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Othering, peaking, populism and moral panics: The reactionary strategies of organised transphobia

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Abstract

This article shows that organised transphobia is promoted using similar strategies and politics as the wider reactionary movement which has become increasingly mainstream. In particular, we outline the transphobic process of 'othering' based on moral panics, which seeks to construct, homogenise and exaggerate a threat and to naturalise it in the bodies and existence of the 'Other'. Reactionary politics rely on authoritarian tendencies and strategies which aim to remove the rights of certain communities, and as such threaten wider demands for equal rights. They claim to speak on behalf of 'the people', in this case often (certain) women, against an elite which seeks to grant unfair rights and privileges to a mostly silent and silenced minority, even though said rights are precarious and limited, and power is rarely on their side. Rather than a bottom-up movement in defence of women, what we refer to as 'organised transphobia' is a top-down movement that relies on prominent platforms and privileged access to shaping public discourse to divert attention away from the real struggle most women and LGBTQ+ people are facing conjointly.

Keywords

exclusion, far right, moral panics, populism, reactionary politics, transphobia

At a time when reactionary politics are on the rise across much of the globe, attacks on trans people, and more generally what we will term and define here as transphobia, are yet another canary in the coal mine. As Alyosxa Tudor (2021, p. 239) highlights in their research on decolonising Trans/Gender Studies, links between reactionary politics and transphobia are increasingly clear, in particular 'how transphobic feminists are aligned with masculinist anti-gender and far-right anti-immigration rhetoric'. It is therefore no

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surprise that scholars have sought to better understand the links between what we call 'organised transphobia' and the far right (see Blee, 2020; McLean, 2021; Owen, 2022; Phipps, 2020). By organised transphobia, we refer to this seemingly unholy alliance between liberal articulations of transphobia, often couched in feminist and even pro-LGB rhetoric, and deeply reactionary politics. Organised transphobia describes a top-down movement that relies on prominent platforms and privileged access to shaping public discourse to divert attention away from the real struggle most women and LGBTQ+ people are facing conjointly, but also from the deeply reactionary and threatening nature of transphobia. This type of transphobia has been particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom, contrary to the United States where it has often taken a more conservative form, and it is the former which will be the focus here predominantly. Having said that, the strategies utilised by British transphobes have spread far beyond its borders and resonate in many contexts, for reasons explored in this article.

This article builds on and contributes to the vibrant discussions which have taken place in sociology and within the pages of *The Sociological Review* in particular. We believe that the insights we bring from politics research can provide new ways to think about these issues, but also build necessary bridges between the disciplines. More precisely, we build on research on far-right and reactionary politics to provide a more comprehensive conceptual mapping of organised transphobia – something Kathleen Blee (2020) highlights as a pressing area of research. Processes of mainstreaming are too often ignored or denied in mainstream public discourse and allow transphobic and other reactionary arguments to be portrayed as one (legitimate) side of a polarised debate. As such, more than simply confirming the reactionary or far-right elements on which organised transphobia builds, our aim is to demonstrate how strategies central to the mainstreaming of such politics can also be witnessed within organised transphobia, thus creating a better appreciation of the forces at play and how to combat them.

Crucially, our argument outlines the transphobic process of othering based on moral panics which seeks to construct, homogenise and exaggerate a threat and to naturalise it in the bodies and existence of the 'Other' (see Hines, 2020; Serano, 2020). It relies on authoritarian tendencies and strategies which aim to remove the rights of certain communities, and as such threatens wider demands for equal rights. Transphobes claim to speak on behalf of 'the people', in this case often (certain) women, against an elite which seeks to grant unfair rights and privileges to a mostly silent and silenced minority, even though in reality said rights are precarious and limited and power is rarely on the side of said minoritised community.

After providing an overview of key concepts, our argument focuses on four strategies core to the mainstreaming of transphobia. Each element is discussed separately to illustrate how organised transphobia builds on similar exclusionary methods and discourse to the wider reactionary resurgence. First, we explore the process of othering, and in particular the essentialisation and homogenisation of trans people as a threat. We then turn to a study of moral panics, in particular the role of 'peaking' and conversion narratives. Our third section explores the use of 'populist' discourse, which while not essentially right-wing, offers a semblance of democratic or majoritarian legitimacy to transphobic arguments. Finally, we turn to what we see as the logical conclusion of transphobic politics: increased authoritarianism.

Is transphobia part of far-right politics? It's complicated

In this article, our aim is not to attach too neatly a precise definition drawn from the literature on far, radical and extreme right or even fascist politics to organised transphobia. This is not to say that sophisticated definitions of such terms may not apply to this movement, but we argue that its ability to move across the borders between each of these definitions and politics, while tapping into mainstream, liberal discourse, is what makes it both more dangerous and more successful. Indeed, while more conservative, reactionary actors in the wider transphobic movement defend ideas that can be academically described as extreme right, that is, the more illiberal type of exclusionary politics often based on appeals to 'biology', those of primary interest to us here tend to be couched in more liberal terms, as per the more reconstructed far right, even if the borders are always fuzzy (see Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Crucially, our focus is not on individual actors and whether they themselves are far or extreme right, or even individually transphobic. Applying labels to individuals is counterproductive for two reasons. First, individuals, in this broad, seemingly organic movement in particular, rarely hold consistent ideological views or discourse. While there have been some clear examples of alliances with reactionary movements (Clarke & Moore, 2020; Moore, 2022a; Yours, 2023), those pushing transphobia within the mainstream often assert that they stand in opposition to more illiberal articulations. Flattening such distinctions through individual characterisation would allow said actors to claim plausible deniability, diverting attention away from the matters core to our argument and onto the intentions of individuals – which are often impossible to prove, but also irrelevant to the damage done by the discourse itself. More importantly, it would remove the focus on wider trends, power relationships and the impact of such politics, which is where we argue structural oppression lies. Therefore, our aim is not to directly link the individuals spreading transphobic discourse to the violence, both physical and symbolic, trans people are recipients of, but to highlight that such discourse participates in this wider systemic violence and that responsibility for it cannot be shunned. For this reason, we avoid as much as possible naming specific people and organisations in this article.

To provide this wider argument, we build on the work undertaken by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020) on what they term 'reactionary democracy' and in particular the contingent relationship between the far and extreme right and the mainstream (see also Brown et al., 2023). Key here is understanding the borders between the extreme and the mainstream as permeable, contingent and fuzzy. We also build on Corey Robin's work (2018) on the *Reactionary Mind*:

> What conservatism seeks to accomplish through that reconfiguration of the old and the absorption of the new is to make privilege popular, to transform a tottering old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses. A new old regime, one could say, which brings the energy and dynamism of the street to the antique inequalities of a dilapidated state. (p. 40)

To this definition of reaction, we add what we consider to be a core element, also stressed by Mondon and Winter (2020), which is that reactionaries *construct* popular support rather than respond to popular demand and grievances, and that this construction is first

and foremost discursive. Claiming to speak on behalf of 'the people', the 'left behind' or a 'silent majority', reactionaries have made this a widely accepted trope in much mainstream discourse, even though such tropes have no tangible measure and/or are often proven wrong or inaccurate by most serious studies. For example, in our case, organised transphobic discourse generally claims to speak on behalf of 'women', who it claims are threatened both by 'trans activists' who seek to undermine women's right to speak out, as well as more generally by trans women's access to spaces such as women's public toilets or refuges. It has been demonstrated that these views do not represent most women (Stone, 2020; Tryl et al., 2022). Yet this powerful pseudo-democratic argument has allowed them to gain prominence. It has also justified their constant platforming which would have been impossible should their politics have been described – more accurately – as far right or reactionary.

While many definitions of the far and extreme right have focused on the racist or nativist character of those parties and movements, Omran Shroufi (2024, p. 16) pointedly argues that

> . . . far-right politics will not always manifest itself in hatred towards one and the same designated 'other'. Far-right actors will focus their gaze on a variety of different 'others', but also those belonging to 'us' changes as far-right forces shift and swap allegiances.

Therefore, an intersectional understanding of politics, often missing in far-right studies, is essential in taking account of the moving targets of the far right and reactionary politics, as well as the potential alliances they seek to create. For Ruth Wodak (2020), intersectionality is key to understanding how women can end up supporting movements traditionally opposed to their equality: 'the [female] voters' fear of and discrimination against the external "Other" override the dissatisfaction with sexism in the respective parties' programmes and with the patriarchal order of the parties themselves' (p. 197). The comparison with our case is striking:

> Such body politics is inherently nativist and exclusionary; it excludes the strangers within and outside, also via conceptual metaphors: Jews and Roma are cast as 'parasites' that 'destroy' the host body from the inside . . . the Muslim woman is established as a *Feindbild* (an enemy image), as the threat to Western civilisation as such; all the negative attributes are condensed into this symbol which acts as a metonym and has been normalized in the mainstream. (p. 199)

Similar moves are found across global 'anti-gender' movements, which agitate against the threat of what they call 'gender ideology'; that is, women's (especially reproductive) rights and LGBTQ+ rights activism and related policy reforms (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Similarly, organised transphobia can claim to take a stand against 'gender ideology'; though, depending on the actor, this may be defined more narrowly in terms of pro-trans advocacy or 'trans ideology' rather than the broader feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy opposed by the anti-gender movement – especially as organised transphobia often claims a feminist heritage and identity. In both cases, however, 'gender ideology' represents not simply a belief system but 'a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and

minority values on average people' (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 9). As Birgit Sauer argues, anti-genderism

> . . . remains open to extensions indefinitely, as ever new topics can be addressed which require a moral but also political reversal of the view of several, very different groups . . . Attacks on feminism and gender equality policies under the label of 'anti-genderism' thus have to be recognized as part of a comprehensive strategy that attempts to create a consensus for this political project of reconstruction; which, in other words, seeks to turn authoritarian and exclusionary discourses and practice into common sense. (Sauer, 2019, pp. 345–346, cited in Wodak, 2020, p. 205)

Building on this literature, we define organised transphobia as the elite production of essentialising discourse and politics regarding trans people to construct them into an homogeneous group incompatible with 'our' 'normal' and 'good' society. Through the combined processes of othering, moral panics and conspiracy theories, and couched in populist discourse, trans people are constructed as a threat to society, justifying authoritarian and liberticidal measures 'we' would not accept for 'our' people. We choose to use the term 'transphobia' because others, such as TERF or Gender Critical, could inadvertently lend legitimacy to these movements and ideas, as transphobic discourse can revolve around more or less liberal articulations, as we discuss below. We also use the term 'organised transphobia' as this discourse does not occur at random or in isolated events, but rather is being generated and promoted by a highly organised social movement in a top-down manner.

Having explored key definitional and conceptual elements, we can now turn to the elements of the transphobic movement and discourse which make it reactionary.

Constructing trans people as 'other'

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p. 16) highlighted how woman is 'defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.' Crucially, as de Beauvoir stressed, women were/are not the only group susceptible to being othered, paving the way for work in intersectionality (see Harmer & Lumsden, 2019; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). This echoes Edward Said's work (1978/2003, pp. 20–21), as Orientalism, like transphobia,

> . . . is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.

This process of external othering parallels what happens to trans people, whereby their voices are forcefully kept out of public discourse and their existence is constructed through the discourse of actors in positions of discursive power, acting from outside of the trans experience and yet defining it for the rest. Similarly to Orientalism, transphobia responds 'more to the culture that produce[s] it than to its putative object' (p. 22). Othering is therefore a process through which hegemonic representations are created and

for which power is key: as Harmer and Lumsden (2019) note, 'by defining itself against an "other", the dominant group silences or delegitimizes the "other"'.

As Tudor (2021, p. 241) stresses, 'we are witnessing an overlap between transphobic positions and misogyny, racism, and migratism, a simplistic focus on sexual violence, and a rewriting of feminism as a single-issue-project'. Issues of 'queer liberalisms' and 'marginal mobilities' are discussed at length in a dedicated special issue in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* edited by Fadi Saleh and Mengia Tschalaer (2023). As such, much can and should be learnt from other processes of exclusion and othering. In particular, we argue that the process of othering trans people is one that can be well explained by borrowing from the vast literature on Islamophobia. Indeed, while it also echoes that which takes place in other forms of racialisation, as discussed below, Islamophobia is perhaps most useful as a comparison as it allows for the denial of racist, and therefore taboo/illiberal intent, as it is supposedly targeting something other than the dehumanisation of a group on the basis of race.

Othering is therefore a process which finds its roots not in the targeted community (whether it be Muslim communities or trans people), but in the way they are essentialised and homogenised in the discourse of the Islamophobe or transphobe. This resonates with how Steve Garner and Saher Selod (2015) describe the process of racialisation:

> . . . those who produce, absorb and reproduce representations of asylum-seekers, and Muslims, can transform the clearly culturally and phenotypically dissimilar individuals who fall into this bureaucratic category (asylum-seeker), or are simply devotees of the same religion (Muslims), into a homogeneous bloc: this is the basis of the racialization of Muslims (the process), and of Islamophobia (the snapshot of outcomes of this process).

This is strikingly applicable to liberal articulations of transphobia as those who produce, absorb and reproduce such discourses apply quasi-immutable characteristics to an otherwise wide variety of individuals who share as sole characteristic their trans identity. For example, all trans women must be understood as latent threats to women in spaces such as shared bathrooms or prison estates and therefore banned from such spaces regardless of the risks this would pose to them.[1] As with Islamophobia, one need not be trans to suffer from transphobia, seeing as it is not about the identity of the trans person, but rather about the way the transphobe assigns this identity and the essentialised characteristics they have chosen to go with it. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see women who do not conform to white, western standards of femininity be abused when they come into female only spaces (see Billson, 2022). This also speaks to the vilification of athlete Caster Semenya as a woman with high natural testosterone levels (Carrera-Fernández & DePalma, 2020, p. 753).

As with processes of racialisation, it is essential here to rely on a broad understanding of othering so as not to focus solely on illiberal occurrences at the expense of more mundane and even seemingly liberal ones (Mondon & Winter, 2017). In liberal societies, colourblind approaches to racism have tended to forcefully denounce extreme, illiberal articulations of racism, portrayed as exceptional and circumscribed, all the while ignoring more mainstream and systemic forms of oppression (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The same can be applied to transphobia, whereby the actions of the extreme right

or ultraconservatives may be denounced by more liberal voices whose attacks remain discursive and couched in pseudo-liberal and even progressive arguments. For example, more 'moderate' individuals and groups such as Woman's Place UK have sought to distance themselves from those who overtly ally with extreme-right figures or welcome new anti-trans laws created in Victor Orbán's Hungary.

The use of women's and LGB rights to support far-right and/or reactionary agendas is not new. For example, Jasbir Puar (2007) noted, as the War on Terror unfolded, that 'despite the re-entrenchment of heteronormativity, the United States was also portrayed as "feminist" in relation to the Taliban's treatment of Afghani women (a concern that had been previously of no interest to US foreign policy) and gay-safe in comparison to the Middle East'. Similar links have since been demonstrated by Sara Farris (2017; see also Delphy, 2015) in her work on femonationalism. In the case of transphobia, Tudor notes that (2021, p. 244)

> .. the strategy of accusing trans people of sexual violence echoes a discourse that externalizes sexual violence as taking place somewhere else, outside the West, or that is ascribed to migrants, Black and Brown persons, or Muslims—all of whom are constructed as the eternal migrants who can never belong in the Western nation-state . . . The recurring topos of externalizing sexual violence and ascribing it to the pervert other is shared in transphobic, Islamophobic, migratist, and racist debates.

As Pearce et al. (2020a, pp. 680–681) highlight, it is therefore not surprising that transphobic discourses 'have racist undertones, as the implicit whiteness of the women who are the subject of protection means that racialised and especially Black women and non-binary people are more likely to be considered dangerously masculine'. This links back to Orientalism and Islamophobia, where the Muslim man is constructed as the epitome of masculine violence, giving white men a free pass. With regard to transphobia,

> . . . discourses that position trans women and non-binary people as a 'threat' to cis women elude how (white) cis women's ability to claim a position of vulnerability in this context is, itself, a reflection of the power that (white) cis women have over trans women (as well as racialised subjects of all genders). One's ability to be recognised or awarded a position as 'vulnerable' is conditioned by whiteness and gender normativity. (Pearce et al., 2020a, pp. 680–681)

Moral panic, crossed thresholds and 'peak trans'

One way in which the process of othering is sedimented in mainstream discourse is through moral panics. As Alison Phipps (2020, p. 104) notes, moral panics are key to transphobes' strategy as 'trans-exclusionary feminism generates outrage through constructing all trans women as dangerous in response to isolated incidents'. However, exploring the trans panic alongside other documented moral panics helps illuminate how it draws upon long-established reactionary tropes. While moral panics were first defined academically by Stanley Cohen (1972/2011), we draw here from Stuart Hall et al.'s characterisation of the 1970s moral panic about mugging:

> When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress sudden and dramatic increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty', above and beyond that at which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic. (1978, p. 16)

The above passage could almost have been written about the present trans panic. Political and media accounts of the 'trans issue' are highly memetic in nature, often speaking 'with one voice' about 'transgender ideology' and 'social contagion' (on the representation of trans people in the media, see Åkerlund, 2019; Gupta, 2019). Social contagion is supposedly demonstrated by sudden and dramatic increases in trans identification, for example in what are often reported as 4000% or even 5000% increases in referrals to the UK's only youth gender identity service across a given period (Rayner, 2018; Turner, 2022).[2] Hall et al.'s observation regarding the supposed novelty of the 'threat' also rings true for the trans panic, which has hammered home the idea that trans existence is dangerous and new in spite of documented histories of gender incongruence spanning thousands of years, and decades of gender confirmation surgery and use of hormone treatments for medical transition (Heyam, 2022; Santos, 2018; Stryker, 2017) – including by children (Gill-Peterson, 2018).

We will not labour the point here, as the role of moral panic in organised transphobia has been discussed many times (see for example Faye, 2021; Mestre i Mestre, 2022; Miles, 2022; Pepin-Neff & Cohen, 2021; Slothouber, 2020). However, one element of Hall et al.'s account of moral panics is particularly interesting for our analysis: that of *crossed thresholds*. In moral panic discourse, *thresholds* 'mark out symbolically the limits of societal tolerance' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 225), past which point action must be taken. These could be legal thresholds or (putative) potential for violence:

> . . . acts which pose a challenge to the fundamental basis of the social order itself, or its essential structures, almost always involve, or at least are signified as leading inexorably across, the violence threshold. (1978, p. 225)

Crossed thresholds are key to the trans panic; organised transphobia trades heavily in the image of trans violation of a violence threshold. This may be stated as a *violence against women* threshold, with trans women's access to spaces such as women's public toilets presented as leading inevitably to assaults on cisgender women (see Slater, 2023). Or it may be stated as a *harm to children* threshold, as children's access to knowledge about trans identities is depicted by key organisations such as Transgender Trend (which campaigns against children's access to both gender-affirming treatment and trans-inclusive schools resources) as 'normalising' harmful practices and resulting in children's 'indoctrination' by ideologues and worse (see Ashley, 2020 on 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' [ROGD] and Amery, 2023). These are such powerful significatory tools that they can be invoked regardless of reality; for example, despite the fact that trans people's access to gendered public spaces in the UK is governed by equality law, *not* by the Gender Recognition Act (*AEA* v. *EHRC*, 2021; Cowan et al., 2021; Sharpe, 2020), the phantom

of violence against women within such spaces was enough to generate support for the government to block meaningful gender recognition reform, first within its own jurisdiction, then by the Scottish Parliament (Morton & Seddon, 2023).

Thresholds form another central part of the lore of the organised transphobia movement, specifically within *conversion narratives* in which participants recount the event or events that they claim transformed them from a tolerant (if apathetic) supporter of trans rights into an active member of the anti-trans movement. This is termed the 'peak trans' moment: a term which seems to have first appeared on the website Reddit's now-deleted GenderCritical forum (Tiffany, 2020). Participants claim to have 'peaked' upon discovering that trans people or 'trans activists' (often styled 'transactivists') had made a demand that had 'gone too far' or had otherwise crossed a threshold. Peak trans moments often involve literal crossed thresholds, such as the threshold of the women's toilet. They may be banal, such as an experience of being called to task for using the wrong pronouns, or they may involve violence, for example, hearing that a demonstrator behaved violently at a pro-trans protest. In an explicit attempt to 'peak' more people, a prominent transphobic website collates news stories involving allegations of violence by trans women alongside reports about trans women participating in women's sports, 'wokery' in schools and universities, the 'silencing' of anti-trans views, and other such stories.

'Peak trans' narratives bear a striking resemblance to the conversion narratives found in extreme-right circles, particularly the 'red pill' narratives popular in online misogynist communities (the 'manosphere'). In these communities, to 'take the red pill' is to have an epiphany about the harms of feminism, the naturalness of male dominance, and how 'All Women Are Like That' (Furl, 2022). More recently, as well as repudiation of feminism, it has come to signify the repudiation of 'multiculturalism, leftism, liberalism and globalism, followed by the embrace of traditionalism, hierarchy, and inequality' (Stern, 2019, p. 16). Similarly, 'peak trans' can signify not only the embrace of transphobia but also the active repudiation of pro-trans feminism alongside previously-held values such as kindness and allyship.

Red pill stories, like peak trans stories, all involve a process of personal transformation having 'opened one's eyes' to the 'truth' (Ging, 2017, p. 640; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016; Stern, 2019, pp. 16–17). In this way they conform to the structure of 'awakening narratives' as described by Thomas DeGloma (2010, 2014): autobiographical accounts of how individuals claim to have discovered 'the truth'. Key to the structure of such narratives is that they make a 'temporal distinction between "falsehood" and "truth"' (2010, p. 522) whereby the past is associated with falsehood and the present with truth. 'Awakeners' – both the 'red-pilled' and the 'peaked' – may describe their past self as if they were a different person: one who was ignorant or a fool (2010, p. 533). The similarities with online 'red pill' discourse do not end there. Stern describes red pill ideology as 'Manichean', envisioning the social world as a struggle between 'cancerous' feminism and its antithesis, the red pill (2019, p. 19). At its extreme ends, the rhetoric and practice of organised transphobia is similarly Manichean, depicting 'trans ideology' as an evil to be stopped at all costs – even if this requires entering into alliances with the extreme and/or Christian Right; even if it requires sacrificing hard-won rights such as legal abortion. In red pill circles, the Manichean narrative is bolstered by portraying feminism as the polar opposite of the red pill, based in idealism and emotion as opposed to masculine

pragmatism, science and reason (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Organised transphobia appears to adopt and adapt this anti-feminist argument, pitching itself as the guardian of supposed scientific 'truths' ('human beings cannot change sex'; 'a woman is an adult human female') versus emotional pro-trans 'ideology'.

DeGloma argues that the same narrative structure of 'awakening' stories is present across ideologies and may be found in other narratives expressing diametrically opposed worldviews (for example, in the awakening narratives of Mormons and ex-Mormons alike [2010, p. 528]). The structure of 'peak trans' and red pill stories may therefore not be specific to reactionary politics. However, what is striking in both movements is the extent to which the awakening narrative is foregrounded. Awakening is so central to the 'red pill' that the ideology itself is named after it. 'Red pilling' is 'a communal experience [that] helps construct a shared language of social transformation' (Stern, 2019, pp. 16–17). Similarly, within organised transphobia considerable effort goes into soliciting and sharing 'peak trans' stories, with the aim not only of bolstering in-group solidarity but also of 'peaking' others. In both movements, 'awakening' is central to both their self-understandings and their recruitment processes.

Removing trans people from 'The People': Harnessing populist discourse to legitimise exclusion

Tying this together is an attempt at constructing 'a people' spoken for by those who have been red-pilled. While many transphobes rely on awakening narratives and exceptionalisation of the self in much the same way as typical reactionary movements do, they also tend to claim that their struggle is in defence of most people against a nefarious elite (e.g. Sinnott, 2023) that has 'captured' policy and public institutions (e.g. Jones & Mackenzie, 2020). We refrain here from calling the transphobic movement populist, as this term is commonly misused, and using it would risk legitimising and euphemising transphobia (Brown & Mondon, 2020; Glynos & Mondon, 2016; Goyvaerts, 2021; Hunger & Paxton, 2022). Yet we believe the more sophisticated understandings of the term can shed some light on the strategy and discourse employed by transphobes to claim that (1) their position is supported by a democratic mandate and finds its source and legitimacy in 'the people'; and that (2) the trans movement is elitist, powerful and authoritarian and therefore against 'the people'.

We take our cue from the discursive approach to populism, best summarised by Giorgos Katsambekis (2020), which sees the construction of 'the people' as 'an open and contingent process' (p. 61). As such, we take a minimal definition based on a discourse focusing on people-centrism and anti-elitism, with people-centrism referring to 'the primacy given to "the people", who are constructed by way of linking a series of different subjects, groups and demands that share common grievances and frustrations' and anti-elitism to 'the construction of a fundamental division within society between an "us" and a "them", which generates the conditions for the antagonistic identification of "the people" through their opposition to given opponents' (Katsambekis, 2020, p. 62). Avoiding the normative pitfalls of the thin-ideology approach allows us to see populism not as inherently anti-pluralist, but merely as a discursive construction of 'the people' which is then qualified by the ideology it aims to serve.

Understanding the contingent nature of the construction of 'the people' is essential to the role it plays in the democratic public arena. As Katsambekis (2020, p. 56) notes:

> . . . 'the people' in democratic societies constitutes the alleged ultimate authority and source of legitimation of the polity, but as a subject, it never truly appears in a tangible manner, flesh and blood, exercising its power in a direct and unmediated way.

This understanding of 'the people' as a construction is illuminating in the case of transphobia, as its proponents claim to speak on behalf of different 'people'. While US transphobes have generally built their people along more traditional patriarchal lines, British transphobes have sought to claim they speak on behalf of women, children and the LGB community, claiming a liberal position and opening up public spaces outright reactionaries could not afford. As Pearce et al. (2020b, p. 885) note, 'the difference is that in the UK, appeals to religious and social conservative values have been less successful in recent decades; we have therefore seen a laundering of anti-gender talking points through forms of "respectable" middle-class feminism'. Either way, and contrary to more inclusive and left-wing articulations of populism, what we see in transphobic discourse is very much a construction of an homogeneous 'people'. Stressing the anti-pluralist nature of transphobia matters, as a populist counter-argument is also deployed on the pro-trans-rights side, but this time in a pluralist, intersectional fashion which values and brings to the fore the diversity and plurality core to a progressive construction of the people.

The populist construction of 'the people' within organised transphobia is thus reminiscent of that on the far right, as it imposes clear boundaries regarding who belongs and who does not. In fact, it goes further than the more reconstructed far-right discourse, which tends to avoid biologically deterministic arguments that could link it back to its fascist roots. Transphobic discourse, on the other hand, often resorts to more or less crude biological arguments (see Serano, 2020) which echo traditional fascist fantasies of nature and the body. It is no surprise therefore to see extreme right and fascist groups supporting these positions, which could easily be extended to other traditional exclusionary politics based on race or ability – a point made abundantly clear when neo-Nazis joined a Posie Parker rally in Melbourne in 2023 (Hansford, 2023). As highlighted earlier, whether transphobes actively hold extreme right or fascist views is irrelevant. What matters is that their construction of 'the people' from often mainstream and prominent positions gives credence to the extreme-right and fascist narrative that 'the people' can be neatly divided based on essentialised and immutable biological norms and that 'the other' can be oppressed or excluded and their rights denied on this basis.

Populism is often key to reactionary discourse as it lends otherwise minoritarian and exclusionary ideas (see Stonewall, 2022) a veneer of democratic legitimacy, even though said ideas have no place or legitimacy in a democracy worthy of the name. As is common in the mainstreaming of reactionary politics, potentially progressive concepts such as free speech are used and abused to justify and legitimise exclusion: transphobes are simply raising 'reasonable concerns' (see McClean, 2021). As discussed in the previous sections, transphobic discourse is based on the exclusion and removal of key rights (or their pre-emption) of an oppressed minoritised group fantasised through moral panics. Yet this reversal of power relationships – turning the oppressed into the

nefarious elite – is key to spreading and mainstreaming reactionary discourse (Brown et al., 2023). In a typical reactionary fashion, trans people, despite being generally prevented from accessing public discourse and widely discriminated against throughout society, are painted as a powerful and homogeneous group with privileged access to power. In alliance with other elites, a 'trans lobby' is claimed to be conspiring against 'the people': in this case generally embodied by a generalised and essentialised understanding of 'women' (which is then extended to traditional forms of white, hetero, cis patriarchy by the far right). In a move akin to antisemitic and Islamophobic discourse, reactionary fantasies portray trans people as a conspiring minority with malicious intent undermining the health of society in an almost pathological way. It is again therefore no surprise that these conspiracy theories are echoed in antisemitic circles and even coalesce at times (see Anti-Defamation League, 2022).

As Sara Ahmed (2021) notes, 'gender conservative feminisms are part of the not-so-new conservative common sense, which has reweaponised "reality" as a "war against the woke," that is, as an effort to restore racial as well as gendered hierarchies by demonizing those who question them'. As with other articulations of reactionary politics, the power of mainstream liberal organised transphobia comes from what Pearce et al. (2020b) have described as '"respectable" middle class feminism' credentials which tap into narratives of progress and therefore could not possibly be reactionary. In a sleight of hand, it is not transphobia that threatens the rights of the trans community, but those who oppose transphobia who are threatening women (understood as a monolithic group, in which only the experiences and expectations of middle-class white women matter [see Koyama 2020]). As Ahmed (2021) highlights, 'It is not only that the terms "sex" and "gender" are being used to de-realise and de-legitimate trans people, but the project of trans inclusion can be framed as feminist exclusion, as if trans people are replacing us by replacing our terms with theirs.'

Conclusion: Transphobia, reactionary politics and the threat to democracy

For Hall et al. (1978, p. 221), moral panics are 'one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a "silent majority" is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lends its legitimacy to a "more than usual" exercise of control'. Ironically, the current moral panic about trans people is voiced in the name of women as if it were trans activists and their allies who were the oppressors, in the same way women have been accused of 'demonising men' when pushing for women's rights. This is not surprising: as Ahmed (2021) notes, 'anyone involved in trying to challenge norms and conventions to enable them to be more accommodating . . . will know how quickly you will be judged as imposing restrictions on the freedom of others'.

What this article shows is that organised transphobia is based on similar strategies and politics to the wider reactionary movement which has become increasingly mainstream. Its targets are constructed as threatening and powerful in their challenge to hetero-cis-patriarchal (white) norms in a manner reminiscent of the great replacement theory (Ekman, 2022). Through a mix of liberal and illiberal articulations, transphobic movements seek to push authoritarian and liberticidal measures based on moral panics and the othering of

trans people, and couched in pseudo-populist discourse. Such coercive measures can be witnessed across a wide range of areas which seek to regulate and restrict trans lives, chiefly education (Scottish Government, 2021), healthcare (Shepherd & Hanckel, 2021), state recognition of identity (Burman, 2022) and sport (Storr et al., 2021). As Carrera-Fernández and DePalma (2020) note, 'trans-exclusionary discourses not only oppress adult people who identify as trans*, but they also constrain children and young people who are learning how to do gender'.

Considering that such coercive measures could be logically extended to other communities and minorities, it is not surprising to see organised transphobia growing links with far and extreme-right groups, their collusion in certain conspiracy theories or their participation in demonstrations together (see Hermansson, 2022; Rabinowitz, 2022). As such, the far and extreme-right support of mainstream liberal transphobia is a logical step, as it not only builds on the same methods of exclusion, but also legitimises many of their talking points and opens the field to further processes of exclusion, including eugenics (Honkasalo, 2019; see also Owen, 2022, on toxification and genocidal ideologies).

The fragile state of liberal democracies and their failure to withstand reactionary onslaughts have meant that reactionary arguments couched in pseudo-liberal or progressive terms have been allowed to enter the mainstream. This matches processes of racialisation and the backlash against demands for fair and equal treatment from historically oppressed minoritised groups and communities. As recent research has shown, gains regarding the acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities remain fragile (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2023) and, in this context, the attacks on some, justified by powerful actors in public discourse, risk precipitating and emboldening threats to all. In this context, intersectional approaches to fighting oppression and reaction are essential (see also Tudor's fascinating discussion of dimensions of transnationalism [2017]). As Shon Faye (2021) powerfully argues, 'trans gender justice is justice for all' and by extension the exclusion of one must be felt and combatted as the exclusion of all.

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Notes

1. As Nigel Patel (2017, p. 61) has highlighted in their research, 'participants' experiences of violence in bathrooms are connected not just through gender, but also through race and class'.
2. These seemingly frightening figures are misleading; they represent an increase from what were very low referral rates – in the dozens per year – to rates that appear to be stabilising at a level that we might expect, given reasonable estimates of the number of transgender children in the population (Moore, 2022b; The Tavistock and Portman, 2019).

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