


CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Anti-Trans Attacks: Interrogating “Gender” in Politics and Gender Scholarship

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This essay considers the rapid uptick in anti-trans legislation that targets transgender girls and women as an occasion to critically interrogate the ways that gender is conceptualized and operationalized in political science (Murib 2022). I argue that the disciplinary tendency to view gender as a single-axis facet of identity that is static and rooted in biology needs to be reconsidered in light of two problems. First, collapsing biological sex and gender naturalizes the gender of non-trans women and men as static, normal, and self-evident; transgender people, in contrast, are locked into perpetual processes of gendering themselves against this biological baseline (Enke 2012). Second, and as a result of this limited view of gender, political scientists face difficulties anticipating, understanding, and addressing recent mobilizations invested in maintaining White, heterosexual, and reproductive families as the cornerstone of what it means to be a proper citizen (Alexander 1994).

In the United States, these include legislative attacks on the rights of trans youth and their parents, the criminalization of drag performances and pregnant people seeking abortions, challenges to books on sexuality in public libraries, and campaigns to prohibit Critical Race Theory in schools. Globally, these mobilizations pit migrants against sexual and gender minorities to pose nations as accepting of difference. Contests over gender and sexuality and, by association, the proper roles and behavior of women and men animate these developments. Perhaps most pressing for the stakes of this essay, these mobilizations are united by a shared emphasis on biology as presumably neutral truth about bodies to obscure their discriminatory intent. When political scientists leave the “gender” side of “politics and gender” underspecified due to the emphasis on biology, they not only abet this type of reasoning, but they also miss opportunities for analyzing these on-going political events.

Gender (and Sex) in Political Science

The dominant ontological view of gender within political science is that it is an analytically distinct social category that is constrained by biological difference, or sex (Westbrook and Saperstein 2015). Take, for example, the prolific work on gendered political behavior. These researchers grant that gender is a meaningful social category that ought to be subject to social science inquiry, but limit understandings of gender to the possibilities determined by biological difference (Hatemi et al 2012). Proponents of this approach draw on medical scholarship to support how biological factors such as *in utero* effects on fetus development (i.e., hormones) shape gendered behavior (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant 2017; Hatemi et al. 2012; R. McDermott and Hatemi 2011).

The logic then follows that gendered qualities indexed as feminine and masculine vary for people assigned female and male at birth, respectively, and that these variations explain different political attitudes among women and men. These include the perception that masculinity is defined by more aggressive and competitive behavior while femininity is characterized as intuitive and caring. Recent updates to this line of scholarship investigate how these differences shape political behavior regardless of biological sex (Gidengil and Stolle 2021; M. McDermott and Jones 2022; M. McDermott 2016). While this evolution presents important findings about political attitudes and outcomes, it also requires perceptions of natural differences between the sexes to inform gendered stereotypes. This retreat to biology runs the risk of leaving the logic of subordinating women based on qualities that disqualify them from public life intact, as such qualities are seen to be rooted inextricably in biology (Rippon 2019).

Survey questions used by social scientists also rely on biological difference to investigate gender. Sociologists Laurel Westbrook and Aliya Samperstein examined how sex and gender are operationalized in four longitudinal studies often used by political scientists: the American National Election Survey, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the General Social Survey, and the 1979 Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Their findings indicate that although the terminology used to describe sex and gender change over time, the measurement of gender as nested within biology does not (Westbrook and Samperstein 2015, 639). In other words, although “gender” is broadly understood to connote a socially meaningful category, social scientists still consider it integrally linked to biological difference (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant 2017). This is reflected in questions that link “woman” to “mother” or survey practices that ask interviewers to use visual assessments to determine a respondent’s gender. The implications of operationalizing gender in this way is that it fails to capture meaningful variations in experiences associated with gender, particularly for transgender people and also for Black, Latine, Asian, Native, and Arab people whose genders are routed through racialized gender norms to render them “other” (Labuski and Keo-Meier 2015).

Survey innovations piloted by public health scholars and adopted by political scientists attempt to overcome the difficulty in capturing transgender populations with the introduction of the “two-step question” (Tate et al 2013). This

question first asks for a respondent's gender identity, which includes male, female, and transgender options, and a follow up question about sex assigned at birth. While celebrated for reliably measuring transgender people in a population (Conron et al 2014), a study of how LGBTQ respondents view the two-step question found that many transgender respondents perceived questions about sex assigned at birth as invasive and would be hesitant to provide reliable answers outside of a health care setting (Cahill et al 2014). Furthermore, using sex terminology (male and female) for both sex assigned at birth and gender identity commits the analytic slippage at the center of this essay by collapsing sex and biology with gender.

These flattened conceptualizations and operationalizations of gender run the risk of producing less robust analyses of power because the assumption that gender and sex are stable and binary gives biological difference outsized explanatory power. As a result, political scientists are incapable of anticipating how ideological formations, such as the heteronormative family, animate political mobilizations that target people who are LGBTQ (Murib 2023), Black (Cohen 1997), and undocumented (Leach 2022) based on the perception that they fail to reflect American family norms. The "political" aspects of political science are critically neglected in this type of scholarship.

Critical Interventions

Feminist science scholars, queer theory, and trans studies posit that biological understandings of sex are themselves contingent and socially constructed to establish and maintain a rigid gender binary. These thinkers argue that scientific narratives of sex as biological and essential are exactly that: stories told about bodies that reify gender stereotypes in service of maintaining power (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler 1990; Spade 2011; in political science see Currah 2022; Silverberg 1993; and Wuest 2023). These alternative conceptualizations of gender widen the researcher's perspective to examine how political regimes and systems of governance shape gender (and sex) and, consequently, provide robust and rigorous understandings of how inequalities are put in place and maintained.

Perhaps most obviously, intersectionality was developed as an explicit critique of liberalism as a governing ideology and its reliance on single axis frameworks (Crenshaw 1989). For political scientists, intersectionality as a theory and methodological approach is useful for examining the ways that uneven political outcomes are shaped by the interlocking forces of White supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, nationalism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity (Simien and Hancock 2011). These uses of intersectionality are attuned to how political, social, and economic factors exert significant influence on what comes to be known about a group, including "gender."

Scholars of gender are uniquely positioned to move the discipline toward producing more robust understandings of groups that recognize their inherent heterogeneity. These shifts ought to foreground political identities as produced by power as it is routed through political, social, and economic institutions and norms (i.e., laws, policies, and institutions). Methodologically, this means that

researchers will need to utilize qualitative approaches over quantitative ones. Highlighting the sites where what comes to be known simply as “gender” and “identity” are constructed and maintained directs attention to the substantive roots of negative stereotypes and meanings that are attached to stigmatized groups. If recent developments are any indication, scholars ought to take this latter point into serious consideration if we are to have any hope for understanding the global assault on those glossed as “deviant” and “outsiders” using the language of sexual, gender, and racial difference.

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