



# Repressive Moralism: World Making and Petty Fascism in Transgender Politics

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## Abstract

The past decade has seen a shift in the way that minorities exert their influence in society. Where in previous decades the emphasis was on winning the hearts and minds of the population at large, a recent strategy has been to ignore general public discourse and only to target specific influential bodies. In this paper we use the example of transgender issues to analyse the socio-psychological dimensions of this approach. We show how some groups promoting these issues eschew a wider social discourse and debate in the mass media, and how their strategy rests on a self-construction as victims of the hetero-normative society, with a concomitant appeal to moral rather than factual argumentation. This is combined with a programme of aggressive challenge to opponents through social media, and sometimes direct action, which effectively closes discussion on the topic. We conclude that these methods have much in common with the oppressive politics of fascist rule.

**Keywords** Moralism · Transgender · Communication · Victimisation · Tolerance · Culture wars

## Transgender discourse

In this text we analyse the characteristics of communication related to 'political correctness' and minority politics in social psychological terms. We take examples from public debates involving the transgender community and place them in the theoretical framework of discourse theory, social representation theory, and approaches of minority influence. Our focus is primarily on contemporary transgender discourse in the United States and Europe because this phenomenon has gained significant visibility during recent years there and provides prime examples of how minorities

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enact their interests and politics. We believe however, that our conclusions also apply to other politically engaged minorities in the so-called 'culture wars'.

Transgender individuals, particularly men who transmute to a female identity and appearance are often the target of attacks by trans-intolerant hooligans (Phillips, 2013; Stelloh, 2019), of mobbing in schools (Norris & Orchowski, 2020), and of other forms of discrimination (Haines et al., 2018; Miller & Grollman, 2015). At the same time, one must not forget the outrageously high number of ciswomen—that is, women whose female identity is congruent with their biological sex, being battered and killed the world over (World Health Organisation, 2021). The authors wish to make clear that they condemn any violence, prejudice, and discrimination against women, transgender persons, and any other human being.

The sexual category of a new-born as male or female is attributed according to the baby's sexual anatomical constitution, usually clearly discernible. If necessary, pre- or post-natal chromosomal testing will reveal anomalies in the genetic basis of male and female sex chromosomes. The term 'transgender' describes persons who feel dysphoria with their biological sex ascription, and who desire to change their sex to the other gender. To achieve this, transgender persons may decide to alter their bodies hormonally or surgically.

There is considerable research about stereotyping, bullying, and prejudice against transgender people by cisgender persons (e.g. Haines et al., 2018; Klett-Davies, 2019; Miller & Grollman, 2015). However, while this tendency to conduct research about discrimination against transpersons is important, we also believe there is also an issue concerning the manner in which the transgender community deals with people who do not endorse their enthusiasm for a changed gender identity.

In this paper we adopt a discursive approach (Wiggins, 2016), drawing examples from recent media and social reports to illustrate relevant aspects of social theory. Our aim is to highlight, through these exemplars, how social processes are manifest in both media reporting and political decision-making, to discuss the social psychological mechanisms involved, and to show how the political agenda resulting from the strategies used by activists affects both the quality and content of social debate.

## Consensual discourse versus reified monologues

Democratic societies develop by maintaining a lively discourse about relevant societal issues at any given point in time. This discourse is maintained by individuals in their everyday conversations, by the mass media by their news reporting, and, increasingly important in the modern world, through the diverse sources of valid and false information in the internet and social media. In order for diversified public opinion to be maintained in society, it is crucial that discourse is free, dialogical, and carried out in a communitarian sense, allowing partial consent to emerge and opposition to be accepted by all participants (as in the ideal model by Habermas, 1985; Moscovici, 1981). It is deeply damaging for public discourse if single voices can determine the tune that the 'orchestra' is forced to play. Censorship in democratic societies may sometimes be necessary in order to target anomic and violent voices in social media, because these voices threaten the very existence of democracy

and human rights. However, censorship that targets mere opinions and beliefs will destroy trust and coherence in a society in the short term., and be even more damaging in the long term. This destructive effect is particularly apparent in the self-censorship that people may feel tempted to submit to in times of political tension, such as has occurred recently in the US (Ekins, 2020).

The media, and particularly television or video blogs and podcasts where people face each other in an open-minded setting, are important avenues for public discourse. They can provide platforms for minority representatives who may otherwise find it difficult to present matters of minority interest. In order to offer such a platform, a journalist from a German weekly magazine set up a podcast intended to initiate a conversation between himself and a minority representative, with the conversation being scheduled across several weekly episodes. He scheduled several episodes with his first guest—a feminist Muslim woman—as well as with his second guest—a transwoman and activist. However, neither of the two series of podcasts could be completed because both the Muslim feminist and the LGBTQIA+ activist cancelled their participation after one or two episodes, due to enormous pressure from their peer groups. Both of the intended partners in the conversation succumbed to threats of ostracism by their peers, who were more interested in maintaining their reified within-group monologues and their role of marginalised victims than in entering a public discussion and communal discourse (Fleischhauer, 2021). They strongly opposed an open-minded exchange of opinions about their minority interests, in order to avoid any averse public responses.

Shutting down discourse is a political tool for promoting a specific agenda in politics and society (Callaghan & Augoustinos, 2013). A reified universe of discourse is commonly found in institutions, particularly at the interface of institutions and the public. It results from the rules and laws governing such institutional bodies, which most of the time are inflexible and rigidly bound to regulations, by contrast with consensual and communitarian discourse (Batel & Castro, 2009).

A clear example of this is revealed in a 'meta-empirical' study of the structure and development of events in Arthur Miller's play 'The Crucible', in which the author analysed the emergence and characteristics of a reified institutional discourse following some unusual events involving girls from the village of Salem in the seventeenth century (Wagner et al., 2008). Due to a psychological shock, two girls fell in a day-long stupor that some villagers explained by natural causes. Others resorted to the magical explanation of witchcraft, which was a serious offence in this pious Puritan community. Once an official court was called to investigate the accusations of witchcraft and devil's work, the to and fro of freely exchanged opinions during the first day of consensual conversations swiftly vanished, to be replaced by stiff and reserved utterances. As a high-level religious institution the court had the right and duty to execute any person found to be affiliated with the devil, which resulted in more than a dozen executions.

The reified discourse that institutions employ formally and some groups employ informally assures a homogeneity of opinions that helps to preserve in-group harmony—that is, to promote a group that is able to represent itself as an entity and unit, with a common aim of promoting the group's interest (Castano et al., 2002). Such groups are called active minorities in social psychology (Moscovici et al.,

1994). As we saw in the previous example of the podcast, individuals may deviate from their ingroup's informal norms for personal 'profit' or visibility, but other group members will tend to call the 'deviant' to order by the threat of ostracism and worse.

## Creating social facts

There is no doubt that physics and biological evolution have shaped the workings of the human body as well as the functional units of the human brain. However, cultural and social life are the product of forces beyond straightforward natural constraints. To a certain extent it can be said that the intricacies of human interaction, culture, and institutions transcend the limitations of natural causes. In other words natural evolution has prepared the brain such that social and cultural phenomena became an essential factor increasing procreative fitness.

Cultural and social aspects of reality are covered by theories of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1965; Gergen, 1985; Searle, 1995). Social construction is the process of communication, discourse, overt behaviour and interaction, by which people jointly establish and elaborate the meaning and relevant attributes of experience—physical things or imaginary issues. Social construction happens tacitly wherever people exist in groups and social objects are addressed unwittingly and/or enacted automatically. It is the taken-for-granted character of objects and issues populating social worlds that gives groups their sense of identity and belonging.

The resulting shared meaning and attached symbolism is demonstrated in how group members communicate about social objects and how they behave and interact with regard to them. In the case of imaginary constructions such as deities, justice, honour, and other abstract ideas, it is the mutual behaviour of group members that enacts the social object as a particular pattern of interrelationships. Even imaginary issues may have physical consequences through the concerted interactions of group members—for example, in contemporary systems of justice with their prisons, or in the consequences of an accusation of blasphemy (Putra et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2018). Groups and individuals experience social objects as extensions of their behaviour, as part of their thinking, and as mediating their relationship with others (Moscovici, 2008, p. 8).

A social constructionist ideology, taken literally, may also be used as an instrument for a political purpose. This happens when the concept of a socially constructed reality becomes intentionally detached from its constitutive spontaneity, and is used to enforce a specific set of interests, as in commercial or political propaganda. In other words, a group of political actors may take social constructivism at face value and announce that their sphere of influence is truly populated by factors—essentially the figments of their imagination—which entitle them to 'dynamite' other people's constructions.

In the case of the transgender movement the most important step is negating the reality of biological sex. This requires a deconstruction of the popular belief of man and woman as being determined by deep seated essences (Wagner et al., 2009). There is no doubt that biologically male and female children in the majority of cases

are educated differently by their parents and extended family group. The boy-girl difference in education may vary considerably on a continuum, and each sex may experience differential treatment first by parents and later by the wider society. This imposes more than subtle differences in male and female behaviours, preferences in taste, and ways of thinking over the biological basis of the sexes. It could be argued that these imposed differences are the consequence of socially constructing genders that in their stereotypical form are what is considered a woman and a man by society in general. This process of transforming the dimorphism of biological sexes into the androgynous dimorphism of genders has been extensively addressed by sex and gender theorists (Bem, 1981; Dreger, 1998; Heilbrun, 1986; Perry et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2020).

Gender identities are subjective in the sense that every individual is free to accept or question the sexual category that has been assigned to them at birth. In democratic societies individuals are free to follow their preferences in affiliating with others of the same or opposite sex, to wear stereotypical attire of the opposite gender, and to announce that they consider themselves as members of the opposite sex or gender, creating 'transmen' and 'transwomen' whose biological sex conflicts with their preference for the opposite gender identity. In many countries there is no law or argument other than age restrictions for surgical alterations and hormonal treatment that could effectively forbid assuming a cross-gender identity.

In other words, in transgender ideology the world of gender is made of the feelings that an individual has with regard to their gender identity, and the 'social' aspect of gender is constructed along subjective preferences that others are required to accept by face value. Individuals feel entitled to be a member of a certain gender category by their personal sense of belonging or not belonging. However, what appears to be a free decision by the individual mind is ultimately the consequence of the individual having absorbed a myriad of narratives and discourses about sex and gender in their lifetime and about the nature of female and male exemplars. This can be understood as socially constructing, and being entitled to, a body of 'man' or 'woman' according to the individual's subjective preferences (cf. Ekins & King, 1999).

Militant proponents of the 'trans-movement' such as the 'International Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth Organisation' [IGLYO, <https://www.iglyo.com/>], face the problem of how to establish trans-identities as social facts and not as the fad and fashion of a few individuals. What was initially the will, desire, or need to adopt another gender identity has become a political issue, with interest driven pressure groups aiming to institutionalise a new social object: the existence of trans-gender persons, through influencing public discourse. This is a huge task because the movement has to nullify the essentialised dichotomous thinking of the vast majority of people and cultures, as well as changing bureaucratic assumptions and customs, such as 'man' and 'woman' being the only gender categories allowed in official documents until recently (Wagner et al., 2009). In social psychological terms, their task is to realign the new social fact of trans-gender individuals with common-sense and institutional regulations, through rhetorical and political means.

The lobby group IGLYO recommends three steps for its affiliates to follow in normalising public discourse and achieving institutional recognition (Louis, 2021, p. 70). The first is to de-medicalize the topic in the public mind, such that it does not automatically link trans-gender with surgery and hormones. The aim is to de-essentialise the general perception of gender and trans-gender, such that the transformation appears as a simple expression of the person's wish for a better fitting identity. The second step is to attach the issue to another campaign in law making, that can be used as a 'Trojan Horse' to enter the law-making process. The third is to avoid publicity and media coverage, preferably and to engage only in ingroup discussion and consensual discourse. This has become the preferred strategy of several minorities with a contentious cause, such as the British LGBTQ organisation 'Stonewall' [stonewall.org.uk] in their campaigns to commit educational institutions to embrace their goals (Siddique, 2021).

It may appear surprising that a trans-gender lobby minority follows a quiet strategy that sidesteps public and media attention and discursive visibility as much as possible. In earlier times active minorities with a cause followed the opposite strategy. Disengaging from the public actually implies that the general public has become irrelevant, because the ultimate goal is to produce laws made by politicians who can be directly 'convinced' by moral appeals, rather than approaching the majority's attitudes and representations. In today's democracies, where much communication happens through social media 'bubbles', the step from minority interests to institutional laws is more direct and efficient if it takes place without extended public discourse. The intention is clearly to avoid intense public resistance, such as the kind that in the UK and in Sweden led governments to refrain from allowing minors to undergo medical transgenderising procedures (Westerhaus, 2021).

## Repressive moralism

### A strategy of victimhood and morality, ...

During the second half of the twentieth century minorities organised into parties or consistent formal groups which allowed them to fight for their cause, often through militant political action. These consistent minorities created open conflict with the majority, and their success was achieved when the politics of the majority changed, and public attitudes and also legislation addressed the minority's experience of injustice (Moscovici & Lage, 1978; Moscovici & Personnaz, 1980; Wood et al., 1994).

The strategy of minorities fighting for their rights changed when many started using the soft approach of a moral appeal by emphasising their victimhood (Barkan, 2000). Moral communication conveys aspects of respect or disregard, that is the social appreciation of a person, and at the same time connects a situation to supra-situational representations of good, evil, and correct life. Morality is implicit and invisible as part of communication, metaphorically resembling the 'colour' of language (Bergmann & Luckmann, 1999, p. 22). There are no moral phenomena, just moral interpretations of phenomena. Being part of language, moral underpinnings

are a direct way towards constructing social objects as morally necessary without falling back on rationality.

Presenting oneself as a historical victim with its associated moral appeal of protection is intended to arouse feelings of guilt and shame in the members of the perpetrator group, assumed to be the majority. Creating an atmosphere of the majority's collective culpability, discriminating against people either because of racism, class, and caste, or creating other economic and political exclusion from the benefits of a society, means that minorities increase their chances of acknowledgement, restitutions, and reparations for past wrongdoings by the majority (Moscovici & Pérez, 2007).

The militant wing of the trans-gender community follows this new strategy. It poses as being victimised by a 'repressive' cis-gender and hetero-normative society (cf. Niemi & Young, 2016). Most sentient people will refrain from even symbolically hitting victims, no matter how obscure their victimhood may appear. In other words, dealing with a victim twists any discourse into an exercise of moral argument, which also carries the spin of being immune against further attacks. LGBTQ proponents in Europe and the US profit from two historical trends without which their movement would not have succeeded: the existence of a largely liberal society and the technology of the internet. They take advantage of living in the modern and politically liberal society that is a precondition for freely shedding old-fashioned ideas of biological sex and social gender and the shackles of traditional world views. This freedom is an outcome of the sixty years of more or less progressive politics since the late 1960s in Europe.

The second enabler of their successes is the internet, and particularly the social media and its excesses which allows them to reach widely into the population and thereby simplifies organising their ingroup. The combination of the image of victimhood and technological access permits them to over-represent a 'stubborn' majority, and to act upon it by sanctioning active resistance in order to convince elites, such as the directors of universities, heads of multinationals, and politicians in democratic countries.

A large part of the transgender movement's success is to mount pressure on deans and rectors of universities. This has to do with the movement's moral appeal as victims, the liberal social ideology in western countries and the fact that in a moral setting individuals tend to act in a prosocial way towards perceived victims if the action does not involve personal costs but is attributable to a third person (de Hooge et al., 2011). In the case of institutions and universities the third person is often the 'gender-critical' employee who may be warned, sacked or their invitation cancelled by their superiors (who thereby demonstrate their own moral impeccability) after trans-activists and followers stage a loud protest and/or threaten violence (No Name, 2021).

### **...and using big sticks**

Besides the moral colour in appealing to a group's victimhood, another strategy is applying pressure to opponents by using the toxic anonymity of social media. It is

well-known that attacks via social media can have severe consequences. Bullying, personal shaming, being called names (Dhungana Sainju et al., 2021), defamation, shitstorms, delegitimising, ostracism (Ergun & Alkan, 2020; Tang & Duan, 2021), and even ignoring somebody by withholding 'likes' (Lee et al., 2020) have been shown to lead to depression and other psychiatric syndromes.

It is not necessary in a campaign of this type for individuals targeted as 'transphobic' to be personally accessible, because a well-orchestrated attack will be indirectly effective, via social relationships, institutional responses, and the amplification of echo chambers. Such strategies are the other side of the moral coin. It is obvious that many ideological arguments in social media tend to become aggressive and often personal, but the moral appeal together with threats to the livelihood of opponents, for example in educational settings, is specific to online arguments involving minority interests.

A particularly illustrative example of transgender politics is how early transgender activists responded to scientific medical research about intersexuality and gender-dysphoria. From the mid-1980s onward Ray Blanchard, a psychologist, developed the Theory of Autogynephilia to characterise and explain the desire of men who wanted to be a woman (e.g. Blanchard, 1991). It must be emphasized that none of his work was intended to reverse or 'correct' his patients' desires (Joyce, 2021a). When other sexologists took up his theory (e.g. Bailey, 2003), some being transgender individuals themselves, the autogynephilia theory caught the attention of some activists. In due course they stirred up a controversy that has not abated until today (Dreger, 2008). The controversy centred on Blanchard's finding (Blanchard, 1991) that the wish to transition by males was most of the times motivated by erotic phantasies at cross-dressing (as confirmed by Långström & Zucker, J., 2005) and not the result of a gender-identity mismatch. Activists deemed the scientists' finding of being transgender because of sexual preferences unacceptable and initiated an aggressive campaign against Michael Bailey. The vitriolic campaign involved allegations of academic and therapeutic misbehaviour, corruption, alcoholism, and sodomising his children. In other words, activists intended to assassinate Bailey's character and reputation, undo any positive praise his book received, and make Bailey as personally miserable as possible (Joyce, 2021b). This campaign provided the role model for all later campaigns that the militant part of the trans-community were going to initiate, such as the case of J. K. Rowling.

Rowling's case starts with a woman who was fired by her employer because she questioned "government plans to let people declare their own gender" and stated, on Twitter, her opinion that "transwomen holding certificates that recognise their transgender identity cannot describe themselves as women". The woman's dismissal was upheld by an employment tribunal: the judge ruled that she was not entitled to ignore the rights of a transgender person and the "enormous pain that can be caused by misgendering" (BBC, 2019). In their ruling, the judge clearly took up the victim argument, a significant part of the trans-movement's strategy, and added a guess about the addressee's enormously fragile affectivity. Rowling commented critically on this ruling. On another occasion, she jokingly remarked that she knew another word for the expression "people who menstruate", that is "women" (Bennet, 2020; Delius, 2020). She stated that sex was real



and expressed her concern about the "huge explosion in young women wishing to transition" (Rowling, 2020). Her celebrity didn't spare her being vilified on Twitter for these remarks. It earned Rowling a storm of insults and death wishes, and resulted in her books being cleared from stock in several feminist bookstores (Delius, 2020).

Transgender-critical feminists who believe that women's roles in sex and reproduction are significant factors in their oppression in a patriarchal society are a frequent target, because, according to Sonia Sodha (2021), "gender identity—the feeling of being a man or a woman regardless of one's biological sex—can therefore never wholly replace sex as a protected characteristic in equalities law, and women have the right to organise on the basis of their sex and to access single-sex spaces". The same hostility was demonstrated against Germaine Greer, Julie Bindel (Siddique, 2021), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Flood, 2021a) and many others. Their mistake was not wanting to take the speech act of a biological man stating 'I am a woman' at face value.

Marguerite Stern protested bare breasted in the Parisian cathedral Notre-Dame against one of the pope's misogynist decrees and was celebrated as an icon of French feminism in 2013. She still fights against the three pillars of patriarchy, that is "dictatorships, religions, and the sex industry" (Meister, 2021), but a few years later "... *she no longer has a say. She is insulted on social networks and threatened by former companions. 'I have the feeling that the movement that I started is turning against me'*" (Meister, 2021). The reason for her rejection is her opinion that transgender women cannot be part of the feminist movement. In other words, a deeply engaged feminist was sanctioned by exclusion and even physically attacked because she did not sufficiently embrace the trans-movement.

In Germany the well-known feminist Alice Schwarzer became a target of the transgender movement when she expressed doubt about granting transwomen access to women's privileges and refuges. In a campaign she was smeared as racist, islamophobe, transphobe, xenophobe, etc. and as holding on to an obsolete biological understanding of gender (No Name, 2020). Like the other victims of delegitimising campaigns she was branded a 'Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist' (TERF), as many feminists with a prime interest in women's rights are labelled (Studnikschließen, 2021).

It is no surprise that individuals who had transitioned to the opposite gender by hormone treatment as well as by massive internal and plastic surgery become prime targets of transgender politics when they later decide to 'de-transition' for whatever reasons, (Herzog, 2017). Unsurprisingly too, transgender campaigners also target men. So Richard Dawkins lost his award as 'Humanist of the Year' by the American Humanist Association as a result of online attacks following his asking for the difference between transgenering and assuming a wrong racial category such as announcing being black while being Caucasian or Jewish by birth (Flood, 2021b). Gender trumps race.

As a corollary to J. K. Rowling's case, her response and defence of the accusations is revealing as an example of the ubiquity of victimised discourse. She wrote a short essay where she defended her questioning of transgenderism by events in her own biography where she had experienced sexual harassment and violence by her

partner. In other words, she portrayed herself as a victim, who therefore deserved the same consideration as her attackers are claiming for themselves (Rowling, 2020).

## Historical and petty fascisms

Definitions of fascism vary, but political science generally defines it as a political movement of the twentieth century, characterised by right wing ideas of a ruling elite dominating and acting for, the 'masses'; which establishes dictatorial rule, suppresses opposition, and regulates social life to a high degree. The two most important fascist movements were the Italian fascism since the First World War and the German National Socialism that took power in 1933. Besides the two dominant fascist powers in Europe there were smaller countries where temporary fascist rule was imposed, such as Hungary, Romania, and Austria in the two decades between the first and second World War. In addition, the term has been used to describe several dictatorships in European countries, such as in Spain and Portugal, as well as the rule imposed by the military who took power after a coup, such as in Greece, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Myanmar, Indonesia and a few other countries across the world.

The individual person living under fascism experienced a constant risk of being imprisoned or otherwise sanctioned if they had the wrong thoughts and mentioned something that contravened the official ideology. At the time of writing this paper many people in Myanmar are incarcerated for having the 'wrong' thoughts, or have been shot for participating in manifestations against the recently established military dictatorship. Naturally, under these circumstances people refrain from trusting their neighbours and are afraid of sharing their thoughts publicly.

The suppressive power of fascist regimes derives from streamlined laws, and the unrestricted use of ultimate force. Naturally, such means are not available to militant minorities nowadays. Instead, they exert social power by exploiting social media, i.e. the big stick, the emotional power of moral appeals, ostracism, and the real threat to others for having wrong thoughts. Such actions taint people's reputations as well as threatening the economic basis of their life: their work place.

The increasing fear of being sanctioned that stops people of freely expressing their ideas is a modern symptom of this. A 2019 study by the Allensbach Institute showed that only 19% of Germans felt that they could express their opinion freely in public, and even with friends and acquaintances it was only 59% (Allensbach Institut, 2019). In particular, many people are afraid of openly answering the question "Do transwomen count as women?". On social media young people are afraid of sharing wrong opinions, which robs themselves of the opportunity to think and to learn and to grow (Adichie, 2021). The philosopher Kathleen Stock (2021) says: "Very few people who are sceptical talk about it directly, because they're frightened, ... It's so hard psychologically to say, in reply: 'I'm afraid not.'" She believes that in universities and the wider world, it is increasingly a view that cannot be challenged. "There's a taboo against saying this" (Stock, 2021). In October 2021 Kathleen Stock was forced out of her university position by a vitriolic and anti-scientific campaign massively threatening her and her family. The campaign resembled the one directed against Michael Bailey as shown above (Adams, 2021). The difference between the

methods of the 1990s and those of 2021, however, is not the fascist character of transgender activism, but the fact that a large number of students and academics support this blatant attack on academic speech and scientific freedom of Kathleen Stock (Parsons, 2021).

The aggressive enforcement of minority interests by threatening non-conforming academics and others with "big sticks" often comes with the clandestine or open agreement of academic authorities (Rosenfelder, 2020; Väliverronen & Saikkonen, 2021), though not in the case of Kathleen Stock (Lawrie, 2021). It seems that vice-chancellors and university management are frequently unable or unwilling to manage the challenges by minority militants of suppressing academic freedom (Fazackerley, 2020; Moorhead, 2021).

Sanctioning critical opinions to enforce appreciation of minorities and their practices is a very peculiar form of tolerance (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). The concept of tolerance has a long and thorny history—for example, the tolerance of religions (e.g. Stearns, 2017) but at its core it can be defined as bearing with an opposing belief, religion, or practice patiently even if disapproving of it, up to a certain extent. Many people are not willing to tolerate a violation of human dignity and rights, even if it is claimed to be a minority's cultural habit (Wagner, 2021). In this context, toleration of other religions does not mean to embrace these religions for oneself, but to bear with them. Arbitrarily changing the meaning of tolerance to a postmodern and opposite version that forces people to also endorse the tolerated ideology and practice breeds segregation and threatens political freedom (Wagner, forthcoming).

In that sense, the present political practice of transgender proponents demanding appreciation of their ideas and practices while being intolerant of opposite opinions and free speech can justifiably be called 'petty fascism'. This type of political activism conjures the harbinger of fascism: threatening opposition, pursuing 'thought crimes', and endangering the basic democratic freedom of speech. But without freedom of thought and civilised speech there is no democracy. To tell people what they have to think and how they have to talk because otherwise they will be disgraced is intolerable (Polt, 2021).

## Discussion

We have shown how recent manifestations of transgender politics are largely based on self-victimisation, moral appeals, and the accompanying use of social media's possibilities of pressure, threat, and coercion. Their restrictive policing embraces all public from everyday life setting to schools, academic institutions, and courts by streamlining language use and sanctioning deviation. The end result is the stifling of open public discussion. As we have shown, an enforced homogeneity of expression has been the hallmark of fascist regimes—indeed, of all repressive regimes—the world over. The ability to engage freely in public debate, to challenge or support ideas as seems appropriate, and to negotiate consensus, is the essential foundation of a social democracy, as well as of liberal ideology. When it becomes impossible to declare a belief that a transwoman is a biological man openly, or to address a woman as a man, or a transwoman as a man even in

joke, or to refer to the biological bases of the human species, all parties suffer, including those with a clear agenda to contradict them.

It is noteworthy that this militant transgenderism has introduced a rift that cannot be disregarded, in feminist (Louis, 2021; Siddique, 2021) as well as homosexual/lesbian movements (Bey, 2021; Kacere, 2015). As we discussed before, transgender proponents reject classical feminist representatives and vice-versa. One group negates the importance of biological facts while the other upholds the belief that social objects have a life and weight of their own, effectively transcending the biological constraints and safety considerations of ciswomen. Some female authors as well as homosexuals competing for the 'Booker Prize' fear that a trans-normativity of changing gender identities is a much more radical deviation from 'hetero-normativity' than being attracted by the other sex (Bey, 2021; Cain, 2021). From a social science standpoint it will be interesting to observe the societal consequences of these schisms; from the perspective of citizens the ominous question is: where are the limits of free speech?

Research shows that a statement made by a member of the ingroup is more likely to be judged as free speech than a statement from the outgroup—except when another ingroup member judges the ingroup statement as prejudiced (Wang et al., 2021). This is not really surprising, but in this instance, it does raise the question who is and who is not the ingroup and the outgroup in the case of genders and transgenders? Claims to a majority ingroup's culpability tends to improve the minority ingroup members' stereotypes of the 'others' (Moscovici & Pérez, 2007). But where public debate is stifled, the minority ingroup becomes, or at least appears to be, unrealistically powerful.

The petty fascism that some of these minorities enact in their politics is habitually attributed to the political left. Compared to traditional left politics, the new trend is exclusively focused on symbolic morality, a self-righteous sanctimony, and an identity politics that polices ideas and language use in everyday life. Whereas the traditional left is concerned with issues such as wage justice, working conditions, fraud in commerce and corruption in politics as well as with women and minority emancipation, these issues are virtually absent in the 'lifestyle left' (Wagenknecht, 2021), whose methods are more right than left-wing in any meaningful sense (Wagner, 2016).

This raises another question, of how the so-called political elites are being encouraged to embrace a cause that almost certainly does not accord with their private opinions, values, and attitudes. The representatives of the ruling classes and their politicians tend to lean to the conservative side of the political spectrum, and are therefore, almost by definition, not enthusiastic about embracing the political goals of the so-called progressive sector of society—helping the.

*"gay teen seeking acceptance, the single mom with no family or friends to support her, the tomboy who wants to try out for the football team, the transgendered man who wants to use the ladies' room at his workplace, [...] the feminist determined to eschew the constraints of marriage and family in exchange for a life of unbridled self-seeking" (Wanis, 2014).*

Accordingly right-wing republicans and peers of the outspoken conservative would-be politician and trans-female Caitlin Jenner in California are anything but comfortable with her (Brady, 2017; Korte, 2021).

Democracy works largely because of the idea of human rights and the equality of all mankind and of men and women, which has penetrated the mentality of European countries at least since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Political responses to minority claims of collective culpability—whether historically real or hypocritical—have been mixed, with some countries providing reparations, or taking the minorities' 'reminder' as motivation to sharpen their political sense to anticipate and avoid future structural injustice (McKeown, 2021). In the highly political and often backstabbing world of academic and social leadership, it is a brave individual who will expose their back to the knife. The intimidation of those in positions of influence through social media 'shitstorms' and potentially violent protest raises their ever-present fears of appearing vulnerable; while the victimisation agenda removes the apparent option of counter-argument.

The Newspeak of Orwell's 1984 is with us in many ways, and this is no exception. While some changes to everyday language—notably the growing social disapproval of pejorative racist language—have been both social and politically successful, they differ from the present situation both in terms of the nature of the language and the means used to achieve that social change. The recognition of implicit racism in certain terms was revealed by public debate and discussion, and resulted in widespread social change as a result, with the consequence that such terms are now only expressed by a few, whose reactionary political allegiance is clearly apparent as a result. The suppression of public involvement in the debate, and the enforcement of a single viewpoint through political manoeuvring and digital bullying, however, is a very different process. The one was the outcome of public recognition of need for social change, the other is the imposition of petty fascism. In the end, the correct use of the terms 'man', 'woman', 'transmen', 'transwoman' etc. in a discourse should be a matter of the point of reference, rather than of either wishful expectations or fear of consequences, by the addressee and conversation partner. It is up to all of us to ensure that the debate remains open.

## Declarations

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals.

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