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Transphobic truth markets: Comparing trans-hostile discourses in British trans-exclusionary radical feminist and US right-wing movements

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Abstract

British “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist” (TERF) discourse has often been contextualised in fringe radical feminist thought, but its similarities to and alliances with right-wing trans-exclusionary movements in the US are notable (McClellan, 2020). To understand the place of TERF discourse in an international wave of trans-hostility, it is necessary to understand how it converges with and differs from explicitly conservative counterparts. I place TERF discourse in comparison to trans-exclusionary discourses of the American Right (AR) using a Critical Frame Analysis, investigating the extent of shared themes and the role of ontological discourses across cases. I find that TERF and AR discourses converge heavily on frames and have a shared ontology, but draw on different repertoires to bolster their claims. Combining Harsin’s (2014) truth markets and Smith’s (1995) ideological code theory, I show how an ideological-code-like structure demonises and ontologically delegitimises trans people, demonstrating how reactionary frames can be granted cross-ideological appeal.

Keywords

Trans-exclusionary politics, Gender ontologies, TERFs, Truth markets, Ideological codes

Introduction

In October 2022, a review of laws relating to gender recognition and self-determination for transgender people passed in Scottish parliament with a majority of 88 to 33. The UK government responded with the first ever use of a Section 35 order to block a bill in the Scottish parliament, as widely reported in press (Siddique, 2023). Simultaneously, 2023 saw the highest number of US bills targeting transgender people in a single year (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). In both national contexts, anti-transgender legislation and sentiment appears to have intensified greatly. Various discursive repertoires are used to justify anti-transgender arguments, including appeals to religious morality, family values, selective scientific claims and human rights. Trans issues have become an ontological battleground: various ideologically distinct trans-exclusionary actors draw on various repertoires to throw their weight behind a definition of gender which excludes transgender people (Bassi & LaFleur, 2023). Whilst anti-transgender sentiment has often been associated with the right, in the UK in particular much anti-transgender legislation is framed as vehemently feminist rather than conservative, repeating the rhetoric of a particularly loud proponent of anti-transgender rhetoric often called the “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist” (TERF) community¹. The discourse associated with TERF actors is now prevalent in British party politics, and relies heavily on a zero-sum positioning of women’s rights against transgender rights (Jones & Slater, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020).

The announcement of the Gender Recognition Act reform in 2017, which would allow trans people the capacity to change the sex marker on their birth certificates more easily, pushed transgender issues into British public discourse. Several women’s organisations opposed the reforms on the basis that they would infringe on women’s “sex-based rights”, intensifying the so-called TERF movement (Jones & Slater, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020). The rhetoric of the TERF movement depends upon the sex essentialist idea that womanhood is ascribed at birth and inherent in biological characteristics such as genitalia and chromosomes, and decries the erosion of women’s “sex-based rights” as a result of trans-inclusive policy and understandings of gender (see e.g. FPFW, 2021a). The movement is largely understood as taking influence from fringe segments of second-wave radical feminist thought, to which such sex essentialism is inherent, as well as the attachment of violence to male bodies (Earles, 2019; Hines, 2020). Contemporary TERFs thus heavily emphasise the supposed danger of “men” in women’s spaces (see e.g. FPFW, 2021b). Whilst there are also anti-trans actors who rely more heavily on conservative, religious and family values arguments in the UK (see e.g. Scottish Family Party, 2021), TERF rhetoric is somewhat distinctive from these movements due to its fringe feminist history and the contemporary emergence of self-described women’s rights groups such as ‘Fair Play for Women’ and Women’s Place UK (McClean, 2021; Pearce et al., 2020).

In the US, by contrast, the contemporary (post-)Trumpian moment colours trans-hostile discourse. Recent years have seen the mainstreaming of a particularly hateful brand of right-wing populism, chaperoning in a fusion of populist conspiratorialism linked to a “paranoid style” of politics and anxiety about destabilised race and gender hegemonies with classic, religious “family values” conservatism (Barkun, 2017; Hart, 2020). Trans-hostile rhetoric of the American Right (AR) has often reiterated older homophobic moral panics, which construct queer people as dangerous folk devils, connected to conservative and religious fears about changing gender roles and the sexual harm of children (Purvis, 2019; Lugg, 1998). Children frequently take centre-stage in these often-racialised U.S. trans-hostile

¹ It should be noted that, although now in common parlance and useful for demarcating trans-exclusionary actors who display these discursive patterns, the term TERF is somewhat descriptively inaccurate. Despite a fringe radical feminist genealogy, many significant British TERF actors do not self-identify as either ‘feminist’ or ‘radical’, and the inherent ‘radicalness’ of contemporary British TERF discourse is questionable given that its talking points are reiterated by both Conservative and Labour leaders.

discourses, as a powerful, deracialised, medicalised symbol, contrasted with the particular deviance ascribed to transfeminine people of colour (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Trump, quoted this year in press, encapsulated anxieties about families and children, by promising that if re-elected his administration would promote ‘positive education about the nuclear family’ whilst preventing the ‘child abuse’ of gender-affirming care (Cooper, 2023).

Despite the seeming ideological distinctiveness of TERF and AR trans-hostility, the two appear to converge in their issue frames as well as positioning themselves on the same side of an ontological struggle. TERF and AR discourses share in particular concerns about the preservation of single-sex spaces (Jones & Slater, 2020; Stone, 2018) and freedom of speech (Hines, 2017; Aliapoulios et al., 2021a). This is something they have in common with often religiously-rooted “anti-gender” movements in various geographical contexts, who oppose sex education, reproductive rights and gender/sexual equality (Borba, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). TERF and AR discourses, like anti-gender movements, position themselves as opposed to “gender ideology” (see e.g. Respect my Sex, 2023; Gilberston, 2023), and on one side of a battle over gender ontology to which trans people have become symbolic (Basssi & LaFleur, 2022). There is also a shared racial dimension to this battle: trans-exclusionary discourses emphasising the inherent vulnerability of women, visible especially in discourses about sex segregated spaces and sports, often depend on an imagined whiteness, and thus reproduce colonial narratives about gender whilst constructing the unfemininity of racialised women (Patel, 2017; Fischer, 2023).

The similarities between TERF and AR discourses, as well as apparent alliances between women’s and LGB rights-focused anti-trans groups in the UK and evangelical movements, have led Craig McLean (2021, p.473) to contextualise British trans-hostility and TERFism as an “importation of culture war tropes from the US”. Whilst some early TERF thinkers were from the US, this contextualisation implies a transfer of right-wing American discourses pertaining to a contemporary culture war into the British context, neglecting to acknowledge the fringe feminist history of TERF discourse. However, the contextualisation of contemporary TERF discourse as an extension and evolution of fringe second-wave feminism also neglects its relationship to a wider international wave of anti-transgender sentiment, and McLean’s work shows both a convergence and co-operation between the anglophone trans-exclusionary movements of the UK and US. I propose that it is necessary to understand British TERF discourse as embedded in *both* its feminist history *and* in a wider international wave of trans-exclusionary politics which is often driven by conservative and religious movements. This means understanding how TERF discourse resembles its explicitly conservative counterparts, and how it is distinctive from them. Identifying the distinctions and similarities is especially important to comprehend the strategic nature of these debates, and how trans-exclusionary politics spread in ideologically diverse contexts.

This research seeks to contribute to this understanding by empirically examining the similarities and differences between TERF discourse, and their more explicitly conservative and ideologically distinct anglophone counterparts of the AR, by applying a Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) to one online TERF and one AR case study, scraped using 4CAT data scraping and analysis software (Borra & Rieder, 2014). I examine two comparative levels of analysis: the central arguments which TERF and AR discourses make, and the truth claims which they make and imply.

To compare how the two discourses discuss transgender issues and how their ideological differences shape their discourse, I ask firstly *what are the key arguments made by AR and TERF anti-trans discourses, and how do they compare?* I understand an argument as an issue frame – a storyline which gives meanings to events and constructs the essence of a political problem (Nelson & Kinder, 1996) – and use CFA to provide a focused and comparable account of these. By identifying and comparing the most prevalent issue frames of each discourse, I clearly disentangle their differences and similarities.

The second research question focuses on the significant ontological components of the discourses. Centring ontology in the design of this research is important because of how

central it is to the wider debate. As Bassi and LaFleur (2022) posit, trans-exclusionary movements congregate under a shared opposition to particular theoretical claims about the nature of sex and gender. Understanding how they converge on gender ontology specifically is integral to understanding the basis of their convergence. As such, the second research question asks *what are the fundamental truth claims of AR and TERF anti-trans discourses, and how do they compare?*

The case studies capture snapshots of (primarily) British TERF and AR discourses online. The first case study consists of a sample of 500 X (formerly known as Twitter) posts containing hashtags commonly used by TERF actors in the UK, collected between January and August 2021. The second case study is a sample of 500 posts which contain the term ‘transgender’ (or abbreviations/slurs referring to transgender people) from the right-wing platform *Parler*, using data drawn from a pre-existing dataset of comments and posts made between August 2018 and January 2021 (Aliapoulos et al., 2021b).

In the following section I first describe the traditions from which TERF and AR ontologies and contemporary discourses emerge, based on existing literature. I situate them in a post-truth context of high ontological uncertainty, laying down a framework to understand how the structure of discourse serves a strategic role in this particular context. I then present a discussion of the similarities and differences between the case studies, showing how they appeal to different ideological contexts. I finally discuss their ontological dimensions and the strategic power of this, comparing their truth claims and contextualising their convergences in relation to their distinctive traditions of thought.

Contextualising TERF and AR as Ontological Discourses

Ontology, the philosophy of things which exist in the world and how they do so (Hofweber, 2023), underpins much trans-hostile discourse. Whether based on women’s rights arguments, family values or other ideologically-salient talking points, many trans-hostile movements understand themselves as on one side of a battle of ideas about what iterations of man and womanhood can be possible (Bassi & LaFleur, 2023). TERF and AR discourses are unified in a trans-exclusionary ontology, but their underpinnings emerge from distinctive traditions of thought.

The fringe radical feminist thought from which TERF rhetoric emerges is often traced to key American authors of the 1970s, such as Janice Raymond and Mary Daly. These early thinkers emerge from some strands of second wave radical feminist which, by emphasising the social and sexual domination of women by men, paved the way for some to frame patriarchal oppression as inherently attached to penised bodies. Early trans-exclusionary voices thus vilify transgender women as oppressing “real” women and invading spaces to enact male dominance (Raymond, 1979). This is based on a biologically essentialist gender ontology, and as such TERF discourse slots into what Westbrook & Schilt (2014) have called “biologically based” gender-determination criteria², in opposition to “identity-based” criteria. This entails the use of biological criteria such as sexual organs and chromosomes to determine another person’s gender. Biological gender-determination criteria tend to preclude the possibility of transgender people and thus are associated with a trans-exclusionary stance. Also inherent to TERF thought is that these gender-determination criteria are highly rigid from birth onwards: sex is perceived as immutable (Hines, 2020). Moralistic dichotomies of “natural” and “unnatural” thus also emerge, separating cis and trans women as natural and deviant respectively (Pearce et al, 2020; Williams, 2020). Although a religious influence is not apparent in contemporary British TERF discourse, to

² Many TERFs would not understand their own behaviour as ‘determining gender’ due to a frequent rejection of the concept of gender itself – they would rather see it as determining sex. I use this term throughout to describe the practice of naming someone as a man or woman based on biological criteria.

understand the moralistic nature of this discourse it is worth noting the influence of Christianity on TERF foremother Janice Raymond's thought.³

The religious influence of biology-based gender-determination criteria in AR discourse is clearer. Religion has long been particularly important to AR politics (Corbett et al., 2014), and as such transphobic (and homophobic) rhetoric in the US frequently draws on a Christian emphasis on "natural" male and female gender roles (Scholz, 2005). Some newer segments of the AR are considered to be less overtly Christian but still underpinned by "covert" religiosity (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018). The digital alt-right, for example, is not always overtly religious but uses religious symbolism, echoing Christian morality by demarcating certain types of gender and sexual liberation as degenerate (Shaw, 2019). Some right-wing actors in the US-centric online sphere thus tend to construct affective solidarity through a constructed image of rationality rather than religion, with appeals to "fact and reason", known as "fact signaling" (Hong, 2020). These appeals occur strangely against a growing anti-science sentiment in conservative American politics (Hsu, 2021). This is a point on which AR and TERF discourses converge: both, regardless of the basis of their ontological claims, use a strategically ontological language, making appeals to truth, science and reason to boost their claims (Pape, 2022, Hong, 2020). In this and in their broader criticism of gender as a concept, both align with global anti-gender movements, who see trans-exclusionary politics as part of a wider battle against "gender" or "gender ideology", signifying various objects such as sex education, reproductive rights and gender/sexual equality (Borba, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Whilst TERF and AR discourses are underpinned by different influences, their shared adherence to biologically-based gender-determination criteria places them in defence of a particular gender "regime of truth" (Rahilly, 2015). A regime of truth is a Foucauldian concept referring to the types of discourses accepted as true in a society, and the mechanisms which make them true (Foucault, 1980). Transgender people pose a threat to a regime of truth where sex and gender are coupled in a binary male-female system, and frantic reassertions of the naturalness of this regime, or "gender panics", are a common response to its disruption (Westbrooks & Schilt, 2014). Gender panics, however, should be understood not only as a reaction to ontological stress, but as an inherently strategic act: asserting a regime's naturalness is also an attempt to sustain it.

The strategic power of trans-exclusionary appeals to truth or naturalness is amplified by the fact that the transgender debate happens against the backdrop of a "post-truth" era, characterised by public anxiety about truth, a breakdown of social trust, and the emergence of a "regime of post-truth" (Harsin, 2015). Harsin uses this term to refer to the emergence of competing truth regimes, and a "truth market" in which actors compete to spread their claims. His theorisation is useful for contextualising highly ontological debates as potentially post-democratic: he describes how publics are mobilised to engage in "a managed spectacle of claiming, sharing, liking, debunking and refuting issues that are ultimately designed to block the emergence of more inclusive social justice agendas" (Harsin, 2015, p.332). The managed spectacle, however, misses an account of the mechanisms by which the discourse is shaped. I posit that a particularly strategic way of structuring debate can be understood through Smith's (1995) "ideological code".

Ideological codes are Smith's (1995) theoretical answer to how text-mediated discourses can be structured, often in service of a particular ideological interpretation. They are mechanisms which copy themselves through speech and text, embedded in the ways in which people produce discourse, structuring the order and form of the discourse. A particular way in which they can do this is by redirecting speakers to focus on particular concepts: a particular example Smith gives of this is the "Politically Correct" (PC) ideological code, which, by naming rights claims as politically correct, invokes the concept of freedom of speech and positions the rights claimants in opposition to it. By grafting the debate through

³ See Rebecca Jane Morgan's article in this issue.

the concept of freedom of speech, which has cross-ideological appeal, the underlying rights claims of the debate are framed as oppressive. The use of “well-established rights and antidiscrimination repertoires” in conservative anti-gender movements resembles this code, similarly constructing ideological opponents in opposition of widely-accepted ideals (Borba, 2022, p.60).

What I show with my analysis of TERF and AR discourses is not only how these types of rights-based ideological code operate within them, but also how trans-exclusionary appeals to reality structure the debates to delegitimise trans people. I show that ideological codes are particularly useful for granting ideological malleability to a reactionary discourse. Understanding the similarities and differences between AR and TERF discourse helps to understand how this strategic discursive structuring works to promote a particular gender regime of truth.

Thematic Similarities and Differences

To examine the key arguments of TERF and AR discourses, I use Critical Frame Analysis (CFA): a set of sensitizing questions were applied to each post, comment or tweet, designed to clearly isolate the issue frames present⁴. During several rounds of systematic qualitative analysis, frames were organised into thematic groups relating to what exactly they *problematise* about transgender people and transgender inclusion. I find that TERF and AR discourses tend to make five overarching assertions: that transgender inclusion causes harm to groups or individuals; that it results in privileges or spaces being offered to those to whom they do not belong; that it is a consequence or cause of distorted truth and misinformation; and that transgender people are complicit in a plot for societal control. A final theme, which only emerges in AR discourse, consists of frames positing that trans people are the cause or consequence of a Western societal decline.

Figure 1 shows clearly how the most prevalent frames, grouped into these overarching themes, are often shared by the two discourses, but occur at differing frequencies, revealing distinctive ideological underpinnings and priorities. Although I here describe the frames which are most prevalent in each case, it is important first and foremost to acknowledge that barring the final theme, there are only a few cases of frames in which TERF and AR completely diverge, suggesting a high circulation of frames.

Harm

Transgender people and trans-inclusive policy are understood as causing harm to particular groups, either through an imagined potential for physical or sexual harm or the limitation of rights. In TERF discourse, supposed concerns about threatened rights of women, and to a lesser extent LGB people, are the most prevalent. By contrast, AR discourse relies heavily on narratives which emphasise the potential for physical and sexual harm to children, echoing the child-centric focus of older moral panics (Lugg, 1998). Concern and disgust about gender-affirming care are articulated in both, reflecting moral dichotomies of natural and unnatural (Williams, 2020). Fears about sexual harm are also present in both, articulated in the assertion that transgender inclusion enables sex offenders to enter single sex spaces under the pretence of being trans, or in a more extreme sense that transgender people are themselves inherently sexually deviant:

‘They will confuse kids, use medication to keep them prepubescent until they are legally 18 (and forever), and then “date” them. ... A pedophile’s dream basically.’ (Parler, 2021).

And:

⁴ These questions, as well as a more in-depth description of the hashtags and keywords queried to create the datasets, can be found in Appendix A.

‘Cross-dressing is one of the most common paraphilias among convicted sexual predators.’ (X, 2021)

Space and Unbelonging

Amidst wider concerns about who has the right to lay claim to particular words, categories or privileges, TERF and AR discourses position the entry of transgender people into single-sex spaces or contests as a key issue – one of the most prevalent for both discourses – invoking a biology-based gender determination criterium. In AR discourse in particular, this theme is more often bound up or articulated in relation to physical harm: single-sex spaces are necessary as a protection from sexual danger, and trans participation in women’s sports is seen as a problem due to the supposed weakness and fragility of women. School sports are a prevalent topic for AR discourse, amplifying child safety refrains. AR discourse is also concerned with a wider populist resource competition, whereby political attention and resources are given to groups such as trans people by liberal governments at the expense of the ordinary citizen.

For TERFs, the supposed erosion of protection for single-sex spaces, sporting categories and services is seen predominantly as a rights issue, bolstered by appeals to fairness and justice. This echoes the tone of Janice Raymond, who framed transsexuality as an active and intentional plot by men to take over women’s spaces:

‘Did they really think they could just rock up & appropriate women’s rights & spaces for themselves & women would say nothing? Of course they did they’re MEN.’ (X, 2021).

Truth & Untruth

A pervasive frame in both discourses posits that transgender issues and people are a cause and consequence of misinformation, the distortion of truth and the repression of truthful speech. In TERF discourse, rights are once again prevalent, with the notion of freedom of speech articulated often in relation to another key frame positing that the concept of “sex” is being replaced with the concept of “gender” to define womanhood. The perceived changing of definitions is framed by TERFs as a deliberate, strategic attempt to erode women’s rights:

‘This is a blatant attempt to reduce sex-specific health care for women. #SexNotGender’ (X, 2021)

The TERF-specific topic of sex being replaced with gender reflects reactions to gender recognition reforms in the UK, as well as a broader human rights focus in TERF discourse. TERF and AR discourses however are unified on the notion that transgender people are inherently opposed to objective reality, and both the existence and inclusion of transgender people is a consequence of misinformation. This is a theme in which the unity of AR and TERF discourses rest on a shared opposition to the possibility of trans people, demonstrated in appeals to selective notions of science, biology, fact and reason:

‘I took biology also and there was no transgender or binary [sic] bullshit. [...] Too bad they do not teach truth only lies.’ (Parler, 2021)

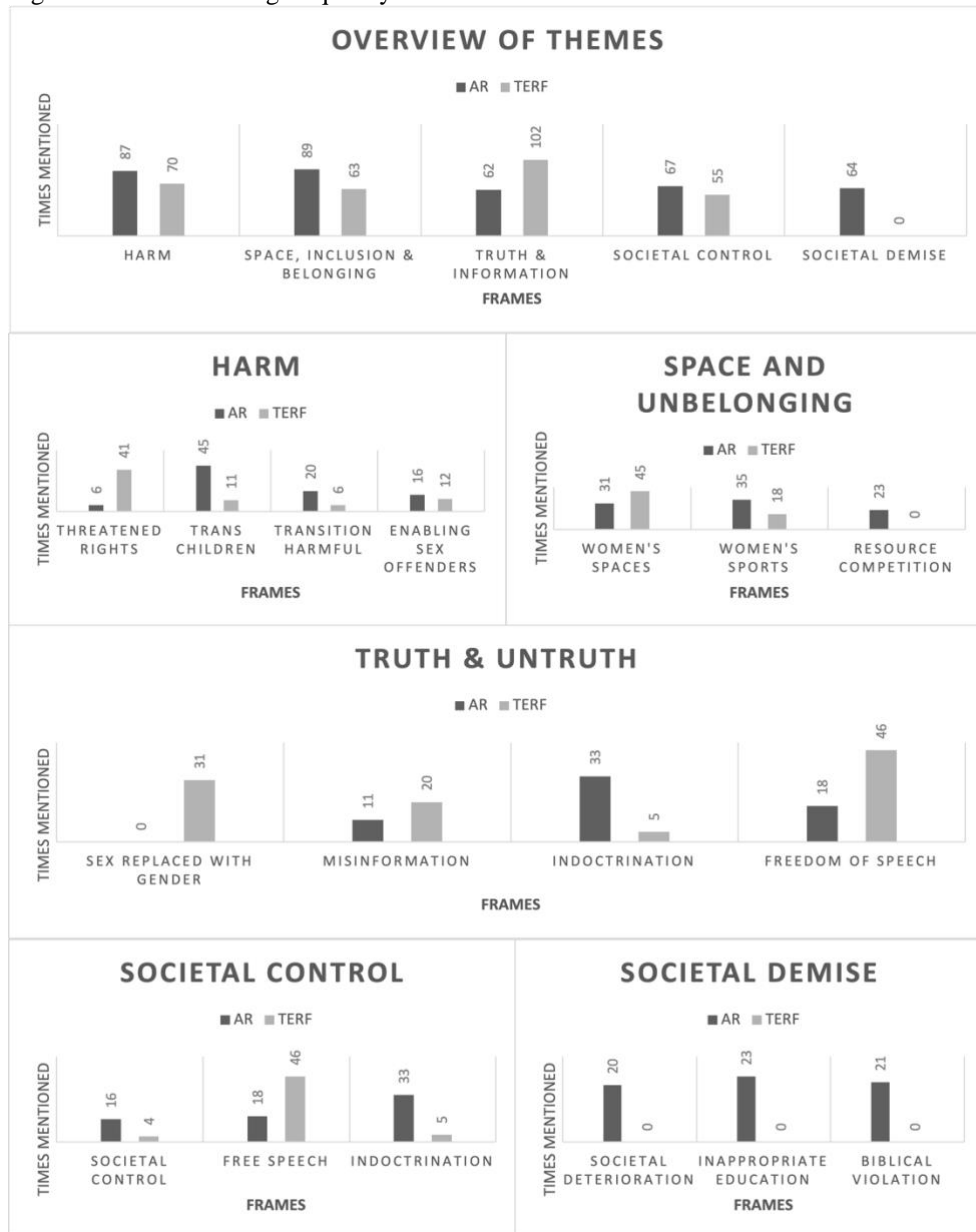
And:

‘No child is born transgender. Children are born either girls or boys. No child can change their sex. Scottish schools give up on scientific facts.’ (X, 2021).

In both cases, this is seen as an intentional plot to push a nefarious political agenda, although AR discourse is far more conspiratorial and thus more likely to explain this as an active attempt at societal indoctrination. TERFs generally frame truth and information issues as attempts to erode women’s rights, whereas AR discourse tends to lean into a range of explicitly conspiratorial narratives and cites the destruction of Western society or the grooming of children (or both) as common reasons:

‘Vaccines are messing with kids DNA. [...] [H]ave you ever seen so much autism and now this transgender explosion. All done intentionally dumbing down this generation through our vaccines.’ (Parler, 2021).

Figure 1: Charts showing frequency of themes and frames within each theme.



Societal Control

Discussions of truth and untruth underpin frames which explicitly posit that transgender people are integral to or complicit in attempts by various groups to exercise societal control. The conspiratorialism of AR discourse is highly visible in this theme, as is the typically child-centric moral panic. The perpetrators of societal control for AR are the usual suspects of right-wing conspiracy: Jewish people, “globalists”, Big Pharma, communists, liberals.

‘They’re going to brainwash your kids and drug them in ways that permanently destroy their biochemistry and development...’ (Parler, 2021)

Or:

‘It’s the jews. Hitler told you. ... They openly support this stuff. Gays abortion transgenders child molesting all Jews’ (Parler, 2021)

TERF discourse is less conspiratorial, but belief in tyrannical forces is present in both discourses, variously named as “gender ideology”, “trans ideology”, “wokeness” or “political correctness”. In TERF discourse the freedom of speech frame relates to this: “oppressive males” are framed as engaged in plots to “silence women”. More explicit allusions to a narrative of societal control are made by framing trans activism as a cult or cultish:

‘THIS explains so much about the ideological capture of governments, parties, institutions and social media. It’s a cult, backed by money’ (X, 2021)

Societal Demise

A point of distinction between discourses lies in the AR assertion that transgender people are linked to a decline of Western society, echoing alt-right refrains (Shaw, 2019). Trans people are viewed as instrumental to the intentional erosion of Christianity, family values, tradition, morality, and Western culture. In this theme both the exceptional conspiratorialism and religiosity of AR discourse as compared to TERF discourse is particularly visible. Trans people are also framed as a violation of Biblical principles, problematising them on the basis that deviations from God-given gender identities or bodies are immoral and harmful. Explicitly religious moral panic and conspiracies are also articulated:

‘It’s Satanic. These kids are being presented as sacrifices required by satanists. If you don’t offer your first child’s blood, then you must transgender them. It’s a fact. In exchange you get power pleansure [sic] and possessions to your satisfaction.’ (Parler, 2021)

And:

‘#Transgenderism is the Final Solution of Globalists (Leftist, Marxist-Communists, feminists in the destruction of the family, and straight men). Much like the National Socialist parties of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s sought to resolve the Jewish Question, Globalists are using sexuality to subvert and destroy Western Culture and Civilization.’ (Parler, 2021)

Key Similarities and Distinctions

The central preoccupations of TERF and AR discourses are highly similar: with a few exceptions, most frames mentioned in TERF discourse are also mentioned in AR discourse. These demonstrate the alliances which McLean (2021) posits. However, TERF discourse is not a lock-and-stock importation of US culture war tropes: they draw from quite different

vocabularies and repertoires, which reflect the distinctive fringe feminist roots of TERF rhetoric which many have identified (Earles, 2019; Hines, 2020). Particularly distinctive to TERF discourse is the articulation of antagonisms between men and women, and framing of the trans debate as a patriarchal struggle. Echoing Raymond's (1979) early discourse, "males" are constructed as intentionally using transgender politics to take rights from women. TERF discourse also relies far more heavily on wording resonant with a human rights framework. This is integral to the structure of TERF arguments in a way that it is not in AR. Without the backbone of a human rights framework, prevalent frames in TERF discourse – threatened rights, sex being replaced with gender, or freedom of speech – no longer function.

In contrast, the language in which AR frames are couched draws on a wider repertoire, incorporating arguments which appeals to religious, conspiratorial and conservative sentiments, with present but less frequent strategic appeals to human rights. Contrasting the central male/female antagonism of TERF discourse, they centre many arguments around children, invoking long-standing homophobic child safety rhetoric (Lugg, 1998), and reflecting Gill-Peterson's (2018) positioning of the child as a key symbol of transgender politics in the US. The conspiratorialism and religiosity of US politics are tangible in this discourse, articulated strongly in explicitly fascist refrains about the decline of the West and the construction of transgender people as unholy or Satanic.

By drawing on different repertoires, the two discourses tap into differing types of ideological appeal. The centrality of human rights in TERF discourse – although also strategically present in AR discourse – conceals reactionary frames under a liberal veneer. The assertion that transgender people are inherently sexually deviant and dangerous resonates heavily with a long history of homophobic moral panic (Lugg, 1998), but in TERF discourse these are folded into a discursive structure intended to position them as rational and liberatory. Many examples can be found of Smith's (1995) PC code, used to position transgender people as oppressive. Freedom of speech is a highly prevalent frame, as is the naming of trans people and activists as politically correct or "woke" to discursively position them in opposition to rights and freedoms, particularly the freedom for women to speak "truths" about sex.

The women's rights framework echoes the PC code, similarly shifting the discursive position of trans people from rights-claimant to oppressive rights-limiter. TERFs' avoidance of the most extreme conspiratorial and fascist refrains of AR discourse also likely contributes to its liberal veneer and mainstream acceptability in the British context. However, directing the focus of the debate away from the rights claims at the heart of trans inclusivity towards other rights claims is necessary to give an acceptable veneer to the exclusionary and oppressive refrains which *are* inherent to TERF discourse.

Truth Claims & Ontologies

TERF and AR discourses, despite drawing on different languages to couch their arguments, are quite unified on their truth claims, which centre around the immutability of sex and a biology-based gender determination criterium. TERF and AR discourses believe sex to be immutable, binary, and determined by biological characteristics such as genitalia and DNA:

'You can't change sex. It's defined by your DNA, chopping off body parts doesn't change it.' (X, 2021)

Or:

'The delusional "transgender" community can cry all they want. They cannot escape reality. #BiologyIsBinary' (Parler, 2021)

The primary distinction between the two is that TERFs tend to have more complex, inconsistent definitions of gender, appearing to internally grapple with the ontological

debates of feminism whilst maintaining sex essentialism. Their truth claims are various and sometimes contradictory: sex and gender are distinct, but sex is more important; sex and gender are the same; gender does not exist; or gender is innate and immutable like sex. AR discourse is simpler, reflecting its roots in quite straightforward religious conceptions of man and woman; the terms sex and gender are mostly used interchangeably.

The influence of religion creates another distinction: AR invokes notions of biblical “naturalness”, premised on the logic that one should not interfere with God’s plan. Contrastingly, religiosity is frequently disavowed by TERFs. As such, the various appeals which AR and TERF discourses use to bolster their claims are underpinned by different sources of truth. Although both use Hong’s (2020) “fact signalling” and selective scientific appeals, AR discourse also uses appeals to Christian sources of truth. TERFs never use appeals to religious principles to support their claims, at times using religiosity as pejorative when positioning itself as rational and immune to inaccurate dogma:

‘No one at all is excluding anyone from society. Some people simply won’t accept being controlled by the Church of the Holy Gender, recite its mantras, or take part in its rituals.’ (X, 2021)

The distinctions around religiosity bring us back to the distinctive underpinnings of TERF and AR discourse, posing the question: why is one discourse which positions itself as vehemently feminist, and another which has historically championed traditionalist and religiously-oriented gender roles, so similar in their ontological understanding of what it means to be a woman? The heavy ontological convergences here, in tandem with a closer examination of the origins and influences of each discourse, suggests that they may not have been so ontologically opposed from the beginning. The depictions of early TERFs of transgender women as “synthetic” and unnatural (Williams, 2020) are very congruent with right-wing Christian oppositions of natural and unnatural (Scholz, 2005), resulting in a similarly moralistic discourse about gender-affirming care. Although religion is overtly rejected by British TERFs, the influence of authors like Janice Raymond, whose religious influence is noted elsewhere in this issue, might shed some light on a shared moralistic ontology of natural, distinctive and immutable sexes. Both discourses thus react with appeals to reality to bolster a shared ontology which is destabilised by transgender people.

Whilst these appeals could be understood as a frantic and emotional “gender” panic (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Rahilly, 2015), they can also be understood as having a strategic function, which like the PC code removes the agency of trans people to make rights claims and grants a broader ideological appeal to anti-transgender frames. Harsin’s (2015) understanding of the contemporary era of post-truth as one in which competing truth markets are salient and instilling particular truth claims can serve post-democratic interests. Structuring a discourse around appeals to truth has particular cross-ideological appeal not only because of the capacity to draw on different, ideologically congruent sources of truth, but also because of the poignancy of truth in an age of ontological anxiety.

TERF and AR discourses draw on the sources of truth which make the most sense in their respective ideological contexts, and doing so gives their arguments an ideologically malleable appeal in the truth markets which Harsin (2015) theorises. Like the term “Political Correctness” grafts arguments onto the tenet of freedom of speech, citing “truth” as the basis for one’s argument against a human rights claim positions the claimant as outside of the boundaries of reality. By grafting frames to the notion of truth, rights claims at the root of the debate are artfully sidestepped, through the assertion that the basis on which they are made is simply not real. As particularly shown through narratives about misinformation and indoctrination in the case studies, ideological opponents targeted by a truth and reality ideological code are also then inherently attached to nefarious sources of oppressive mistruth.

The ontological structure of TERF and AR discourses thus serves to demonise trans people and pro-trans actors within a post-truth context where concerns about information are

salient, positioning their own discourses as arbitrators of truth. These case studies demonstrate Harsin's (2015) point that dominating a truth market serves post-democratic interests, by showing here how ideological codes can take advantage of informational uncertainty to delegitimise rights claims. Moreover, they demonstrate how appeals to truth and reality lend ideological malleability to repressive frames: appeals to truth, like appeals to freedom of speech, garner an affective sense of ideologically neutral rationality and reason, obscuring the extent to which they serve a post-democratic interest.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial premise of this article – understanding the extent to which TERF and AR discourses are similar or different – I find that TERF and AR discourses often echo each other's arguments, although the ways and frequencies in which they are expressed tend to reflect the ideological priorities and trajectories of thought of each group. Although this research primarily is a descriptive investigation and thus does not seek to make claims about causal influence of one discourse on the other, the extent to which arguments are repeated between the two as well as the active alliances, which McLean (2021) describes, suggests a circulation of frames. This circulation is not premised on an ontological convergence which became similar, but on pre-existing similarities: a moralistic dichotomy of highly different immutable sexes was present in the thought of early TERFs, resembling the religiously-underpinned dichotomies of the AR.

This shared ontology and its continuous reiteration through appeals to various sources of truth – religion, science, logic – in trans-hostile discourse, beyond a frantic “gender panic”, serves a post-democratic strategic function. It roots frames in the ontological norms of the environment in which they are expressed, drawing on different sources of ideologically or culturally-salient truth, to position its claim as superior and to remove the agency of transgender people to make rights claims by positioning them outside of truth. Through the use of both ontology-centred and rights-based ideological code-like structures, frames which demonise transgender people as ontologically oppressive, unreal and unholy are legitimised across ideological contexts. The discourses described here thus provide an example of the mechanisms by which generalising, reactionary narratives about minority groups can take hold in ideologically diverse contexts, sustaining rights-limiting truth regimes in a post-truth context.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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