

# Afterword: TERF wars in the time of COVID-19

The Sociological Review Monographs

2020, Vol. 68(4) 882–888

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0038026120934712

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sor](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sor)



**Ruth Pearce**

University of Leeds, UK

**Sonja Erikainen**

Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society, University of Edinburgh, UK

**Ben Vincent**

Open University, UK

## Keywords

coronavirus, COVID-19, discrimination, transgender, transphobia

We conceived of this collection at a different time.

As an editorial team, we were spurred to action in 2018. The catalyst for this was the rapidly growing number of publications which spread fear and misinformation about trans and non-binary people and the supposed danger that we pose to women, children, and the established moral order, especially that of the ‘West’. An untold number of these were published (and continue to be found) in the mainstream media, bringing ideas from the far-right and from trans-exclusionary branches of feminism alike to a mass audience. We were also concerned by the growing anti-trans sentiment within academia, disseminated primarily in conference proceedings, blog posts, and through predatory publishers, but also increasingly through ‘respectable’ academic outlets. We wanted to provide a thoughtful, well-evidenced response, which would address anti-trans arguments head-on, while also moving the conversation forward.

Working in the fields of trans, feminist and intersex studies, the TERF wars have always been a frustrating distraction for us, rather than an interest as such. As researchers, we have sought to address inequalities and abuses of power in arenas such as health-care, education and sports; as activists, we have fought for abortion rights, bodily autonomy and self-determination, fair pay, equal rights to sport participation and physical activity, wealth redistribution, open borders, and freedom from sexual violence.

---

## Corresponding author:

Ruth Pearce, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: [r.pearce1@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.pearce1@leeds.ac.uk)

Similarly, each of the contributors to this collection has made an impressive contribution to political struggles: not simply through their writing, but also through arts, culture and public protest. There has been much to struggle against in recent years, from the emerging climate crisis, to the resurgence of nationalist and neo-fascist movements, to the continued marketisation and commodification of work, education and leisure. All of this has been framed by the continued impact of the 2007–8 global economic crash, and the subsequent scapegoating of migrants, racialised minorities and the working classes.

Amidst the tumultuous chaos of the early 21st century, the TERF wars have remained ever-present, woven through endless threads on social media, a constant interference on the television and radio. Within trans and feminist communities, these incessant, fruitless debates sap our energy and interfere with our ability to focus on the tasks at hand. While the TERF wars have become far too convoluted and extensive to summarise (let alone analyse) within a single volume, we felt that at the very least this collection could serve as our reply to many trans-exclusionary arguments. Something to point to, so we can say, ‘this is what we have to say about that’, and then all get on with more pressing matters.

We are putting the final touches to this collection in the spring of 2020, during a global pandemic the likes of which have not been seen for over a century. 2018 feels a world away; and yet, many of the most disturbing developments of recent months are of course a consequence of the events of the 2010s. At this juncture, it feels necessary to reflect on what has changed with the coming of the COVID-19 crisis – and what has not.

Marginalised social groups and individuals have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. We can see this in the devastating increase in domestic abuse against women and children across the world (Dalton, 2020), the shock experienced within informal economies such as sex work (Hurst et al., 2020), and the horrifyingly disproportionate death rate for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic populations and low income communities in the Global North (e.g. Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020; Yancy, 2020). This unnecessary suffering is the consequence of long-term systemic inequalities, compounded in many countries by years of underinvestment, cuts and privatisation of public services. Trans and non-binary communities, too, are in an especially precarious situation. The impact will be most pronounced for individuals whose social positions sit at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation, including trans people of colour, disabled and elderly trans people, and trans people who are low income, immigrants, refugees, or homeless. As several major human rights organisations have observed, trans and non-binary people as a group are more at risk of exposure to the virus and of developing severe symptoms (e.g. Human Rights Campaign, 2020; Transgender Europe [TGEU], 2020; UN Human Rights, 2020). This is because they (we) are more likely to have existing health conditions and face barriers to healthcare access, such as a reluctance to seek healthcare when needed due to fears and experiences of discrimination. Trans and non-binary people are also more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the socioeconomic effects of the crisis, being overrepresented in precarious and low income employment, as well as being disproportionately unemployed, and more likely to live in unstable housing conditions (Human Rights Campaign, 2020; TGEU, 2020).

As healthcare systems become overloaded, trans-specific services are already being deprioritised or interrupted, negatively affecting mental health and suicide risk. In the

UK there has been a chaotic response from gender identity clinics: many individuals have found their appointments cancelled, surgeries delayed, and their hormone prescriptions suddenly more difficult to access. For example, the Leeds and Aberdeen gender clinics suspended all services after staff were redeployed in response to the COVID-19 crisis; notably, the Leeds clinic initially failed to inform most patients that their appointments had been postponed. Concurrently, trans people in general and trans youth in particular are at increased risk of domestic violence and abuse at home due to stay-at-home restrictions (UN Human Rights, 2020). There have also been reports of increasing transphobic rhetoric in some countries as well as police abuse of COVID-19 directives to target and attack LGBTIQ+ individuals and organisations (UN Human Rights, 2020). Some countries, such as Panama, Peru and Colombia, have implemented gender-segregated quarantine rules, which mean that men and women are allowed in public on different days, the effect of which has been that trans and non-binary people have been subjected to harassment, abuse, fines and police violence, especially when their identification documents' gender markers have not been consistent with their gender identity and presentation (Perez-Brumer & Silva-Santisteban, 2020). On a more mundane note, it is important to observe our increasing reliance on the Internet for work and leisure while many nations are in lockdown. In many online spaces, especially within the Anglophone world, unmoderated transphobic rhetoric and hate speech has been on the rise over the last few years (Brandwatch & Ditch The Label, 2019; Colliver et al., 2019). All of this makes it challenging for trans people to survive and live, let alone thrive enough to have the extra capacity required to debate and argue about conceptual questions around sex, gender and feminism, or to defend one's right to an empowering and self-defined gendered existence.

Yet, these debates have not only continued to rage in the mainstream press and on social media,<sup>1</sup> but also within legislatures. In a couple of last-minute edits to the introductory essay for this collection, we noted the tabling of a new anti-trans law by the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán, and a series of concerning pronouncements from UK Women and Equalities Minister Liz Truss. The similarities and differences in discourse within the two countries is important. In both cases, government figures appear to be taking advantage of the pandemic to push back on formal recognition of trans people, through centring 'biological' sex as a determining factor of social and legal identity. In Hungary, this move is the latest in a highly public culture war. The increasingly authoritarian government has sought to uphold traditional 'family values' in opposition to 'gender ideology', for instance through banning gender studies programmes in universities. Feminist commentators such as Eileen Boris have observed that this is part of a wider essentialist agenda on the part of religious and social conservatives:

The Hungarian ban . . . belongs to a larger rollback against dissenting intellectuals and defense of traditional values, in which women's place is having children for the nation. 'When our girls give birth to our grandchildren, we want them to regard it as the defining moment of their self-realization', Hungarian Parliament President Laszlo Kover of the ruling party declared. 'Gender madness' can only lead to the decay of civilization as it is part and parcel with sexual deviancy. The government proclaims a form of gender essentialism, declaring that 'people are born either men or women'. (Boris, 2019, p. 688)

Many of these concepts – such as the idea that ‘people are born either men or women’, or the notion that women and girlhood are defined by reproductive capacity – will be familiar to those who have been following the TERF wars in the UK. 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. A recent essay on UK transphobia in the time of pandemic from trans blog *The right lube* observes that:

We cannot talk about the presence of TERFs without talking about the English class system. The Karens of Mumsnet are a gender in themselves: a gender of whiteness, a gender of the absurd and rigid English class system. Transphobia is a sense-making process of gender for and by the upper middle classes. Transphobia, posing as feminism filtered through family values, is a perfect potion to split solidarity between the middle and working classes and push social conservatism. (*The right lube*, 2020)

An example of how the concept of ‘biological’ sex is mobilised by those campaigning to define womanhood on this basis in the UK can be seen in the quotation below from Suzanne Moore, writing for liberal newspaper *The Guardian*:

Female is a biological classification that applies to all living species. If you produce large immobile gametes, you are female. Even if you are a frog. This is not complicated, nor is there a spectrum . . . Female oppression is innately connected to our ability to reproduce. Women have made progress through talking about biological menstruation, childbirth and menopause. We won’t now have our bodies or voices written out of the script. . . . You either defend women’s rights as sex-based or you don’t protect them at all. (Moore, 2019)

It is not a coincidence that this notion of ‘sex-based’ rights, along with Moore’s assertion that ‘shocking’ numbers of ‘teenage girls’ are transitioning, has been echoed in Conservative minister Liz Truss’s recent statements. These include support for ‘the protection of single-sex spaces’, ‘checks and balances’ for trans adults, and ‘making sure that the under 18s are protected from decisions that they could make’ (Truss, 2020). Nor is it a coincidence that any formal policy proposals that follow from these statements are likely to disproportionately affect cis women as well as trans and non-binary people, through tying legal definitions of womanhood to reproductive capacity and undermining adolescents’ right to consent to medical treatment (a move that will most likely also impact on teenagers’ current legal right to confidentially access contraception, abortions and domestic violence services). This, ironically, is the front through which the war on women is being fought in the UK, as well as the war on trans existence, including – *especially* – during the COVID-19 crisis.

The TERF wars, now more than ever, are a vexing diversion away from the more pressing priorities for most women as well as trans and non-binary people, including equitable access to basic needs like healthcare, housing, employment and education. Moreover, they are both a consequence of and a distraction from the dangerous growth of nationalist sentiments across the world, as represented by authoritarian rulers such as Orbán, and the concurrent resurgence of interest in pseudoscientific concepts such as eugenics and phrenology among white elites; a connection referenced in the cover art for

this collection.<sup>2</sup> The contributions this collection brings together are therefore – and regrettably – just as timely and relevant today as they were in 2018 when the collection was first conceived.

In these frightening times, we find hope in the lessons of the past, the solidarities of the present, and the possibilities of the future. As Jay Bernard and Cristan Williams wisely observe in their respective contributions to this collection, trans and non-binary people are always already a part of our cultures, *especially* our feminist and LGBTIQ+ cultures. Across the world, trans and feminist activists are forging alliances on the basis of our shared interests, fighting back against oppressive patriarchal systems and organising amidst the pandemic. We can see this in the work of groups such as South African advocacy organisation Iranti, which has built a united lesbian, trans and intersex alliance against gender-based violence, and in the contributions of activists such as trans feminist student leader Emilia Schneider, an organiser in Chile's 2019–20 protests against neoliberal governance. In the UK, transfeminist autonomous care organisation Queercare have helped to pioneer the grassroots mutual aid response to the COVID-19 crisis, with their resources cited prominently by National Health Service bodies and the national support network Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK.

In our future work, we will continue to take strength and inspiration from such examples. We will once again look beyond the TERF wars, focusing instead on the lessons we can learn from those who stand united against oppression on the basis of sex and gender. We encourage you to do the same.

## Funding

This scholarship was supported in part by the Wellcome Trust (grant number 209519/Z/17/Z).

## Notes

1. One particularly prominent example from the UK involved complaints about trans women delivering food as part of a queer mutual aid group.
2. Biometrics and the use of technologies such as facial recognition as means of profiling, classification and surveillance can be seen as part of the historical trajectory of fields like phenology as well as physiognomy (Bueno, 2019). Alongside tools such as magnetic resonance imaging, such approaches to biologically mapping the body (and the brain) have been claimed to biologically locate social attributes and emotive states such as disgust (Schermer, 2008). Echoes of phenological logics can also be seen in some 'incel' discourse online. Eugenic logics are arguably echoed within fields such as epigenetics (Gillies et al., 2016); although of course, the necropolitical devaluing of Black bodies (as evidenced for example in heightened COVID-19 death rates) and continued state sterilisation of trans people in many contexts, indicates that eugenic thinking never really went away (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Honkasalo, 2020).

## References

- Boris, E. (2019). Gender troubles, Redux. *Women's History Review*, 28(4), 686–691.
- Bueno, C. C. (2019). Face revisited: Using Deleuze and Guattari to explore the politics of algorithmic face recognition. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(1), 73–91.

- Colliver, B., Coyle, A., & Silvestri, M. (2019). The 'online othering' of transgender people in relation to 'gender neutral toilets'. In K. Lumsden and E. Harmer (Eds.), *Online othering: Exploring digital violence and discrimination on the web* (pp. 215–237). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brandwatch, & Ditch The Label (2019). *Exposed: The scale of transphobia online*. Brandwatch. [www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/](http://www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Dalton, S. (2020). When staying at home can mean danger. *Concept: The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory*, 11(suppl). <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/4371/5961>
- Gill-Peterson, J. (2018). *Histories of the transgender child*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gillies, V., Edwards, R., & Horsley, N. (2016). Brave new brains: Sociology, family, and the politics of knowledge. *The Sociological Review*, 64(2), 219–237.
- Honkasalo, J. (2019). In the shadow of eugenics: Transgender sterilization legislation and the struggle for self-determination. In R. Pearce, I. Moon, K. Gupta & D. L. Steinberg (Eds.), *The emergence of trans: Cultures, politics, and everyday lives* (pp. 17–33). Routledge.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2020). *How transgender and non-binary communities around the world are being impacted by COVID-19*. [www.hrc.org/blog/how-transgender-and-non-binary-communities-are-impacted-by-COVID19-globally](http://www.hrc.org/blog/how-transgender-and-non-binary-communities-are-impacted-by-COVID19-globally) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Hurst, L., Martinez, M. R., & Monella, L. M. (2020). 'It's a contact job': Sex workers struggle amid the coronavirus crisis. *Euronews*. [www.euronews.com/2020/04/16/it-s-a-contact-job-sex-workers-struggle-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis](http://www.euronews.com/2020/04/16/it-s-a-contact-job-sex-workers-struggle-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Moore, S. (2019, March 2). Women have the right to organise. We will not be silenced. *The Guardian*. [www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2020/mar/02/women-must-have-the-right-to-organise-we-will-not-be-silenced](http://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2020/mar/02/women-must-have-the-right-to-organise-we-will-not-be-silenced)
- Office for National Statistics. (2020). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 to 10 April 2020*. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Perez-Brumer, A., & Silva-Santisteban, A. (2020). COVID-19 policies can perpetuate violence against transgender communities: Insights from Peru. *AIDS and Behavior*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-020-02889-z>
- Schermer, M. (2008). A new phrenology? *Scientific American*, 298(5), 46–48.
- The right lube. (2020). *Transphobia in the UK: Why is the UK media so transphobic? . . . Why wouldn't it be?* [www.therightlube.co.uk/transphobia-in-the-uk](http://www.therightlube.co.uk/transphobia-in-the-uk) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Transgender Europe. (2020). *COVID-19 and trans people*. <https://tgeu.org/covid-19/trans-people/> (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Truss, L. (2020). *Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss sets out priorities to Women and Equalities Select Committee*. GOV.UK. [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-women-and-equalities-liz-truss-sets-out-priorities-to-women-and-equalities-select-committee](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-women-and-equalities-liz-truss-sets-out-priorities-to-women-and-equalities-select-committee) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- UN Human Rights. (2020). *COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTI people*. [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf) (accessed 24 May 2020).
- Yancy, C. W. (2020). COVID-19 and African Americans. *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.6548>

## Author biographies

Ruth Pearce is a Visiting Researcher in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds. Her work explores issues of inequality, marginalisation, power and political struggle from a trans feminist perspective. Ruth is the author of *Understanding Trans Health* (Policy Press,

2018), and co-editor of *The Emergence of Trans* (Routledge, 2020). She blogs about her work and interests at <http://ruthpearce.net>

Sonja Erikainen is a research fellow at the University of Edinburgh Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society, where their interdisciplinary research focuses on social, historical and ethical issues around biomedicine and scientific knowledge production. Their research and publications cover areas including gender and sport science, hormones in scientific and popular cultures, and the promissory futures of science. They are the author of *Gender Verification and the Making of the Female Body on Sport: A History of the Present* (Routledge, 2020).

Ben Vincent (they/them) has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Leeds, which followed degrees in biological natural sciences and multidisciplinary gender studies, from the University of Cambridge. Their first book, *Transgender Health*, was highly commended at the BMA Medical Book Awards. They are the author of *Non-Binary Genders: Navigating Communities, Identities, and Healthcare*, and co-editor of the collection *Non-Binary Lives*. They are online via @gender-ben on Twitter.