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# Gender and sexualities: the reactionary offensive of the far right

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**Much of the success of the far right continues to be based on racism, particularly anti-immigrant xenophobia and Islamophobia, but it is important to analyse the new terrains that these political forces are investing in to broaden the scope of their influence. We are publishing an excerpt from the chapter written by Cassandre Begous and Fanny Gallot, which shows how the far right has sought over the last ten years to politicize questions of gender and sexuality, shaping "new logics of exclusion and othering" and enabling the redeployment and legitimization of "an essentialist and transphobic discourse."**

## The ghosts of La Manif pour tous

On March 19, 2024, Les Républicains (LR, traditional right) Senator Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio announced the publication of a report on the "trans-identification of minors", as well as a bill aimed at prohibiting them from gender transition. Very quickly, the National Rally said it would submit a similar bill to the National Assembly.

This news is part of a well-documented reactionary offensive in which gender issues occupy an important, if not central, place. If we trace the genealogy of this offensive, we find the same senator among the opponents of the 2022 law that aimed to ban conversion therapy: considering that trans people should not be covered by this law, she warned her colleagues against "gender ideology" and "everything that comes to us from the United States," which, according to her, an "active minority" would like to impose.

This little tune is not new to anyone who experienced the debates around marriage for all in 2012. Careful not to appear too homophobic (despite the well-documented excesses of its participants), La Manif pour tous ("the demo for everyone") preferred to wave the red flag of same-sex marriage. Marriage for all was not for them a simple matter of equal rights, but the vector of a decadence of our society, and even, according to MP Annie Genevard (LR), "an irreversible attack on the integrity of the human species" [1]. It marked the end of "sexual otherness" ontologically - if not theologically - constitutive of humanity and civilization. In 1998, opponents of the PACS (civil partnership - open to two people of the same or of different genders) denounced a threat to the "difference of the sexes".

Similarly, in 2011, when gender stereotypes and sexual orientation were mentioned in the new life and earth sciences (SVT) programmes: Christine Boutin, then campaigning for the presidency, immediately pulled out a poster showing a baby and bearing the slogan "You will be a woman, my son" [2].

The same rhetoric was reactivated in 2014 regarding the "ABCD of equality", a programme for teaching gender equality, where its detractors saw the introduction of "gender theory" into schools, which would lead, among other things, to teaching masturbation to children.

Questions of gender and sexuality shape new logics of exclusion and othering and are also an instrument for redeploying an essentialist and transphobic discourse. Undoubtedly, the far right uses them to construct a "moral panic", that is to say to provoke a disproportionate political and media reaction to a marginal or minority social fact in order to erect it into an existential threat to the entire social body.

It thus seeks to confront the feminist groundswell that is mobilising young people in particular, within the framework of a new global feminist dynamic at work since the mid-2010s [3].

These deeply reactionary discourses are spread via social networks and traditional media, especially those belonging to the Bolloré empire, which provide an important platform for anti-trans discourses. We had another example recently, with the spectacular promotion of *Transmania*, an anti-trans book published by a little-known far-right publishing house [4].

These discourses are all the more pervasive because they are not firmly condemned by Macron's bloc but reinforced by public policies.

Indeed, although the Catholic Church and the anti-gay marriage movements prepared the ground for hostility towards gender-based approaches, the current transphobic offensive has acquired new networks, including the LR senator mentioned above. Although she was not one of the heralds of La Manif pour tous, the former mayor of Saint-Gratien has rather distinguished herself by an aggressive policy against the life of working-class neighbourhoods, for example by destroying the football stadium in which the "African Cup of Nations of the neighbourhoods" was to take place [5] and by calling the young people who came to demonstrate against its destruction "scum" [6].

This repression is justified in the name of a simple idea: the foreigner is a dangerous man for women – by implication, French and white women in particular. This contribution aims to outline the contours of these reactionary offensives in order better to confront them.

## The Anti-Trans Offensive

In August 2022, the Family Planning Association was the target of violent attacks on social media for its campaign featuring a trans person. The groups and personalities just mentioned were calling for the lifting of the subsidies, already reduced to next to nothing, from which benefits this organization, which has historically defended women's rights and the right to abortion.

However, paradoxically, those responsible for these attacks claim to act in the name of protecting women, or rather, in the words of Marguerite Stern and Dora Moutot [7], in the name of a "biological and scientific reality" [8] supposed to protect women. Clearly, for them, including transgender women in the category of women would risk erasing the condition of possibility of a common feminine identity. Worse, trans people would constitute a general danger to women.

Trans women are presented as perverse, sexual and dangerous; they undergo an essentialization of a supposed persistent masculinity, put forward to justify their exclusion from all spaces of social life. This conception goes against decades of radical feminist thought, which have defined emancipation as a liberation from biological destiny. This is true for Simone de Beauvoir, for whom "if the biological situation of women constitutes a handicap for them, it is because of the perspective in which it is grasped" [9], as for Christine Delphy, a materialist feminist sociologist, who explains that "gender precedes sex" [10].

The linking of the female condition to biology is more the preserve of the right-wing discourse. Andrea Dworkin has shown that this political camp limits women to motherhood, considers them vulnerable and weak, but also naturally inhabited by an instinct that pushes them to nourish and protect children. From then on, they would supposedly be "naturally" conservative [11]

This framing allows the right to transform feminist aspirations for emancipation into demands for protection and, in doing so, to keep women dependent on male domination. Women who adhere to this worldview enter into a

perpetual defence of their respectability and their place in the domestic sphere, particularly against homosexuals. According to Dworkin, "homosexuality [...] renders women useless," particularly male homosexuality "because it suggests a world entirely without women " [12].

Thus the homophobic attitude of right-wing women like Anita Bryant or Phyllis Schlafly constitutes for them an existential battle in the strict sense. Defending the respectability of the heterosexual woman who is the mistress of her home then amounts to defending humanity and civilization as a whole.

## The transphobic rhetoric of the new right-wing women

The new right-wing women [13] engaged in anti-trans activism spread a similar rhetoric of replacement.

As early as 1979, in the transphobic pamphlet *The Transsexual Empire*, Janice Raymond explained that trans women are the Trojan horse of a medical "empire" that seeks to create synthetic women and that strikes "real women" with obsolescence [14].

We find this discourse in the current anti-trans backlash [15], for example when on the set of *Quotidien*, in 2021, Elisabeth Roudinesco expressed alarm at a "transgender epidemic", or when *Le Figaro* headlined that trans people "want the erasure of women" . [16].

Transphobia is therefore an update of the anti-feminist discourse of the right aimed at women. But, by reactivating the fear of the replacement of women, transphobia radicalizes this discourse and also constitutes a major vector for the diffusion of far-right thought, its normative and hierarchical sexual policy as well as its xenophobic and eugenicist policy.

The idea of women being replaced by trans people (both men and women [17] echoes the racist discourse of the "great replacement". Like the foreigner who has come to monopolize "our" (white) women and supplant "our" civilization, the trans woman plays the role of a monstrous and sexually dangerous "other" against whom the right promises to erect a cordon sanitaire. Anti-trans discourse often has a conspiratorial undertone and presents, for example, the increase in the number of gender transitions as the result of international and organized lobbying. The videographer Lily Alexandre has shown that transphobia fuels the phenomenon of the far-right: this is how the figure of Martine Rothblatt, a millionaire businesswoman, transgender and Jewish, has become for many anti-trans activists "proof" of the existence of the lobby and its fantasized power [18].

Anti-trans discourse also has a eugenic dimension. It describes trans women as men with pathological perversions, seeking to transition through sexual fetishism or with the aim of raping women in the toilets [19]. Trans men are considered as autistic little girls, with complexes or impressionable by their friends, victims of a lobby that pushes them to self-mutilation. In short, whatever their gender, trans people are systematically reduced to a form of mental imbalance that makes them either dangerous or morally minor.

This vision of transgender identity as an illness in turn justifies an authoritarian policy aimed at "correcting" the disorder, notably through conversion therapies or the outright banning of gender transition, whether legal or medical [20]. Eugenics is also exercised in the social control of bodies that anti-trans panic encourages. In order to "unmask" women who are secretly trans, many internet forums are busy dissecting all the overly "masculine" attributes that could betray the true identity of a trans woman.

This leads to the harassment of transgender or cisgender women considered to have attributes outside the norms of femininity [21]. In its most extreme expression, this desire to control bodies was reflected in the call by anti-trans activist Posie Parker for men carrying firearms to use women's restrooms to "protect" them, that is, to come and attack women considered to be trans [22].

13 September 2024

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[1] Yves Delahaie, *Mariage pour tous vs Manif pour tous, ou La Bataille de l'égalité*, Paris, Golias, 2015, p.308.

[2] Marie Donzel, "Pour ne pas faire du projet de loi-cadre sur l'égalité hommes/femmes la troisième mi-temps du débat sur le mariage pour tous", Ladies & Gentlemen (blog), July 16, 2013.

[3] P. Delage and F. Gallot (dir.), *Féminismes dans le monde. 23 récits d'une révolution planétaire*, Paris, Textuel, 2020.

[4] See Lumi and Usul, "Transphobie ; la nouvelle panique des médias et de l'extrême droite", *Blast*, May 5 2024.

[5] The "African Cup of Nations of the neighbourhoods" is a very popular amateur football competition, organised in working-class neighbourhoods; the teams who play in it represent different African countries.

[6] See Lina Rhrissi, "La sénatrice Jacqueline Eustache Brinio en croisade contre les musulmans et les quartiers populaires", *StreetPress*, July 6 2020.

[7] Prominent women activists, who stood out by providing for the press (in particular *Marianne*) the first French articles whose aim was to "denounce" the presence of trans women and their allies within feminist organisations and collectives, such as the "poster campaign against feminicides Nous Toutes ("All of us women".) They were also the authors of *Transmania*

[8] Marguerite Stern et Dora Moutot, "Mme Élisabeth Borne, féministes, nous nous inquiétons de ce que devient le Planning familial", *Marianne*, August 22, 2022

[9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, chapter 2.

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, chapter 2

[11] Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women; The Politics of Domesticated Females*, New York, Women's Press, 1983, p. 13.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[13] These « new right-wing women » [...] are trying to redefine the content of the cause of women. They are right-wing women because . they take a position against feminism. [...]. They are new because they are distinguished from their predecessors by their relation to equality, their sociology and their sociology and the way they act.. » (Magali Della Sudda, *Les Nouvelles Femmes de droite*, Marseille, Hors d'atteinte, 2022, p.

31).

[14] "A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, in S. Stryker et S. Whittle (dir.), *The Transgender Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 146.

[15] a reactionary political and mediatic campaign whose aim is to counter the advance of progressive cation (in particular feminist). The American feminist author Susan Faludi has described this phenomenon in a book with this title

[16] Vincent Jolly, « Quand des transsexuels veulent l'effacement de la femme », *Le Figaro*, October 28, 2022. We should note that the l'URL talks about the «death of women», a sign that a more oourageous title had been corrected since then... See [www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/wokisme-quand-des-transsexuels-veulent-la-mort-des-femmes-20221028](http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/wokisme-quand-des-transsexuels-veulent-la-mort-des-femmes-20221028)

[17] Trans women "replace" women by becoming women; trans men "replace"women by ceasing to be them.

[18] Lily Alexandre, "The Feminist to Far-Right Pipeline" YouTube, March 26, 2024.

[19] Julia Serrano, "Autogynephilia; A Scientific Review. Feminist Analysis, and Alternative 'Embodiment Fantasies' Model", *The Sociological Review*, vol. 68, n° 4, 2020, p. 763-778.

[20] See Devin Dwyer, "Supreme Court Allows Idaho to Enforce Ban on Gender-Affirming Care for Minors", ABC News, April 16, 2024.

[21] German Lopez, "Women Are Getting Harassed in Bathrooms Because of Anti-Transgender Hysteria ", *Vox*, May 19, 2016.

[22] Josh Milton, "'Gender-Critical Feminist' Posie Parker Wants Men with Guns to Start Using Women's Toilets", *Pink News* , January 30, 2021.