

‘Anti-gender’ politics as “reality enforcement” and cisgender performativity

Dr Anna Carastathis

Co-Investigator, RESIST project

Senior Researcher, Feminist Autonomous Centre for research

Abstract

Drawing on research on ‘anti-gender’ politics conducted in the context of the RESIST project (‘Fostering Intersectional Queer Feminist Resistances to Transnational ‘Anti-Gender’ Politics’), I conceptualise ‘anti-gender’ politics as an umbrella of practices of “reality enforcement” and cisgender performativity, seeking to eliminate gender and sexual self-determination. “Reality enforcement” is drawn from Talia Bettcher’s analysis of transphobia (2014), theorising how trans people’s genders are erased through cisnormative, compulsory assignments and gendered violence. Key to this conceptualisation is self-determination: what Talia Bettcher elsewhere calls “first-person authority over gender” (2009). Self-determination — including living free of violence — is what anti-gender actors, across ideological alignments, oppose: they view it as a threat to the political orders they seek to materialise, which they proclaim ‘natural orders’. Self-determination links together resistances to ‘anti-gender’ politics: queer, feminist, trans struggles (Butler, 2024); struggles for freedom of movement; anti-colonial and antiracist struggles.

The opposition to ‘gender ideology’ and ‘wokeness’ crosses the political spectrum; it is not restricted to the far right and is institutionalised in laws that naturalise the binary gender system, the assignment of gender at birth, and coerced reproduction. Such reactionary views of gender — the refusal of gender as such and the reassertion of the category of ‘sex’ — circulate between, and bring into alignment seemingly contradictory politics on the right, centre, and left. They also suture to fascist discourses, which empower self-proclaimed gender critical feminist conceptions that seek to enforce the ostensibly fixed biological ‘reality’ of sex (Amery, 2024). On these views, to be ‘critical’ of gender, entails the reassertion of ‘sex’ as an indisputable ontological reality. Notions of ‘sex-based rights’, ‘adult human females’, ‘native women’, ‘women-born-women’ etc. evince not only epistemic injustice with respect to gender identifications; through the reimposition of ‘sex’ as a sociolegal category ‘anti-gender’ politics seek to materialise and enforce their ‘reality.’ Transfeminist conceptualisations of gendered and sexualised violence are also derealised in this gesture, with the inversion of actors and targets of violence being a key strategy in representing trans-exclusionary cisgender women *in the act of exclusion* as the (potential) victims as opposed to the (actual) agents of violence.

Drawing on critical accounts of cisness (Haney, 2024, Bey 2022), heteroactivism (Nash & Browne, 2020) and in particular their racialised gender performativity, I argue we can understand the performativity of cisgender as an essential dimension of contemporary ‘anti-gender’ politics, which is another way of making sense of their seemingly contradictory appearance across ideological spectra, law, forms of political rule, carceral and ‘caring’ institutions.

Works Cited

Bettcher, T. M. (2014). Trapped in the wrong theory: Rethinking trans oppression and resistance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39 (2), 383-406.

Bettcher, T. M. (2009). Trans Identities and First-Person Authority. In L. J. Shrage, ed. *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*. Oxford University Press.

Bey, M. (2022). *Cistem Failure. Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*. Duke University Press.

Butler, J. (2024). *Who's afraid of gender?* Allen Lane.

Heaney, E., ed. (2024). *Feminism Against Cisness*. Duke University Press.

Nash, C. & Browne, K. (2020). *Heteroactivism: Resisting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Rights and Equalities*. Zed Books/Bloomsbury Publishing.



UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG



Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union (EU Project ID 101060749). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or British and Swiss funding authorities. Neither the European Union nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them.