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How to Make Sense of the New L.G.B.T.Q. Culture War

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To understand the contours of the renewed culture wars over sex education, sexual orientation and gender identity, start with a Rorschach test.

According to Gallup, the share of younger Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender has risen precipitously in the last decade. Almost twenty-one percent of Generation Z — meaning, for the purposes of the survey, young adults born between 1997 and 2003 — identifies as L.G.B.T., as against about 10 percent of the millennial generation, just over 4 percent of my own Generation X and less than 3 percent of baby boomers. Comparing the Generation Z to the baby boom generation, the percentage of people identifying as transgender, in particular, has risen twentyfold.

Here are three possible readings of these statistics. The first interpretation: *This is great news.* Sexual fluidity, transgender and nonbinary experience are clearly intrinsic to the human experience, our society used to suppress them with punitive heteronormativity and only now are we getting a true picture of the real diversity of sexual attractions and gender identities. (Just as, for example, we discovered that left-handedness is much more common once we stopped trying to train kids out of it.)

So the response from society should be sustained encouragement, especially if you care about teenage mental health: This newly awakened diversity should be supported from the time it first makes itself manifest, at however young an age, and to the extent that parents feel uncomfortable with their children's true selves, it's the task of educators and schools to support the kid, not to defer to parental anxiety or bigotry.

The second interpretation: *We shouldn't read too much into it.* This trend is probably mostly just young people being young people, exploring and experimenting and differentiating themselves from their elders. Most of the Generation Zers identifying as L.G.B.T. are calling themselves bisexual and will probably end up in straight relationships, if they aren't in them already. Some of the young adults describing themselves as transgender or nonbinary may drift back to cisgender identities as they grow older.

So we shouldn't freak out over their self-identification — but neither should we treat it as a definitive revelation about human nature or try to build new curriculums or impose certain rules atop a fluid and uncertain situation. Tolerance is essential; ideological enthusiasm is unnecessary.

A third interpretation: *This trend is bad news.* What we're seeing today isn't just a continuation of the gay rights revolution; it's a form of social contagion which our educational and medical institutions are encouraging and accelerating. These kids aren't setting themselves free from the patriarchy; they're under the influence of online communities of imitation and academic fashions laundered into psychiatry and education — one part Tumblr and TikTok mimesis, one part Judith Butler.

There is no clear evidence that any of this is making kids happier or better adjusted; instead all we see is a worsening of teen mental health, blurring into a young-adult landscape where sex and relationships and marriage are on the wane. So what we need now is probably more emphasis on biology, normativity and reconciliation with your own maleness or femaleness, not further deconstruction.

These three categories are generalizations, but they provide a reasonable way to think about the politics of these issues, condensed recently in the debate over Florida's law restricting public-school instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity, which its opponents branded the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

The law is obviously motivated and put forward by people in the third camp, and opposed by people in the first camp. The second camp, then, becomes politically decisive. To the extent that the law, and other potential laws like it, is understood primarily as moving schools to a *neutral* position in these debates — by keeping gender-identity curriculums out of K-3 classrooms and requiring schools to keep parents mostly informed about their teenagers' self-identification — it's likely to be politically popular. And, indeed, in some recent polling, there is majority support for the provisions in the law that seem to aim in this direction.

But the deliberate vagueness of the Florida law and its invitation to lawsuits by offended parents also means that it could end being used to actively roll back gay rights or gay visibility — whether by pushing gay teachers into the closet or discouraging any discussion of sexual orientation in older grades (which a Louisiana bill would explicitly prohibit). And since there isn't any sign of a retreat from the widespread acceptance of gay people and relationships, this would likely turn the middle group against these kinds of laws, and make it easy for the first group to mobilize majorities against them.

An Unusual Coalition

If these are the general contours of the new culture war, however, there are also three important complications. The first is that the third camp I've just described, the camp that's intensely worried about these trends, is conservative at its core, but much more diverse at its peripheries.

It obviously includes social and religious conservatives, to whom recent cultural trends feel like vindication of their original anxieties about the push for same-sex marriage. (If conservatives had predicted just before *Obergefell v. Hodges* that soon a fifth of young adults would identify as L.G.B.T.Q., prominent voices would deploy terms like "pregnant person" and "menstruator" in place of "woman," and natal males would be winning women's track and swimming competitions, they would have been treated as hysterics.)

But the camp of concern also includes some of the early *advocates* of same-sex marriage — including one of its earliest and most important champions, Andrew Sullivan — as well as a range of figures who consider themselves liberal feminists, or did so just a little while ago.

The main feminist concerns, associated most famously with J.K. Rowling (whose very name now summons a howling vortex of online controversy), are about the possible erasure of the biological sex differences that have traditionally been the basis of feminist analysis. This is a practical as well as a philosophical issue, manifest in the debates about whether transgender women belong in women's sports or women's prisons.

The concerns of some same-sex marriage advocates, meanwhile, are lucidly expressed by Jonathan Rauch in a recent essay for *The American Purpose*. Rauch argues that the push for gay marriage represented a triumph of moderation over radicalism within the gay community itself and worries that today's transgender-rights activists are taking a different path.

Where the gay rights movement emphasized biological realities ("born this way," etc.) and bourgeois aspirations (to monogamy and marriage), today's gender-identity advocates promote "wild claims" about the social-constructedness of sex differences and dismiss any contravening evidence as "violence." This risks backlash, it endangers all the accommodations to transgender rights that America is ready to offer — and it also arguably hurts many gay and lesbian young people, Rauch writes, since a system that encourages "tomboyish girls or effeminate boys" to "identify as the opposite sex" ends up confirming "all the hoary gender stereotypes that made generations of gay and lesbian people (and many straight people) miserable."

And Rauch's anxiety about gay youth here connects to the feminist concerns as well — specifically, the worry that normal anxieties of puberty, the particular challenges of girls' mental health, are being addressed by the new theories not through a reconciliation with one's body and biology but through an alienation from femaleness itself.

The Stakes of Teen Transitions

These kind of concerns are then heightened by the second complexity in the current debate: the extent to which the use of medical interventions for trans-identifying youth — puberty blockers and hormone therapy and then the possibility of surgery in young adulthood — dramatically raises the stakes of the controversy and undercuts the agnostic middle ground.

The moderate position sketched above, the wait-and-see, kids-are-experimenting approach, is plausible to the extent that teenage exploration takes the form of dating both sexes, using a different pronoun or name, changing a wardrobe. But it collapses quickly if the choice is for or against a path of treatment that even advocates concede moves to stages that are only “partially reversible,” and then sometimes “not reversible,” within adolescence itself.

And the anxiety of parents, especially, at being potentially in the dark about their children's self-identification is heightened by the possibility that without their knowledge, their child could end up on a path that leads to surgical intervention — and that their own fitness as parents may be attacked if they object.

But of course this stakes-raising cuts both ways, because for the first camp, convinced that these interventions are essential to transgender mental health, the stakes of the debate are literally life and death, and to defer too much to parental objections is to make trans suicide more likely. Which helps explain why, in spaces where the progressive view is dominant, there are frequent attempts to remove trans issues from debate entirely, lest the mere existence of a controversy spur trans youth to despair.

The Quiet Doubts of Liberals

The effects of this debate-ending impulse on liberal discourse is the third complexity lurking behind my initial categorization. Within liberalism right now you literally cannot know, outside of private conversation, whether someone is fully in the first camp, more inclined to the second camp or even drawn toward the third. There is a gap between what people are willing to say in public and what they really think that's unprecedented on any controversial issue I have seen.

This — call it discretion, if you want — is partly voluntary, based on a desire to be a good ally, to show maximal kindness, and not give any aid and comfort to conservatives, Republicans, Ron DeSantis.

But it's also enforced: A version of the Rowling vortex quickly surrounds anyone who argues skeptically about the rise in transgender identification or suggests that hormonal and surgical treatments are being overused, whether that person is a journalist, an author, an academic researcher, even a gender-dysphoria clinician.

That enforcement has not prevented these skeptics from presenting their arguments, from having books that sell or well-subscribed Substacks. But it effectively limits debate within crucial liberal institutions, so that the skeptical position feels almost untouchable in the academy.

This increasingly means that American liberalism all the way up to the Biden administration is drifting away, on these questions, even from the most liberal and secular parts of Europe. From Britain to Sweden there is an increasingly vigorous debate around adolescent medical interventions, widespread doubts that they are actually supported by the data and a partial reconsideration of their general application to transgender-identifying youth. In liberal America there is mostly just an orthodoxy, even if the cracks show here and there.

This uniquely American climate also raises uncomfortable questions for the few conservatives, like myself, who enjoy a substantial liberal readership. You will notice that I have written this essay in a studiously cautious style, on the theory that as I am in fact a known social conservative, my too-vigorous prosecution of the skeptics' case would serve only to reinforce the current progressive orthodoxy — enabling the response that, see, to doubt the wisdom of puberty blockers or the authenticity of teenage self-identification is the province of Catholics, religious conservatives, the out-group.

But of course this is also a theory of conflict-avoidance, shading into cowardice. So to end more straightforwardly, I will make a prediction: Within not too short a span of time, not only conservatives but most liberals will recognize that we have been running an experiment on trans-identifying youth without good or certain evidence, inspired by ideological motives rather than scientific rigor, in a way that future generations will regard as a grave medical-political scandal.

Which means that if you are a liberal who believes as much already, but you don't feel comfortable saying it, your silence will eventually become your regret.

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