1.14528

434 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

435 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

436 Ibid.

437 Ibid.

438 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

contained. It is not only a tactic of exclusion; it is a psychological invitation to feel secure in a familiar moral order.

This rhetoric does not circulate in isolation. It is reinforced by a broader ecosystem of misinformation that amplifies fear and hostility toward trans people. False narratives portraying trans individuals as violent or predatory have proliferated in right-wing online spaces despite overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary; trans people are often the victims of hate crimes, not the perpetrators. Among the most consequential of these is the “grooming” conspiracy theory, which falsely claims that LGBTI+ advocates are engaged in the sexualisation of children.<sup>439</sup> Crucially, this rhetoric selectively mobilises concern with the same level of public outrage or political intervention which is rarely directed towards child welfare in other contexts. This disparity demonstrates that the concern is not genuinely about children or the protection of vulnerable people.

These stories do more than misinform, they recalibrate moral instincts and a cultural baseline. Roland Barthes’ theory of myth shows how these narratives turn political choices into ‘natural’ truths, making opposition to trans rights feel like an instinctive moral duty rather than a strategic stance. By framing opposition to trans rights as protection of children and tradition, political actors can recode

their exclusion as virtue. Campaign strategies increasingly draw on these emotional triggers, reinforcing the idea that being anti-trans is synonymous with being pro-safety.

One particularly revealing extension of this logic is the phenomenon known as ‘transvestigation.’ This conspiracy discourse claims that public figures are secretly transgender, regardless of evidence.<sup>440</sup> While it may appear fringe, transvestigation intersects deeply with mainstream transphobic and misogynistic narratives. Notably, its targets are disproportionately women; men are rarely – if ever – accused of being trans. This is because men already occupy the culturally-normative position of authority, power, and legitimacy.<sup>441</sup> In other words, accusing a man of being trans would not threaten traditional gender hierarchies in the same way.

Furthermore, the accused women are often those who occupy visible power – frequently due to their relationships to male figures of authority. Implicit in these accusations is the suggestion that these women are taking up too much space, performing authority in ways deemed incompatible with ‘true’ femininity; their power is read as evidence that they cannot be women. It operates by taking ordinary images, bodies, or behaviours and reinterpreting them through a lens of suspicion, transforming gender variance into a hidden threat.

Read through Octavia Butler’s analysis of bodily governance and futurity, this phenomenon functions as a disciplinary mechanism that determines which bodies are permitted legitimacy, inheritance, and continuity. Casting prominent women as secretly transgender destabilises their symbolic authority, marking deviation from rigid gender norms as disqualifying.<sup>442</sup>

Accusations that Michelle Obama and other prominent women are secretly transgender have circulated widely across online platforms despite having no factual basis.<sup>443</sup> These claims are best understood not as isolated conspiracy theories but as extensions of a broader discursive environment in which gender variance is weaponised as a marker of deception and illegitimacy. The goal is not to assert a believable alternative identity but to destabilise the target’s symbolic authority.

Transvestigation operates through interpretive overreach. Ordinary bodily features, photographic angles, or expressions are subjected to hyper-scrutiny and reinterpreted through a transphobic lens.<sup>444</sup> This practice mirrors earlier racialised and misogynistic conspiracies, but

with gender identity functioning as the primary site of suspicion.<sup>445</sup> Trans identity is simultaneously invoked as scandal and denied legitimacy as lived reality.

Michelle Obama is a particularly potent target because she occupies multiple symbolic roles: a Black woman, a political spouse, and a figure associated with institutional continuity.<sup>446</sup> Casting her as secretly transgender serves several discursive functions at once. It undermines political lineage, destabilises gender norms, racialises suspicion, and reinforces the idea that deviation from rigid femininity signals deceit.

Importantly, transvestigation reinforces anti-trans rhetoric even as it erases actual transgender people. It constructs transness as an accusation rather than an identity – a form of symbolic contamination that can be applied to delegitimise anyone. In doing so, it strengthens the cultural logic that gender nonconformity is inherently untrustworthy, dangerous, or fraudulent.

Scholars of conspiracy culture note that such narratives flourish in environments where official institutions are already

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439 Ibid.

440 Ibid.

441 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

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442 McIntyre et. al. (2010 November). Reflections on Octavia E. Butler. *Science Fiction Studies*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746443>

443 Price, S.F. et al. (2020). The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Elections on transgender and Gender Diverse People. *Sex Res Social Policy*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34925634/>

444 Ibid.

445 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

446 Price, S.F. et al. (2020). The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Elections on transgender and Gender Diverse People. *Sex Res Social Policy*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34925634/>

framed as corrupt and deceptive.<sup>447</sup> Gender becomes a tool through which broader anxieties about power, authority, and social change are expressed, allowing conspiratorial thinking to merge seamlessly with mainstream political hostility toward trans communities.<sup>448</sup>

These dynamics mirror the operating logic of anti-rights movements more broadly. Complex identities are flattened into symbols of ideological threat, mobilising supporters while diverting attention from structural inequalities and material conditions.

The consequences of this rhetorical environment are not abstract. Studies examining the impact of the 2016 election on transgender and gender-diverse communities found that rhetorical marginalisation alone, even in the absence of immediate policy change, significantly increased experiences of stigma, fear, and mental health harm.<sup>449</sup> Language mattered because it reshaped the social climate. When trans identities are repeatedly framed as dangerous or destabilising, discrimination becomes easier to justify and exclusion easier to normalise.

Empirical data further shows that spikes in anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric are often accompanied by increases in hate crimes and harassment.<sup>450</sup> Media ecosystems amplify political frames, producing feedback loops of dehumanisation that can precede material exclusion, policy rollbacks, and the erosion of protections. Speech becomes scaffolding for harm.<sup>451</sup>

In the context of the Trump campaigns of 2016 and 2024, anti-trans rhetoric operated as a discursive precursor to structural marginalisation. From campaign slogans to conspiratorial narratives, language functioned as an early warning system, signalling who would be targeted next and how that targeting would be justified.<sup>452</sup>

Taken together, the theoretical frameworks outlined in this paper allow us to understand moments like the 2016 and 2024 US presidential campaigns not as aberrations but as flashpoints: moments where long-running discursive processes become briefly visible in their most concentrated form. Flashpoints are not sudden eruptions of hostility; they are condensations of meanings, anxieties, and



447 Cannon Loren. (2024). *The Politicization of Trans Identity: Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling*. Lexington Books. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969\\_Politicization\\_of\\_Trans\\_Identity\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Backlash\\_Scapegoating\\_and\\_Dog-Whistling\\_from\\_Obergefell\\_to\\_Bostock](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390018969_Politicization_of_Trans_Identity_An_Analysis_of_Backlash_Scapegoating_and_Dog-Whistling_from_Obergefell_to_Bostock)

448 Ibid.

449 Price, S.F. et al. (2020). The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Elections on transgender and Gender Diverse People. *Sex Res Social Policy*. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34925634/>

450 Barwell, J. (2025, April 28). The Weaponisation of Identity Politics. *Legal Lens*. Available at: <https://legallens.org.uk/the-weaponisation-of-identity-politics/>

451 Ibid.

452 Akram, S. (2025). Populist and Transgender Rights: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric. *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Available at: <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1032>

power relations that have been patiently assembled over time.

Foucault helps us see that what surfaces during these moments is not simply prejudice but the productive work of power. Years of rhetorical repetition construct categories of threat that can be rapidly activated when political conditions demand it.<sup>453</sup> By the time a campaign openly centres trans identities as an object of fear or ridicule, the groundwork has already been laid. The category is available, intelligible, and governable.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity clarifies why gender becomes such a potent site during these flashpoints. Trans identities expose the contingency of gender norms that must otherwise appear natural and inevitable. When political actors feel that social order is unstable, disciplining gender performance becomes a way of restoring coherence.<sup>454</sup> Flashpoints, therefore, reveal moments when the illusion of stability requires especially-aggressive enforcement.

Derrida allows us to recognise the intensity of backlash as a symptom of instability

rather than confidence.<sup>455</sup> The more precarious the categories of 'man,' 'woman,' and 'normal' become, the more urgently they must be defended. Flashpoints mark the point in which meaning itself feels threatened, prompting intensified efforts to fix what is, by nature, unfixed.

Baudrillard explains why these moments feel overwhelming. Flashpoints are amplified through hyperreal environments in which simulations of threat eclipse lived reality.<sup>456</sup> Barthes adds that these circulating images and slogans operate as political myths where simplified, ideological icons naturalise anxieties about gender, safety, and social order, making them appear self-evident.<sup>457</sup> The political potency of trans-weaponisation during campaigns does not depend on the presence of trans people in voters' lives but on the saturation of images, slogans, and narratives that feel real precisely because they circulate everywhere.

Octavia Butler, finally, situates these flashpoints within longer histories of bodily governance, racialisation, and futurity.<sup>458</sup> Moments like the 2016 and 2024 campaigns are not only about the present;

they are about who is imagined as belonging to the future. Flashpoints surface when certain bodies are cast as incompatible with continuity, progress, or survival and, therefore, framed as problems to be managed or eliminated.

Seen through these combined lenses, the 2016 and 2024 US presidential campaigns did not suddenly 'turn' on trans people. It activated a discursive infrastructure already in place. The campaign functioned as a stress test for gender norms, revealing how quickly symbolic enemies can be mobilised when political incentives align.

Understanding these dynamics matters because flashpoints are predictive. When rhetoric intensifies in familiar patterns – securitisation, myth-making, performative policing, and hyperreal saturation – it signals not only electoral strategy but the likely direction of policy, social hostility, and institutional withdrawal to follow. Language becomes an early warning system.

The value of this theoretical framework, then, lies not only in explaining what happened but in recognising when it is about to happen again. Flashpoints mark the moment when discourse hardens into structure. If we know how to read them, we are no longer surprised by their outcomes.

The analytical framework developed here offers a tool for identifying similar patterns across populist contexts. By tracking emotional tone – the 'us-versus-them' constructions and the symbolic roles assigned to trans identities in political speech and media discourse – it becomes possible to anticipate where rhetoric is

likely to harden into policy and social exclusion. The passage from speech to structure is not accidental. It is the central mechanism through which gender is weaponised in contemporary populist politics.

This section has applied the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier to a concrete case study, showing how trans identities are weaponised through populist discourse, media amplification, and symbolic threat. By tracing the trajectory of anti-trans rhetoric from campaign rhetoric to policy interventions, and examining phenomena such as transvestigation, grooming conspiracies, and hyperreal representations of threat, this section demonstrates how language, symbolism, and affective mobilisation produce real-world harm. The case study also highlights how historical anxieties, economic context, and cultural narratives intersect to make gender a site of political leverage, revealing the mechanisms through which trans people have become targets.

The purpose of this case study is not to suggest that the US is the only or most important site of anti-trans mobilisation but to provide a familiar, analytically-accessible example that illustrates how the dynamics of trans-weaponisation operate in practice. By examining one well-documented context in detail, this section shows how theory can be used as a practical tool to decode the methods by which populist actors manufacture fear, construct symbolic enemies, and translate rhetoric into policy and social exclusion.

Importantly, the framework developed here is transferable. Scholars, activists, and policymakers can apply these ana-

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453 Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended*. Picador. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/d/37602/files/2016/01/Foucault-Society-must-be-defended14032016.pdf>

454 Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge. Available at: [https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-undoing\\_gender.pdf](https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-undoing_gender.pdf)

455 Derrida, J. (2016). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

456 Shawlin, S. M. (2019). *Critically analyze the theory of Jean Baudrillard*. Academia. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically\\_analyze\\_the\\_theory\\_of\\_Jean\\_Baudrillard](https://www.academia.edu/40766258/Critically_analyze_the_theory_of_Jean_Baudrillard)

457 Hammouri, S. (2020 June 12). *Roland Barthes: Myth*. Critical Legal Thinking. Available at: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/06/12/roland-barthes-myth/>

458 Butler, O. (2023) *Collected Works*. New York: Library of America.

lytical tools to other contexts to anticipate emerging flashpoints, understand the mechanics of populist mobilisation, and develop strategies to counteract the weaponisation of gender. By combining

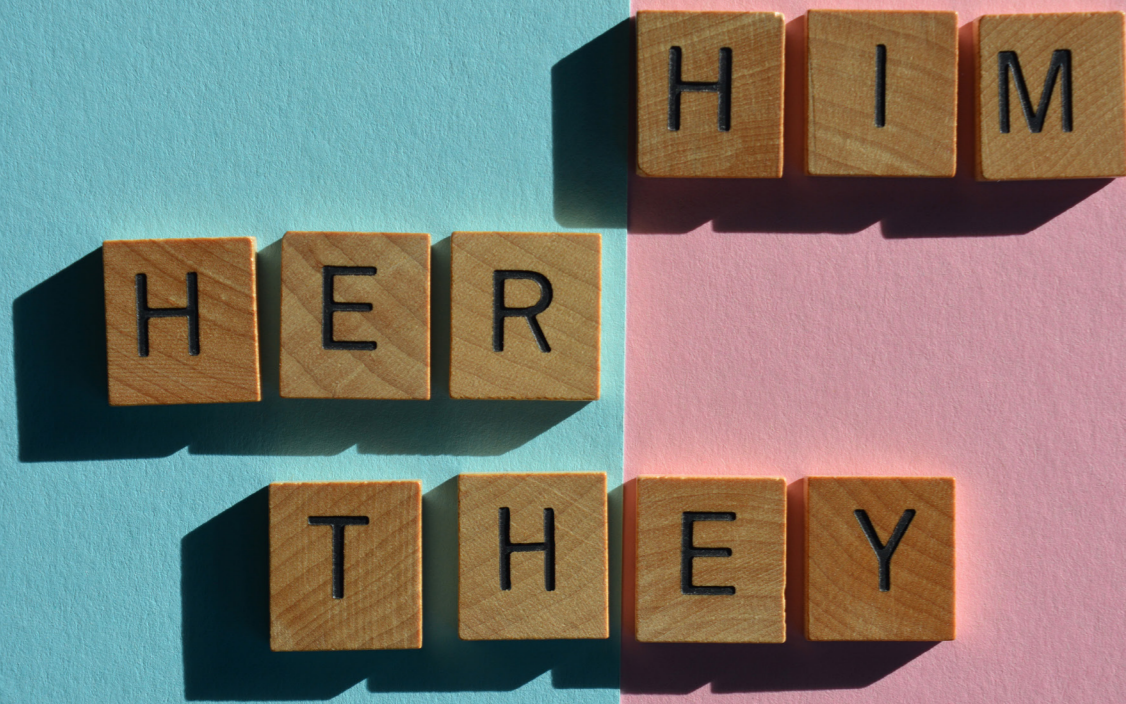
discourse analysis, media scrutiny, and theoretical insight, this approach allows others to identify patterns of threat construction before they crystallise into law, policy, or entrenched cultural norms.

### **Section 7 Key Findings:**

- Political campaigns actively produce trans identities as a category of risk.
- Media saturation, repetition, and digital platforms produce a hyperreal perception of trans people as ubiquitous threats, detaching public discourse from actual demographics or lived experiences.
- Anti-trans rhetoric leverages affective responses, framing trans and gender-diverse people as outsiders threatening children, family, or national values.
- The weaponisation of trans identities is often deployed strategically to signal alignment with in-groups, distract from other issues, or consolidate political power, rather than as an end in itself.
- Conspiratorial narratives alleging that prominent women are secretly trans function to destabilise authority, enforce gender norms, and extend anti-trans messaging.
- Tracking rhetoric, symbolic framing, and affective cues allows civil society and policymakers to anticipate emerging threats, providing a tool to intervene before discourse hardens into law, policy, or entrenched cultural exclusion.

### **Section 7 Questions: Modern Populist Weaponisation of Transgender Identities**

- How have anti-trans narratives in your context been constructed through rhetoric, myth, or symbolic framing?
- In what ways do political actors use language to mobilise public opinion against trans and gender-diverse communities?
- Are there examples of “transvestigation” or similar conspiratorial narratives in your context, and what social or political functions do they serve?
- What flashpoints (elections, policy debates, public campaigns) have triggered intensified anti-trans rhetoric, and what were the consequences?
- How do economic, social, or cultural anxieties intersect with anti-trans mobilisation in your local context?
- How can civil society organisations track early warning signs of emerging backlash against trans and gender-diverse people?
- What strategies have proven effective in countering populist anti-trans narratives, symbolic threats, or moral panic in your local context?



## Section 8: Conclusion

We have now walked through centuries of trans-weaponisation, tracing each era as a distinct strand while observing how they intertwine, overlap, and build upon one another. Each period brings a different dimension of trans-weaponisation to the forefront. While this analysis focuses on trans experiences for clarity, these cycles of fear, control, and social policing have reverberated across the broader LGBTI+ community as well. The cycle repeats but with increasing complexity; the same anxieties about gender and social order are refracted through new cultural, scientific, and political lenses, creating ever more sophisticated mechanisms of control. The same fears resurface, reinvented.

Across these cycles, one pattern is unmistakable: Trans women bear the brunt of these attacks. Why? Because the policing

of gender has always been inseparable from the policing of women's bodies, roles, and autonomy. Trans women become the most visible locus through which societies enforce not only gender norms but also broader anxieties about femininity, authority, and social order. Yet, while trans women are hypervisible targets, trans men have also suffered – often through erasure and invisibility. Their experiences of marginalisation are less publicly dramatised but no less profound. Trans men have been ignored or denied recognition. This reinforces the same systems of control, constraining who can occupy power, public space, or social legitimacy. Gender as a whole is at stake; transphobia is inseparable from misogyny, meaning women – cis and trans alike – remain vulnerable to the same systems of control.

To reiterate, this exploration was conducted from a primarily-Western perspective, reflecting the data available and the expertise we have to tell this story. While this focus inevitably limited the scope, it was never intended to suggest that trans history and identity are confined to the West; on the contrary, they are inherently global. Following consultation, there remains a clear intention to expand this analysis through continued engagement with individuals and organisations operating across diverse cultural and political contexts. Incorporating these contributions would allow for a more comprehensive, nuanced, and representative account of trans histories and experiences worldwide, addressing the limitations of a Western-centered starting point and ensuring that untold stories continue to enter the record.

This process underscores a broader principle and reminds us of how mediated our knowledge can be. Access to trans experiences has been filtered through medical literature, psychiatric evaluation, and journalistic accounts – each mediated by authority and bias. The lesser-known stories presented here remind us that the weaponisation of trans people did not happen suddenly; it was carefully constructed, targeted, and sustained. Understanding this continuity reveals a counterintuitive truth that the evolution of anti-trans tactics demonstrates the effectiveness of the movement they are fighting. They have adapted, refined, and amplified their strategies because, historically, this fight has been one they believed they could win.

But history also offers guidance. If we step back and consider the patterns, lessons, and vulnerabilities exposed through these centuries, we can begin to anticipate and counter the strategies of trans-weaponisation today. Recognition, solidarity, and strategic recalibration – not apology or defeat – are required. By understanding the enduring logic and layered complexity of transphobia, we can equip ourselves to confront it more effectively and to protect not only trans people but the broader project of gender justice that remains at the heart of these conflicts.

Ultimately, the work presented here is both a foundation and an invitation. While we have mapped centuries of trans-weaponisation and traced the patterns that continue to shape vulnerability and resistance, the story is far from complete. Future contributions – from those living and working in underrepresented contexts – will be essential to fully understand the global scope and complexity of these histories. We have now told the uniquely Western story, but the global history of trans-weaponisation is undeniably much greater. By engaging with these voices, we can create a richer, more representative record that not only honours past experiences but also strengthens collective strategies for resisting transphobia and advancing gender justice worldwide.

These cycles are not our destiny. They are patterns to study, anticipate, and counter.

### **Section 8 Key Findings:**

- Trans-weaponisation is not a new phenomenon; it has evolved over centuries, with recurring patterns of fear, surveillance, and social control adapting to new cultural, scientific, and political contexts.
- Trans women are primary targets because policing their bodies intersects with societal anxieties about femininity, authority, and women's roles, affecting cis and trans women alike.
- Although less publicly targeted, trans men experience erasure and denial of recognition, which reinforces the same structural control and limits access to power, visibility, and social legitimacy.
- The persistence and adaptation of anti-trans strategies demonstrate their perceived effectiveness and deliberate design.
- Engaging with the global community is essential to create a nuanced, comprehensive, and globally representative account of trans histories and experiences to inform the work of the Commission.
- Transphobia is inseparable from broader gendered power dynamics; protecting trans communities advances gender justice for all whose identities challenge normative hierarchies.

### **Section 8 Questions: Conclusion**

- How do patterns of trans-weaponisation observed in Western contexts resonate (if at all) with experiences in your country or region?
- What historical or contemporary mechanisms of social control against trans and gender-diverse people are most visible in your region?
- Are there examples of local trans activism that have successfully anticipated or countered cycles of weaponisation?
- How cycles of fear, surveillance, or moral panic shape the ability of trans and gender-diverse people to occupy public space or leadership roles?
- What support, collaboration, or resources are most needed to anticipate and counter anti-trans strategies while advancing LGBTI+ rights globally?

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