

How British Feminism Became Anti-Trans

A surprisingly mainstream movement of feminists known as TERFs oppose transgender rights as a symptom of “female erasure.”

By Sophie Lewis

Dr. Lewis is a feminist theorist and geographer.

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A sign at a swimming pond at Hampstead Heath in London. The pond became the center of a debate about the inclusion of trans women last summer. Credit Daniel Leal-Olivas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



Image



A sign at a swimming pond at Hampstead Heath in London. The pond became the center of a debate about the inclusion of trans women last summer. Credit Credit Daniel Leal-Olivas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Last week, two British women stormed onto Capitol Hill in Washington for the purposes of ambushing Sarah McBride, the national press secretary of the Human Rights Campaign.

Ms. McBride, a trans woman, had just been part of a meeting between the Parents for Transgender Equality National Council and members of Congress when the Britons — Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, who goes by the name Posie Parker, and Julia Long — barged in. Heckling and misgendering Ms. McBride, the two inveighed against her supposed “hatred of lesbians” and accused her of championing “the rights of men to access women in women’s prison.”

Ms. Parker, who live-streamed footage of the harassment on Facebook, [contended that](#) she had come to Washington because “this ideology” — by which she presumably meant simply being trans — “has been imported into the U.K. by America, so, to stem the flow of female erasure, we have to come to its source.”

If the idea that transphobic harassment could be “feminist” bewilders you, you are not alone. In the United States, my adoptive home, the most visible contemporary opponents of transgender rights are right-wing evangelicals, who have little good to say about feminism. In Britain, where I used to live, the situation is different.

There, the most vocal trans-exclusionary voices are, ostensibly, “feminist” ones, and anti-trans lobbying is a mainstream activity. Case in point: Ms. Parker told the podcast “Feminist Current” [that she’d changed her thinking on trans women](#) after

spending time on Mumsnet, a site where parents exchange tips on toilet training and how to get their children to eat vegetables. If such a place sounds benign, consider the words of British writer [Edie Miller](#): “Mumsnet is to British transphobia,” she wrote “what 4Chan is to American fascism.”

The term coined to identify women like Ms. Parker and Dr. Long is TERF, which stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. In Britain, TERFs are a powerful force. If, in the United States, the mainstream media has been alarmingly ready to hear “both sides” on the question of trans people’s right to exist, in Britain, TERFs have effectively succeeded in framing the question of trans rights entirely around their own concerns: that is, how these rights for others could contribute to “female erasure.” Many prominent figures in British journalism and politics have been TERFs; British TV has made a sport of endlessly hosting their lurid rudeness and styling it as courage; [British newspapers](#) seemingly never tire of broadsides against the menace of “[gender ideology](#).” (With time, the term TERF has become a catchall for all anti-trans feminists, radical or not.)

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The split between the American and British center-left on this issue was thrown into sharp relief last year, when The Guardian published an editorial on potential changes to a law called the Gender Recognition Act, which would allow people in Britain to self-define their gender. The editorial was headlined “[Where Rights Collide](#),” and argued that “women’s concerns about sharing dormitories or changing rooms with ‘male-bodied’ people must be taken seriously.” Some of The Guardian’s United States-based journalists [published a disavowal](#), arguing that the editorial’s points “echo the position of anti-trans legislators who have pushed overtly transphobic bathroom bills.”

A curious facet of the groundswell of TERFism in Britain is that, in fact, the phenomenon was born in the United States. It emerged out the shattered remnants of the 1960s New Left, a paranoid faction of American 1970s radical feminism that the historian [Alice Echols](#) termed “cultural feminism” to distinguish it, and its wounded attachment to the suffering-based femaleness it purports to celebrate, from other strands of women’s liberation.

The movement crossed over to Britain in the 1980s, when cultural feminism was among the lesbian-separatist elements of antinuclear protest groups who saw themselves as part of a “feminist resistance” to patriarchal science, taking a stand against nuclear weapons, test-tube babies and male-to-female transsexual surgery alike.

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In America, however, TERFism today is a scattered community in its death throes, mourning the loss of its last spaces, like the [Michigan Womyn's Music Festival](#), which ended in 2015. And so the strangely virulent form that TERFism takes in Britain today, and its influence within the British establishment, requires its own separate, and multipronged, explanation.

Ms. Parker and Ms. Long may not know it, but they're likely influenced by the legacy of the British "Skepticism" movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, which mobilized against the perceived spread of postmodernism in English universities as well as homeopathy and so-called "junk science." Hence, the impulse among TERFs to proclaim their "no-nonsense" character; witness the billboard Ms. Parker [paid to have put up last fall](#) dryly defining a woman as an "adult human female." Such a posture positions queer theory and activism as individualistic, narcissistic and thus somehow fundamentally un-British.

It's also worth noting that the obsession with supposed "biological realities" of people like Ms. Parker is part of a long tradition of British feminism interacting with colonialism and empire. [Imperial Britain imposed policies](#) to enforce heterosexuality and the gender binary, while simultaneously constructing the racial "other" as not only fundamentally different, but freighted with sexual menace; from there, it's not a big leap to see sexual menace in any sort of "other," and "biological realities" as essential and immutable. (Significantly, many Irish feminists have [rejected Britain's TERFism](#), citing their experience of colonialism explicitly as part of the reason.)

But perhaps the biggest factor in the rise of TERFism has been the relative dearth of social movements in Britain over the past three decades. It's telling that Ms. Parker

thinks it was the United States that exported “political correctness” and ideas like “gender identity” to Britain; it might even be fair to say that she’s right.

In other parts of the world, including America, mass movements in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s around the effects of globalization and police brutality have produced long overdue dialogue on race, gender and class, and how they all interact. In Britain, however, the space for this sort of dialogue has been much more limited. As a result, middle- and upper-class white feminists have not received the pummeling from black and indigenous feminists that their American counterparts have, and thus, their perspectives retain a credibility and a level of influence in Britain that the Michigan Womyn’s Festival could have only dreamed of.

Curiously, Ms. Parker and Ms. Long’s trans-Atlantic jaunt has led to a split in the ranks. Over the past few days, large segments of British TERFism have disowned both of them on social media for their Washington stunt, calling it an “ambush,” and them a “liability.” Whether Ms. Parker and Ms. Long went too far for a movement that, to date, seemingly has yet to hit a low, remains to be seen.

It is revealing, however, where Ms. Parker feels she still has friends: On her same trip to Washington, the woman claiming to be a feminist, standing up for the rights of lesbians everywhere, made sure to drop by the right-wing Heritage Foundation.

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