

# Gender, Identity, Ideology: Sex Difference as an Article of Faith

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Affluent countries in Central, Western, and Northern Europe, North America and Australasia seem to have become increasingly accepting of non-traditional gender identifications and non-traditional relationship forms. Same-sex marriage is a legal reality in many countries in the region, and trans and intersex people have become increasingly visible and audible in their quest for legal recognition and legal protection. At the same time, we are now witnessing a cultural backlash against these developments. In the United States, cities and states have passed or tried to pass so-called “bathroom bills” that would make public bathrooms subject to “gender policing” and force many trans person out of the bathrooms that fit with their lived and experienced gender. In Germany, several federal states have had heated public debates about new school curricula, simply for the reason that these new curricula aimed to inform pupils about “sexual diversity” (among other things, gay and trans identities). New extreme-right parties and candidates in many countries have made “traditional family values” a part of their agenda and stoke fear by suggesting that increased acceptance of non-traditional sexualities will undermine the fabric of state and society. A more marginal but no less telling example is the attention paid in professional sports to enforcing gender segregation and “measuring” the true sex of an athlete. Caster Semenya’s case is only the most prominent of several sad examples in this regard. (It deserves mentioning that the last time there was such a public interest in matters of gender in sports was when obligatory gender testing was introduced – at the height of the Cold War).

Generally, we can say that not only is there a clear backlash, there is also a clear gap between gays and lesbians on one side and trans and intersex persons on the other in terms of their general acceptance and their legal protection. Indeed, it could be suggested that trans and intersex identities have become the new battleground of the “culture wars” after same-sex marriage has become an irreversible political reality in many countries – that is, the reactionary energy that was once pumped into resisting civil unions and “gay marriage” now finds its outlet in targeting the more vulnerable groups within the QUILTBAG-umbrella. The flipside of this explanation is so-called “homonationalism”, that is, an attitude that is accepting of non-traditional sexualities as long as these can be read as “contributing” to the national community and identity. In homonationalist fashion, same-sex marriage can be read as a wholesome extension of traditional partnership (thus embodying “traditional” values) while trans identities, for instance, can be read as undermining those same values, because of their connotations of impermanence and fraud.

It is no surprise, then, that in extreme right propaganda, queer persons are often accused of promoting a “dangerous” multiculturalist and pro-immigration agenda – and ridiculed when they fall victim to “immigrant violence” (e.g., religiously motivated attacks on gay persons). There are, indeed, parallels between suspicions toward queer persons and toward immigrants. Both are treated as potentials risk factors and fraudsters, and for both, administrative hurdles are in place when they aim to “naturalize” their identities. Trans persons, for instance, are typically asked to

provide medical proof of their trans status, often in conjunction with requirements for unnecessary surgery. Naturalized citizens must, even if only symbolically, prove their loyalty to their new home. Both, it seems, cannot be taken by their word when it comes to matters of identity. But why is the issue of identity important in these cases? Neither gender nor nationality are of particular help for the identification of individuals (that is, for matters of national security and policing). On identification documents, we could do without them without any great loss for security. This suggests that the reason these categories are widely viewed as relevant and in need of securitization is symbolic – in other words, that they are based on ideology rather than evidence. What makes this situation particularly ethically sensitive is the fact that in this case, we have an ideology that masks itself as science. That is, sex and gender differences are marked as “natural” differences, based in biological evidence. The question to what extent biology as a science is itself rooted in a certain social agenda is raised only at the social margins. In this regard then, sex differences have become an “article of faith”: they are the basis of (and not the evidence for) particular ways of classifying and policing people.

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