

TRANSGENDER RIGHTS LGBTQ ACTIVISM WHITE SUPREMACY

Why Transphobia Is at the Heart of the White Power Movement

Gender nonconformity threatens a worldview that is fixated on immutable and antiquated gender roles.

By Talia Lavin

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Sunflower Haze, right, hugs Mike L. outside LAPD Headquarters to announce lawsuits against the LAPD over its alleged targeted attacks against journalists and activists during protests associated with Wi Spa, a Koreatown business with a

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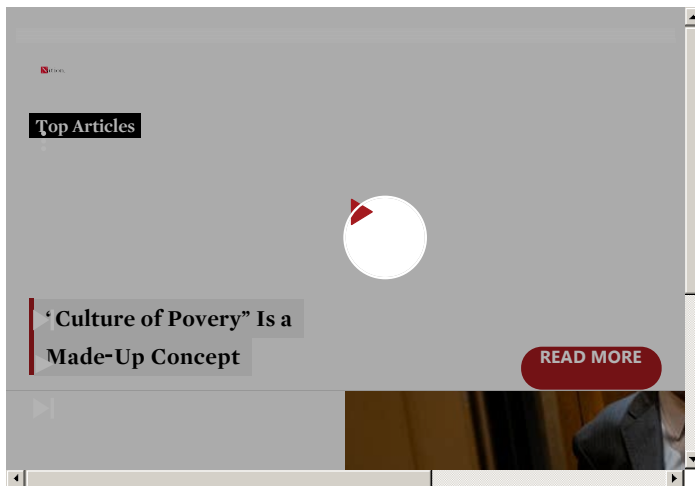
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In 1933, fanatical students led an orgy of scholastic destruction across Germany. Many photos exist of young Nazis throwing books into massive pyres. The conflagrations were proudly broadcast in newsreels, showing the German public joyful incinerations of Jewish, Marxist, and other “un-German” works. Perhaps the most famous image comes from the night of May 10, when

20,000 or so books were burned in the Opernplatz in Berlin, an event that was attended by some 70,000 people. Students and Sturmabteilung alike raise their hands, stark white in the colorless photos, in the notorious salute. Images of the event have gone down in history as emblematic of the monstrousness of the Nazi endeavor, with its determined effort to destroy any knowledge that might undermine their white supremacist ideology.

What is less well known, although queer historians have made an effort to belatedly publicize the loss, is that a significant number of the books that burned on that terrible night had made up the library of the Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, whose Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexual Studies) was the first clinic in the world to provide surgical interventions allowing trans individuals to live in the bodies they sought. The institute, which opened in 1919, provided care that sought to dispel the shame that surrounded same-sex love and gender nonconformity, published pathbreaking research into trans-affirming care, and gave office space to feminist activists. “Love,” Hirschfeld wrote in 1912’s *The Natural Laws of Love*, “is as varied as people are.”

This notion was intolerable to the Nazi state, and all 10,000 of the volumes in the institute’s library—priceless and rare material, German and foreign, much of it addressing same-sex eroticism and gender nonconformity—were collected by the Sturmabteilung and consigned to the flames. It is only now, nearly a century later, that that void left by the destruction of this pioneering work has begun to be filled.



Hirschfeld died, on the run from the Nazis, of a sudden stroke in Paris in 1935, his life’s work in ashes. Yet, nearly a century later, authoritarian horror at gender nonconformity—and a particular loathing of trans people—remains at the center of far-right movements in the United States and around the globe. Their ire is so great that even Hirschfeld himself, so long dead, remains an object of obsession. A post from July 18, 2021, on the neo-Nazi blog *Occidental Observer* by open white supremacist Andrew Joyce attacked both Hirschfeld’s activism on behalf of LGBTQ individuals and a 1934 book that condemned racism in all its forms. In Joyce’s mind, tellingly, Hirschfeld’s acceptance of “degenerate” forms of sexuality led to his anti-racism, and the two, combined, formed an intolerable attack on the existence of white people. “Love as a concept was altered and weaponized by Hirschfeld, who imbued it with transcendental and cosmic qualities in an effort to distance it as much as possible from biological, reproductive drives,” Joyce wrote. “Racism, homophobia, and transphobia,

which together essentially boil down to the idea that Whites should be able to live normally and by themselves, are perceived today as beyond the sphere of this deified 'love' and are therefore representative of a kind of modern heresy.”

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It's difficult to find a purer distillation of the ways in which racism and transphobia are intertwined in the modern white power movement. Joyce represents the pseudo-intellectual wing of the movement, producing polysyllabic propaganda as a thin scrim to cover the vitriol of hate. But throughout the movement, gender nonconformity threatens a worldview that is fixated on immutable, straitened, and antiquated gender roles. In this violent milieu, white women are designated as walking wombs, meant to replenish the purportedly declining birthrates of the white race, and little else. (Nonwhite women are portrayed as threats and grotesques, objects of violent misogyny.) Chastity, submission, and silence are their desired qualities in

women. A nearly comical machismo—rife with homophobia and transphobia—characterizes conversation in spaces where male neo-Nazis and their fellow travelers congregate online. In these chatrooms, fantasies of masculine violence, feminine chastity, and brutally enforced racial superiority indissolubly blend together.

I witnessed the intertwined nature of atavistic gender roles and a correspondent attack on gender nonconformity on, of all things, a program meant to cater to curious, bookish children. In 2018 and 2019, when I was observing neo-Nazi chatrooms closely while researching my book on online white power movements, I noticed a manic obsession with a set of programs at libraries called Drag Queen Story Hour. That fixation was promulgated in memes, such as one sent to me that contained a promotional still from the program of a beautifully dressed drag queen reading to a child, with the slogan added, “And then, one day, for no reason at all, the people voted Hitler into power.” In a telling parallel, Charlie Kirk, a conservative talking head and leader of the conservative youth group Turning Points USA, dressed up equally violent sentiment in patriotism in a radio appearance on August 10, addressing a [podcast audience](#) with the assertion, “If Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, or John Adams saw drag queen story hour, they would mobilize the Minutemen.”

Drag Queen Story Hour was founded in 2015, and since then has been a bête noire for both far-right neo-Nazis and conservative commentators who too often find themselves sharing the same bilious obsessions. These denunciations have included [doxing](#) individual drag queens on white supremacist Telegram channels, flooding libraries with negative and threatening phone calls, [Fox News segments](#) stirring up moral panic that draw on age-old stereotypes of predatory LGBTQ individuals, a [radicalized](#) Christian rushing into a Story Hour only to be arrested, and the Greenville County, S.C., sheriff's office responding to a planned anti-drag queen protest with [precautions tailored](#) to prevent a bombing.

The far-right vanguard, with its expression in groups like Patriot Front, the Proud Boys, and other, looser fraternities of convenience, expresses its anger toward gender nonconformity with violence. In early July, an anonymous user uploaded a video to Instagram showing her berating the staff of a Los Angeles queer-friendly spa, denouncing the supposed presence of a trans woman in the locker room beside kids (though no kids were shown on film or identified, and neither was any trans woman). Within [a few days](#), protesters, including members of the Proud Boys, assembled outside the spa. Far-right extremists stabbed two people in a melee with trans-rights counterprotesters. *Slate* journalist Evan Urquhart

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noted, “That there was likely no trans woman there to begin with only underscores how thin a pretext is needed to prompt these sorts of outbursts from the far right.”

What the far right proclaims through explicit street violence it wants to reinforce with the implicit violence of the state. Bills that seek to suppress anti-racist education, anti-trans legislation that seeks to codify antiquated gender roles, and the severe and continual restriction of abortion rights in states with right-wing legislatures typify the ways hatred of gender nonconformity, a desire to control women’s bodies, and racism intermingle.

And yet through the ire of InfoWars, 4chan, irate parents in the grips of the moral panic du jour, and the denunciations of the Murdoch empire, the Drag Queen Story Hour queens have persisted, reading books like *All Are Welcome* and *Black Is a Rainbow Color* to children. Their events carry on from Jericho, Vt., to Stångby, Sweden. Their actions are proving the words of Magnus Hirschfeld. Love is as varied as people, and try as they might—and they will—the forces of reaction cannot crush it. 

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