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Analyzing Pluralized Moral Panics Using Morphological Framing: The Case of the Transgender Debate

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a new theory of pluralized moral panics that can help researchers make sense of the uniquely inflected conflicts that arise in our highly fragmented and mediatized world. Section one expounds and critiques both the classic theory of moral panics developed by Stanley Cohen, and the polarized theory presented by Iwona Zielińska and Barbara Pasamonik. Section two expounds and revises Michael Freeden's morphological theory of ideologies to present a theory that is applicable to contemporary pluralized moral panics. Section three applies the new theory to the current transgender debate. This pluralized moral panic is shown to have five features that distinguish it from classic and polarized panics: (1) the fragmentation of disputant groups; (2) the proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles; (3) continual reframing and counter-framing; (4) discontinuous moral panics; and (5) ambiguous responsibilities. These features are explored with reference to a range of disputants, including those within the New Christian Right, trans activist groups, Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, gender critical feminists, and pro-trans feminists. The argument concludes in section four by summarizing the argument and its significance.

Introduction

For more than a decade, the question of the rights of transgender individuals and groups has been a central issue in the so-called "culture wars." For most US Christian fundamentalists, the extension of these rights, and their legal protection and promotion, are key causes of a growing immorality (e.g., Christian Institute n.d.; Family Watch International n.d.; Freudenberg 2022; Taylor 2023). For others, these rights are seen as a key part of the decline of American "greatness" (e.g., Trump 2025; White House 2025) Pro-trans1 groups welcome the increased prominence of these rights as a fulfillment of the liberal values that they see forming the core of the American Dream (e.g., Francois 2025; NOW [National Organization for Women] 2021). For gender critical feminists (GCFs), trans rights are just another example of the patriarchal domination of women (e.g., Deep Green Resistance 2020; Murphy 2019; WoLF 2020). The article argues that this complex "transgender issue" (Faye 2021) has become a pluralized moral panic, fueled globally by an increasingly fragmented social media environment and weaponized by the US federal government, GCFs, trans activists and others.

The classic formulation of the concept of "moral panic" has a long history and influence in sociological debates (surveyed in Dandoy 2015; David et al. 2011; Falkof 2020:225–28; Walsh 2020). However, many scholars have sought to reformulate the concept to make it fit better with changed contemporary realities (e.g., Falkof 2020; Flinders and Wood 2015). This article

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contributes to this redevelopment of the theory, using different methodological resources to those that have been employed previously. Moreover, it explores the transgender debate to show how that method can be applied in detail. Specifically, this article outlines a new theory of pluralized moral panics: that is, moral panics between three or more collective actors (called here "disputant groups"), each with their own perspective on the subject of the moral panic (trans rights, climate change, protest, and so on), each with a commitment to particular values and strategies, and each with their own interpretation of their relationships with other disputant groups (which might or might not align with the interpretations of those other groups). By focusing on pluralized moral panics, this article responds to the need for a new theory of moral panics that can capture the new dynamics between fragmented social actors. The hope is that this new theory will help researchers to make sense of the uniquely inflected conflicts that arise in our increasingly fragmented and mediatized world. In this way, researchers will be able to capture and analyze the dynamics of these increasingly pluralized processes.

The article is structured as follows. Section one (The limitations of "classic" and "polarized" moral panic theories) critically assesses the move from the classic theory of moral panics that began with Stanley Cohen and others in the early 1970s, to the polarized theory of moral panic developed in 2022 by Iwona Zielińska and Barbara Pasamonik. A key facet of this critique is the rejection of homogenizing categories that are often invoked in classic and polarized theories, such as "conservative," "left-wing" and "progressive." Section two (Morphological theory) builds on this critique by developing a modified form of Michael Freeden's morphological theory of ideologies and suggesting how researchers can apply this theory to pluralized moral panics. Section three (Transgender rights: a pluralized moral panic) highlights five distinctive features of these new panics, presenting indicative examples from current transgender interrelated debates in the USA and UK. The final part of the article (Summary and significance of the pluralized theory)" summarizes the new theory, emphasizing its significance as a fruitful approach to the analysis of the new forms of moral panic.

The limitations of "classic" and "polarized" moral panic theories

Stanley Cohen (2002:1) canonically characterized "moral panic" as a process through which powerful social actors use mass media to create a stylized and overblown sense of crisis in mainstream society. "Mainstream" is a frequently used but vague term. When Cohen published his classic theory of moral panics in 1971, it appears to have designated, loosely, a relatively homogenous set of beliefs that was publicly endorsed and acted on by a purported majority of the population. More pointedly, Katy Brown (2024:5) has suggested (in a different context) that "the mainstream" can be conceptualized usefully as "A contingent identity that is hegemonically positioned, both through internal and external construction, as representative of the norm or centre however defined in a particular context." The constructed, hegemonic nature of the mainstream is central to Cohen's classic theory of moral panic (CMP theory). Here, "editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people" act as opinion-leaders or "moral entrepreneurs" (Cohen 2002:1; see also Young 1971). They seek to foster a perception in the wider public of their particular target (a "condition, episode, person or group of persons") as a profound threat to social order, social norms, social identity, and, in extreme cases, to the continued existence of society itself. Cohen (2002:2) famously refers to such the targets as "folk devils: visible reminders of what should not be." Folk devils are portrayed as deviants from a purported social mainstream, characterized by socially privileged conceptions of order and decency. Moral entrepreneurs perpetuate this symbolic frame through the "mass media" (in 1971, primarily newspapers and broadcast media) and their audiences (Cohen 2002:7–11). Frequently, folk devils are attributed a stronger shared identity in the eyes of others than actually they possess among their purported members, with moral entrepreneurs tending to elide differences between those purported members. Moral entrepreneurs tailor their messaging to suit their audiences and the commercial imperatives of these media (Cohen 2002:7). "Right-thinking people" bolster this sense of crisis with appeals to the testimony of "socially accredited experts," who provide "diagnoses [of] and solutions

[to]" the crises. They determine both the members of the target group, the public perception of their "causes of deviation – is it due, say, to sickness or to willful perversity? – and a set of images of who constitutes the typical deviant – is he an innocent lad being led astray, or is he a psychopathic thug?" (Cohen 2002:7) If the moral entrepreneurs are successful, then after a relatively short period the folk devils might be reintegrate into "mainstream" society.

Cohen emphasized the instability of this process. He noted that even when moral entrepreneurs have demonstrable effects in the world, "the [provocative] condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible" (Cohen 2002:1). His analysis of the moral panic surrounding British Mods and Rockers in the 1960s went further by highlighting a variety of reactions to the efforts of moral entrepreneurs, from some consumers' full endorsement of media messages, to their nuanced reframing, to complete rejection (Cohen 2002:49–58). Usually, moral entrepreneurs enjoy only limited success, then. Yet, even when the conditions that caused the moral panic disappear, they can still have lasting effects. The moral panic might enter the "collective memory" of the society, leading to the passing of new laws or the subtle modification of social norms. Alternatively, it might foster changes in how "the society conceives [both] itself" and the social problems that it faces. Indeed, moral entrepreneurship is frequently self-defeating, as when the demonization of a target group leads its members to entrench their collective identity or to develop a more radical one. Such entrenchment can lead to an "amplification" of the very behavior that the moral entrepreneur sought to suppress (Cohen 2002:8–9).

CMP theory has been applied very widely since the early 1970s, to analyze protests such as burning the US flag, the actions of QAnon supporters, online resistance by indigenous Latin American groups, and many other socially disruptive phenomena (Welch, 2000; Lupien et al. 2024; O'Brien 2023). It has also been applied to mainstream media reporting of transgender de/retransitions (Slothuber 2020). Prior the initial organization of gay rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s, CMP theory articulated the othering of lesbian, gay, transvestite and transgender people under a single label ("queers" in the pejorative sense) by moral entrepreneurs from the unassailed heteronormative mainstream. Now however, CMP theory is usually applied in some modified form. Indeed, in his later reflections, Cohen acknowledged the need to modify the version of the theory that he set out in 1972, to take account of developments in sociological theory. He accepted that the decline of quasi-monolithic conceptions of social order "means that moral panic narratives have to defend a more 'complex and brittle' social order, a less deferential culture" (Cohen 2002:xxv). Many other factors are instrumental to such changes. Consider the category of "transvestite." In 1970s America, this term encompassed (a) people who regularly wore the clothes of another gender, (b) those people who had undergone gender reassignment surgery, and (c) those who identified and lived as a member of another gender. Now, the majority of mainstream media environments reserve the term "transvestite" for (a), using "transgender," "trans" or some equivalent to refer to (b) and (c). (In this article, the term "trans" is synonymous with "transgender," but not "transvestite.") Such conceptual and terminological distinctions arise through the interaction of many factors. In the transgender case, these include the refinement and dissemination of relevant medical knowledge and technology, as well as changing social and legal norms that have eased the path for those seeking a bodily transition. Yet, there is often a significant time-lag between social and legal jurisdictions here. The first gender reassignment surgery was performed in Germany in 1906, with the associated formal change of gender on the birth certificate occurring in 1907. State recognition of gender reassignment has been legal in the UK only since 2004 and was possible on US passports only between 2022 and 2025.

Sociologists have revised CMP theory in various ways to take account of these changes (e.g., Dandoy 2015; David et al. 2011; Falkof 2020; Flinders and Wood 2015; Hier 2019, 2024; Ingraham and Reeves 2016; O'Brien 2023; Slothuber 2020; Walby and Spencer 2011; Walsh 2020). In 2022, Iwona Zielińska and Barbara Pasamonik sought to extend CMP theory by developing what they call a theory of "polarized moral panics" (PMPs), which they then applied to a brief case study of the Polish refugee moral panic of 2015–16 (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1547–53). Their PMP theory retains many of the key features of the classic version, including: actors' use of mainstream media to propagate

fears of a profound and sudden threat to the social order; and the associated emergence of a social group that shares those fears and mobilizes to counter the sections of society whom they see as the source of the threat. While Zielińska and Pasamonik (2022:1554) accept that CMPs persist, they diverge from CMP theory by emphasizing the highly confrontational nature of PMPs in our less deferential societies. An example here would be the emergence of North American and European gay rights movements in the 1970s as a counter to the heteronormative mainstream.

Zielińska and Pasamonik argue that, with PMPs, "moral panic Activators" use newspapers and online fora to provoke a reaction from "Opponents." Those Opponents in turn use other messages and other parts of the media to counter the Activators' attacks (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1551–52, 1548). PMPs occur between only two "moral communities," which Zielińska and Pasamonik (2022:1548) label "conservative" (in the sense of monocultural traditionalist) and "progressive (liberal)." Unlike CMPs, the two sides in PMPs define themselves through their mutual opposition. This constitutive opposition is framed via the actors' conscious support for "contested narratives and claims-making over the same people or events," based on competing conceptions of social order. Each views the other as a "folk devil," that is, as the primary threat to that order (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1548–49). Hence, Zielińska and Pasamonik argue that PMPs arise out of a polarized competition and are sustained by them. "[C]ounterclaims and contested blame attribution are *essential*" to the existence of any particular PMP: "one [group] feeds off the other, maintaining a consistent congruence" (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1549). This feature of PMPs represents an important divergence from CMPs, where media campaigns serve to construct an exaggerated reaction of a social majority against largely powerless group who are framed as deviant outsiders (e.g., Mods and Rockers, in Cohen's book). Moreover, whereas CMP theory sees moral panics as often short-lived, PMP theory understands many moral panics as being driven by a self-perpetuating feedback loop. This tends to make PMPs much more persistent than CMPs (Zielińska and Pasamonik, 2022, p. 1554).

Zielińska and Pasamonik developed their theory of PMPs explicitly in response to the cultural and technological changes that have occurred since Cohen's canonical statement of CMP theory. In that sense, they continue the research of McRobbie and Thornton (1995) in the pre-internet period and Hier's 2019 more recent work. Yet, even with the diversification and fragmentation of media that has grown apace in recent decades, Zielińska and Pasamonik present moral panics as occurring between only "two very different visions of the social order" (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1550). At times, they gesture toward the greater pluralization that was prefigured in McRobbie, Thornton and Hier's work. Hence, they write: (a) "growing individualization and the arrival of digitally diversified media has changed the situation dramatically"; (b) "In fact, there might be a spectrum of stances towards an issue;" and (c) Polish narratives around refugees only "roughly split" along "the political line of the conservative/right-wing and liberal/left-wing media" (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022, pp. 1547n1, 1549n3, 1552). Moreover, they acknowledge (2022, p. 1553n11) that "The [Polish] refugee crisis is itself a very complex phenomenon that requires the employment of an elaborate conceptual framework in order to better understand the mechanisms of social reaction that were at work." Yet, these are only passing remarks, often given in footnotes. Otherwise, Zielińska and Pasamonik present their case solely in terms of polarization, not pluralization. Citing Zielińska's earlier work on Polish debates regarding LGB rights, she and Pasamonik are explicit that "the PMP mechanism works to highlight the binary positions to polarize society" (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022, p. 1549n3; also pp. 1548, 1552). Yet, it is important to note that Zielińska and Pasamonik are far from being the only people to employ such polarizing and misleading categories. Indeed, despite the widespread acknowledgment of pluralizing tendencies in the current moral panic literature, the recourse to labels such as "conservative" and "left-liberal" remains ubiquitous.

Such a polarized frame is inadequate to contemporary media conditions. Nicky Falkof (2020:228) has written that "Analyses of . . . episodes [of moral panic] often focus exclusively on mainstream media (generally newspaper) coverage." Yet, she continues (Falkof 2020:228–29), following Ingraham and Reeves (2016) and Hier (2019), that this previously narrow focus has given particular significance to the radical diversifications and fragmentations of the media landscape since 1972 (Ofcom 2023;

YouGov, continuing; also Aguerri, Miró-Linares, and Sampayo 2025; Falkof 2020:233; Majó-Vazquez, Nielsen, and González-Bailon 2019; Mukerjee 2024; Statistics Canada 2022; Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm, and Winiarska-Brodowska 2020; Walsh and Hill 2023). These fragmentations and diversifications have occurred not merely through the vast expansion of print media and broadcast media (that is, television and radio stations), but crucially of course through the rise of numerous online news sources, including news websites and social media platforms of various types and audiences (podcasts, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and so on). Crucially, these forums feed off each other. Even regional newspapers and local broadcast media (television and radio) maintain online platforms and apps, with most news items having a dedicated user comment section. Much of this content retains the ethos of print and broadcast ("traditional") media (long-form articles, based on relatively extended periods of research and fact-checking, and so on). Yet, ever-greater emphasis is placed on real-time reporting via a series of short news items, "op ed" pieces, and so on. While social media is often portrayed as dominant in the media environment, its use of content produced initially for broadcast, print and other media undermines this simplistic claim (see Ploch 2025:528; Righetti 2021:228).

The cacophony of actors in the moral panic has intensified due to the increasing sophistication of even low-resource campaigners and the cumulative effects of automated content producers (bots and so on). Contemporary processes of othering and fear-mongering include the deliberate manipulation of online content by hostile states and other large-scale actors, using "troll farms" and the like (David et al. 2011:20; Ingraham and Reeves 2016; Walsh 2020). Political elites, ideologically driven groups and others employ a plethora of levers within the increasingly mediatized world to transmit dog whistles and microaggressions. This complex social dynamic of continual proliferation, fragmentation and separation of the media-driven processes of mass opinion construction transforms the dynamics (and hence natures) of moral panics from their earlier forms. It fragments users into a multitude of disputant groups or relatively organized "communities of practice," with their own interactive online "echo chambers" (Cinelli et al. 2022; Dolata 2018, Mölders and Schrape, 2019; Greijdanus et al. 2020; Nielsen and Graves 2017; Schrape 2021; Zimmer et al. 2019).

It is peculiar, then, that scholars such as Zielińska and Pasamonik and others retain a binary, polarized conception of moral panics (for example, Morris and Memari 2022; Orkibi 2022). When attributed simplistically, an individual or group is labeled as "liberal/left-wing/progressive" simply because they seek change of any sort, whereas those who resist possibly various and incompatible types of change are labeled "conservative" simply in virtue of that resistance. Defenders of PMP theory might respond by pointing to the ubiquity of such labeling. For example, many contemporary disputant groups and media outlets apply these categories in the same way (Freeden 2013b:130–32). Groups often characterize themselves using ill-defined labels, so as to build and sustain social and political coalitions. Such groups rely on the projection of a shared identity that they hope is sufficiently capacious and resilient to allow them as a pragmatic whole to triumph over a common enemy, over an extended period of time. Yet, these factors offer only weak support for PMP theory. Collective action on a limited issue does not mean the coalition is sufficiently united to sustain an effective sentiment of loyalty over a wide range of more contentious issues (Swann et al. 2012). A polarized conflict easily fragments into a pluralized one.

Even though PMP theory is limited in the ways just indicated, it remains a very interesting advance on CMP theory. Moreover, Zielińska and Pasamonik present PMP theory as work-in-progress. It is "an open category that, as we hope, will continue to develop in line with the dynamics of new knowledge, theoretical advancement and – most importantly, empirical data obtained from the application of the concept [of PMP]" (Zielińska and Pasamonik 2022:1553). The remainder of the present article proceeds in that constructive spirit, by sketching an alternative theory: one of pluralized moral panics. It presents a way in which to better analyze the fragmented, disputed "cultural material" ("meanings, beliefs, practices, values, myths, narratives and the like" (Benfold and Snow 2000:629)) that feed into pluralized moral panics. This analysis does not merely facilitate the analysis of the significances of these concepts and values, but also suggests ways to explore the ambiguities and silences within those concepts, values and the ideational clusters (ideologies) that they constitute. Hence, the theory outlined in section two

(Morphological theory) allows us to better differentiate between the fragmented disputant groups that are spawned by an increasingly pluralized and fragmented media environment. Section three (Transgender rights: a pluralized moral panic) then employs this theory in the analysis of the pluralized moral panic that currently surrounds transgender rights.

Morphological theory

As noted above, pluralized moral panics are driven by disputes regarding the fragmented "cultural material" ("meanings, beliefs, practices, values, myths, narratives and the like" (Benfold and Snow 2000:629)) that form the basis of a contested public space. These disputes are characterized below as inherently ideological disagreements. Ideologies have often been viewed as protean beds for social and political thought and practice (Benfold and Snow 2000, p.613n2). Yet, contemporary ideology scholars have come to reject this view (e.g., Freeden 2013b, *passim*). Ideologies are now commonly conceived as having multi-facetted, layered and mutable cognitive and normative structures. This new framing opens the possibility of using ideological theory to bring out the complexities of contemporary pluralized moral panics. In that spirit, this section outlines a new morphological theory of ideologies. The morphological turn finds its classic expression in Freeden's *Ideologies and Political Theory* (Freeden 1996). Freeden has refined his theory (for example, Freeden 2013a, 2013b) and others have applied it in interesting ways to phenomena such as the history of New Labour (Atkins 2011, Chapter 8, especially pp.152–55), the reform of legal ideology (Lees and Shepherd 2018), the Russian-Ukrainian war (Koval et al. 2022), and Brexit ideologies (Marlow-Stevens 2023). The following analysis differs from these other applications in that it modifies some aspects of Freeden's classic theory, not least through the incorporation of aspects of collective action frame (CAF) theory.

The key goal of Freeden's morphological theory is to provide a robust framework with which to analyze the "discernible patterns" within "political language" (Freeden 2013b:115, 116, 130). It does this through the analysis of ideologies, which it sees as forming the necessary core of any coherent political language and action. On the morphological view, an ideology is a determinate network of conceptions (including categories and values) that structures a group's complex and always partly incoherent and conflictual understandings of its members and their shared normative judgments.2 Hence, an ideology structures its adherents' understandings of the complex world in which they live and constitutes the reality of their shared world, rather than (recalling the Marxist conception) masking the true nature of that world.

Morphologically, ideologies function as networks of meaning that (a) are shared between individuals who wish to act collectively in contradistinction to other groups, and (b) provide shared critical perspectives from which adherents can reflect on their own views and the views of others. As such, ideological patterns "open, challenge, or close" "options" within "elite professional, and vernacular political thinking," and hence also "open, challenge, or close" options for political action. Considered purely in isolation from each other, core concepts (such as "freedom," "equality," "dignity and "rights") would be fatally ambiguous and subject to chaotic shifts of meaning. They would also be unable to bind people together in collective action. For this reason, to bring at least "temporary," "manufactured" and "limited coherence" to "a field of meaning within an untidy world," social and political movements rely on processes of collective "decontestation" (Freeden 1996:76–77, 82–83, 2013a:72–77, 2013b:120). For example, a libertarian group decontests the term "liberty" so that it refers to noninterference, say, but not to self-mastery. A decontested meaning can be either narrow and precise (and treated as "'true'"), or it can refer to a broader range of related meanings (and treated as "'plausible'") (Freeden 2013b:120–21). Yet, even narrow conceptions are to some degree "cluster concept[ions]," in the sense that they are always "internally complex" and have "open connections" to other conceptions. Their respective meanings are determined by the relationships in which they stand to each other. The resulting shared "pattern of thought" or "ideology" frames the movement's self-identity and acts as its intellectual and normative center of gravity.

Morphological theory understands every ideology as having a hierarchical internal structure, with this hierarchy being conceived through Freeden's metaphor of three concentric circles. The most fundamental (inner) circle contains those conceptions that are revered by the majority of the group's members. The betrayal of any of these "core" conceptions would cause the group to fracture and, in extremis, to dissolve (Freeden 1996:60–67, 77–78). Despite revering each of these core (inner) conceptions, members need not hold them to be of equal normative weight (Freeden 2013a, Chapter 4; 2013b:125). For example, both human equality and personal liberty as noninterference might sit at an ideology's core, even though, say, the protection of personal liberty is prioritized. Within an ideology's adjacent (middle) concentric circle sit conceptions that give greater definition and precision to the commitments that one finds in the inner circle. Freeden (1996:68–75) describes them as "logically adjacent" to one's core conceptions, in that "they refer to necessary options and permutations which are invariably brought into play by any concretization" of those core conceptions. Most core conceptions could be concretized in several ways. To explain how any one of the possible adjacent conceptions comes to be prioritized within an ideology, Freeden (1996:69–70; see also p. 136) invokes the idea of "culturally adjacency."

> This is more than merely asserting in general terms that such concepts are socio-cultural products. Rather, (a) their *specific internal formation*, attached to the initial ineliminable component, is shaped by what is referred to here as culture: temporally and spatially bounded social practices, institutional patterns, ethical systems, technologies, influential theories, discourses, and beliefs (to include reactions to external events and to unintentional or non-human occurrences). (b) To all these we need add the crucial factor of human agency, which is not determined entirely by such socio-cultural products. It may reflectively select among them and may also frequently be the non-rational "rogue-factor" in preferring one option over another.

An ideology's third (outer) circle is occupied by what Freeden calls "peripheral" conceptions (Freeden 1996:71, 2013b:118, 2013b:125–26). These are ideas and values (norms, laws, political and economic systems, and so on), that operationalize the ideology's deeper core and adjacent conceptions.

Viewed through this lens, one can say that pluralized moral panics occur where groups use a range of media to propagate their morphologically-structured ideology and to demonize their opponents' ideologies. Before considering the social media context of moral panics, more needs to be said about the ways in which researchers can operatize this theory in the analysis of pluralized moral panics. Firstly, researchers studying pluralized moral panics must identify groups that possess a set of shared ideological commitments, which provide an internally complex center of gravity for their collective praxis (Freeden 2013b:117, 126). Researchers should look for actors that possess, in the terminology of the collective action frame literature, their own respective "'organization frame' . . . or a movement-specific frame" (Benfold and Snow 2000:619; see also Căciuleanu 2017). Here, it is vital to remember that to the extent that the members share these commitments in only a shallow and unstable manner, then the group exists in name only. Anticipating Zielińska and Pasamonik, Freeden holds these conditions to be fulfilled by ideological "macro families" ("liberalism," "conservativism," "socialism" and so on) (Freeden 2022a, Part 4; Freeden 2023). However, for the reasons indicated above, researchers should exercise great caution here.

For example, recent years have seen anti-transgender alliances between some gender critical feminists (GCFs) and sections of the so-called US "New Christian Right" (NCR) (Michaelson 2018). However, such coalitions are too thin and strategic for the GCFs and the NCR to constitute a single disputant (see Transgender rights: A pluralized moral panic). Their shared perspective is not sufficiently well-defined and robust, and their commitment to that perspective is too pragmatic, to be able to maintain loyalty to the collective project in the face of significant complex challenges. Even within ostensibly homogenous groups, the same conceptions can often have different subtly different meanings and statuses. For example, the concept of "private property rights" has logically adjacent status to a von Misesian core conception of personal flourishing, whereas it is cultural adjacent to a contemporary Hayekian core conception of personal flourishing (compare Mises [1927] 2005, and; Hayek 2006 [1960]). For these and other reasons, *pace* Freeden, the modified morphological

theory defended here does not conceive ideologies as political ideational families such as "liberalism" and "socialism," or, recalling Zielińska and Pasamonik's PMP, "conservative," "liberal," "right-wing," "left-wing," and "progressive" (see Ostrowski 2023). Rather than adopting a "macro families" approach ("liberalism," "socialism," and so on), researchers should restrict themselves to morphological analyses of the intrinsically contextualized features of what Freeden (2022a, Part 4) calls "lived ideology."

Secondly, thus far, the morphological approach can seem rather rationalistic, concentrating on our awareness of our fundamental categories and values. Yet, it is important to note that researchers employing a morphological theory must be sensitive to the frequently fundamental role played in ideologies by non-conceptual and especially non-rational factors. Researchers should seek out the otherwise ineffable affective dimensions in the plurality of ideologies. To articulate and analyze the richness of this texture, researchers must seek out affective drivers and what Freeden has called the "concealed silences and inaudible voices" in the (re)framings undertaken by disputant groups (Freeden 2013b:122; Freeden 2022a). While these factors are more ephemeral than the conceptual constellations foregrounded in classic morphological theory, they are particularly important when analyzing the nature, causes and dynamics of pluralized moral panics (see, for example, Dandoy 2015; Falkof 2020, pp.233–34, citing Bauman 2006, Critcher 2011, and Walby and Spencer 2011). This is one of the key reasons why morphological analysis is inherently humanistic, based on careful contextualized analysis of the meanings and presuppositions of texts (written, spoken, pictorial, and so on) as complex entities, written by differently situated actors with different goals and different vocabularies, as specific interventions in particular debates at particular times (see further Tyler 2009).3

The third challenge facing researchers in the application of classic morphological theory is that it can often be difficult to distinguish definitively between core and adjacent conceptions, and even between some adjacent and peripheral conceptions. Consequently, researchers should be more modest in their attempts to analyze moral panics than one might be when, like Freeden, one is analyzing canonical ideological texts. Nevertheless, even when analyzing moral panics, the sensitive researcher should be able to distinguish between core and peripheral conceptions. Heuristically, seeking to locate the contents of the three morphological circles raises important and revealing questions about the disputants in a moral panic. Hence, using a modified morphological theory can help the researcher to capture at least some of the central complexities of a specific pluralized moral panic.

Fourthly, researchers must bear in mind that morphological theory places great emphasis on the practical contexts of ideological conflict, including on the agonal dynamics of the particular pluralized moral panic under analysis. For example, to understand debates relating to LGBTQI+ rights, researchers must bear in mind that, say, the religious beliefs that ground the ideology of Family Watch International are in tension with the conception of human dignity that underpins the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda (Slater 2017). Researchers should also remember that the agonal processes within ideological struggles have substantive effects within ideologies themselves, with group loyalties being understood properly as solutions to practical questions of how best to facilitate collective action (Young 2000, especially Chapter 3). Ideologies, then, should be understood as being interrelated and (re)constructed in the face of perceived oppression and conflicts with competitor groups. Consequently, to understand pluralized moral panics using a modified morphological approach, the researcher must analyze the thick detail of practical disputes, rather than prioritizing more abstract, textual analysis of the type that predominates in classic morphological theory (e.g., Freeden 1996, Parts II-V). In methodological terms, this means that researchers should foreground the dynamic decontestation processes at work in the highly complex networks of praxis that create and sustain pluralized moral panics.

To help with this analysis, researchers would do well to incorporate collective action framing theory into their application of morphological theory. Doing so adds nuance to our understanding of the iterative processes at work in particular instances of conceptual decontestation. Consider the three familiar "core framing tasks," as articulated by Benfold and Snow (2000:615–17). The first of these is "diagnostic framing," understood as "problem identification and attributions." The second task,

"prognostic framing," entails "the articulation of a proposed solution, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan." The third task, "motivational framing," "provides a 'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive." As Benfold and Snow (2000:615) write: "By pursuing these core framing tasks, movement actors attend to the interrelated problems of 'consensus mobilization' and 'action mobilization' . . . Simply put, the former fosters or facilitates agreement whereas the latter fosters action." Morphological researchers must remember that when employing these and other framing techniques, disputant groups seek to ascribe authority to their favored alternatives, and, over time, to amend their own ideological configurations in response to changes in external conditions, internal incoherences and lacunae. Moreover, such framing enables disputant groups to denigrate and marginalize their opponents' ideological positions. Groups continually construct and revise these commitments through the concrete, dynamic and shifting oppositions that drive the moral panics in which they participate. Analyzing these changing oppositions helps researchers to uncover the changing nature of the disputes between interlocutors in a pluralized moral panic, including their changing conceptions of risk and discourses of fear, and so on.

This theory has profound implications for the idea of a "disproportionate" response, which is so greatly disputed in the moral panic literature (For an overview of these disputes, see Hier 2024.). Some scholars see moral panic theory as being fatally undermined by its alleged inability to arrive at a "realistic" or "objective" (sc. dispassionate, unbiased) judgment regarding the level of threat posed by a disruptive phenomenon (Critcher 2009:23; Hier 2008:180). The search for a "realistic" assessment of a threat's seriousness rests on both nomothetic presuppositions and the belief that one view of society is more accurate ("objectively" "correct") than any other. However, on the morphological view outlined above, judgments regarding (dis)proportionality are facets of the disputants' differing interpretations of the social relations (broadly conceived) in which they participate and by which they are affected.4 Consequently, the polarization of moral panics moves scholars toward an idiographic position, which accords greater authority to the disparate perspectives of fragmented collectivities of imperfectly aligned and often antagonistic actors. This shift intensifies with the pluralization of moral panics. Here, each perspective comes to be recognized as what it always was: namely, an essentially contested judgment regarding the threat posed by a particular phenomenon to disputants' competing morphologies.

Foregrounding the essentially contested character of (dis)proportionality helps us to address the tendency of "the conception of disproportion [to be] as [part of] a politically motivated strategy to shore up left-liberal political interests" (Hier 2024:60). Certainly, scholars will see what they regard as evidence of bad faith and deliberate manipulation at work in the moral panic. Then, it is incumbent upon them to present the dispassionate evidence and reasoning that leads them to see bad faith. Yet, throughout it is vital to remember that all allegations of disproportionality are perspectival, meaning one must think carefully before attempting to adjudicate between these elements of the moral panic (Hier 2023:365). (The fragmentation of perspectives is returned to in Transgender rights: A pluralized moral panic.)

Thus far, the article has done a number of things. It has highlighted (The limitations of "classic" and "polarized" moral panic theories) the structural forces at work in increasingly fragmented media environments. It has shown that while Cohen's classic theory of moral panics benefited from subsequent refinements, the polarized theory retains the important limitations of any theory of moral panics that relies upon binary categories ("conservative" versus "liberal," and so on). The present section has outlined a modified morphological theory that will enable scholars to move beyond binary categories. Moreover, it has suggested ways in which researchers can use this theory to better understand the distinctive features of the pluralized moral panics that arise in an increasingly complex and fragmented media environment. The next section applies this theory to the current transgender moral panic. There is insufficient space here to present a full and systematic analysis of that panic. Nevertheless, what follows does indicate some of the insights that can be gleaned through the application of the modified morphological theory.

Transgender rights: a pluralized moral panic

The pluralization of moral panic is evident in numerous current conflicts, including over climate change, free speech and protest, multiculturalism, immigration, health care, social security, and animal rights. This section investigates the current moral panic around transgender rights, identities and inclusion. The analysis focuses particularly on debates in the US and UK, although clearly the panic occurs in many forms globally. These debates are intertwined (McLean 2021). As explored below, the associated moral panic is driven by radical disagreements between a multitude of disputant groups regarding a plethora of crucial issues. Its practical manifestations include threats and violence against trans people, feelings of vulnerability in women's refuges and prisons, concerns about the decline of "traditional" values, and of "Western civilization" more generally (Ebner 2019:115–21).

From the beginning, one must note that contemporary pluralized moral panics share many of the key features of classic and polarized versions. These features include the deliberate use of media to create a sense of threat from an outsider group that is disproportionate to the actual threat posed by that group. Hence, a key element of any type of moral panic (whether pluralized or not) is that the scale of media coverage and social concern is significantly greater than the scale of the phenomenon. It is common to cite data such as the following in relation to the trans debate. Research published by the Williams Institute UCLA in 2022 reported that only 5.2% of the US population surveyed identified as transgender (Herman, Flores, and Kk 2022, Table 4), while the 2021 UK National Census reported that 6.54% of the UK population surveyed reported their gender identity as being different to the one registered at their birth (UK Office for National Statistics 2021, Figure 1; see also Ipsos, 2021, page 5). Even allowing for problems in assessing the accuracy and comparability of data internationally, the highest estimates of transgender people in the population are overshadowed by the extent of coverage that they receive in print and social media across North America, Europe, Asia and elsewhere (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018; Asghar and Shahzad 2018; Lou, Shen, and Zheng 2022; Nelson, Scovel, and Thorpe 2022; Olveira-Araujo 2023; Biggs 2024; World Population Review, continuing). Moreover, much of the media coverage focuses on three activities that involve a minority of trans people: (a) men transitioning into women and then competing in female sports competitions; (b) transgender men residing in female prisons, women's refuges, and other forms of single-sex accommodation; and (c) children (generally, under-18 years olds) who wish to transition to another gender. Hence, many groups claim that current transgender debates fulfil the key criteria of (classic, polarized and pluralized) moral panics: they are panics arising from a level of media attention that is disproportionate to the target phenomena. (This claim is questioned below, when the analysis returns to the proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles.) In addition to these shared features, analysis of the contemporary transgender pluralized moral panic in the US and UK highlights five distinctive features of such a panic.

   (i) Fragmentation of disputant groups.
 (ii) Proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles.
(iii) Continual counter-framing and reframing.
 (iv) Discontinuous moral panics.
  (v) Ambiguous responsibilities.

The remainder of this section outlines each of these features, analyzing illustrative examples. What emerges is the overall structure of a pluralized moral panic in a morphologically complex, social media inflected world.

(i) Fragmentation of disputant groups

We have seen that to the extent that individual activists endorse the same constellation of conceptions (categories and values) – that is, to the extent that they hold largely the same perspective or "ideology" – and act in a coordinated manner in relation to a single socially divisive phenomenon, they constitute a single group which itself operates as a single moral entrepreneur. The latter are often called "communities of practice," although here they are referred to "disputant groups." Typically, perceptions of shared interest and oppression cause otherwise loosely connected individuals to coalesce into disputant groups. This coalescence is facilitated by the growth of disputant-focused social media platforms and channels. (See the second distinctive feature below.)

For example, a shared sense of America's growing "godlessness" has fed a marked strengthening of the coalition of Christian fundamentalists, or the "New Christian Right" (NCR) since the 1970s. As Christians, the constituent denominations have always shared two fundamental core conceptions: namely, a faith in God's authority as expressed through the teachings of Jesus, and the promise of eternal salvation for those who are faithful to those teachings. Nevertheless, many of their core conceptions differ. Hence, Roman Catholics continue to accord centrality to the authority of the interpretations and institutions of the Roman Catholic church and the papacy, while Evangelicals and Pentecostals emphasize the believer's direct relationship with God. Despite this difference, a shared sense of threat to Christian beliefs has bolstered the ideological frame of the NCR at the level of peripheral conceptions. Hence, the alliance between "conservative"5 Catholic groups, Evangelicals, Pentecostals and others rests on a shared belief in the sanctity of the heteronormative family, creationism, and many other such commitments, as well as their adjacent opposition to the right to abortion and a particular conception of "liberal" social values. They also share a peripheral conflation of transgenderism, lesbianism and homosexuality as threats to the divine order. Over recent years, the NCR's unity has been significantly influenced by their growing awareness of those perceived threats. The differences in peripheral conceptions within this coalition of Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics and many other denominations have diminished over time, especially in relation to abortion, gay marriage, and a growing emphasis on denigrating the lives of trans people (Freudenberg 2022). The stronger the perceptions of shared threat, the stronger the affective bonds holding such communities together. Sometimes these bonds can be strengthened deliberately, for example through the creation of ecumenical NCR social media or believers' gravitation to platforms such as Parler and CitizenGO, and to dedicated channels, accounts and influencers on more mainstream platforms, such Instagram and X/Twitter.

In other ways, the contemporary diversification and increased dynamism of the media environment fragments these perceptions of shared grievance and oppression. Hence, the ever more conflictual dynamics of pluralistic societies, exacerbated by fragmented media environments, create new shared morphological identities and allegiances. Yet, the situation is intersectional. The resulting "tribes" need not encompass the totality of the individual's life, creating the possibility that any one person will be the member of several disputant groups.6 Other individuals will feel no loyalty to any such community, but can be convinced to temporarily endorse one of the perspectives in the moral panic.

All disputants in the pluralized transgender moral panic use multiple media routes to speak to their respective audiences and against those with whom they disagree. For example, Donald Trump's 2025 Presidential Inauguration Speech received extensive comment in print and broadcast media outlets, as well as on social media worldwide such as YouTube, where the original footage was isolated and preserved on several channels. He targeted his attack on "trans ideology" at his supporters in additional ways, not least through his own social media platform Truth Social and the platforms controlled by supporters such as the owner of X/Twitter, Elon Musk and even more controversial platforms such as Telegram, Gab, Mastodon, CitizenGO and Parler.

Seeking to influence a smaller, more ideologically focused audience, Family Watch International relies upon a subscription service on its website and its Facebook page. Intersectional contemporary

feminists have used a variety of print, broadcast and social media to propagate more nuanced diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames (Alabanza 2023:10–11; Faye 2021:1–16, 136–58). Some control is exerted by other subcultures over private sections of other media platforms, for example, within WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and so on. Hence, the trans socialist Shon Faye uses a large variety of social media outlets including Instagram and Youtube's Novara Media channel. She produces a very popular podcast (available through Apple, Spotify, Acast, and so on), as well as very successful print and ebooks books such as *The Transgender Issue* (Faye 2021; Gorton, n.d.). Faye offers a valuable note of caution, however. While recognizing the importance of greater representation of and by transgender voices in the media and everyday life, she argues that such "visibility politics" can expose transgender individuals and communities to greater surveillance and abuse (Faye 2021:10–12). The fragmentation of disputant groups entails the creation of an ideological battlefield in which individuals can be targeted for physical and psychological attack.

(ii) Proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles

Every ideology contains a shared morphology or "organizational frame" (Benfold and Snow 2000:619). In its most sophisticated forms, such fundamental morphological frames constitute different "world-views" or *Weltanschauungen*, each understood as, "A general conception of the world, in which beliefs, values and metaphysical presuppositions are all woven together so as to instill the world with significance, and facilitate the transition from thought to action." (Scruton, 2007, p.733) These ideologies, organizational frames or, synonymously, perspectives contain both epistemic and affective dimensions, that are constituted by shared (affective) commitments to particular networks of frames, norms, and goals. They contain core and adjacent conceptions regarding ultimate values, as well as peripheral conceptions regarding practical manifestations of and significant threats to those values. It is here that judgments are formed regarding the appropriate response to such threats. Such perspectives differ often radically from the perspectives of other disputant groups. Together, these conceptions generate specific judgments regarding one's proportionate response to external changes and the disproportionate responses of one's opponents. This is the case even where, as frequently happens, individual elements are shared with other perspectives, or when many elements can be found elsewhere but in significantly different configurations. Using social and other media, disputant groups build "filter bubbles," "epistemic bubbles" and "echo chambers," understood in the following terms.

> An epistemic bubble . . . is a structure of people who are not "exposed to people from the other side [of a dispute]." A filter bubble is an epistemic bubble that is technologically mediated (e.g. one caused by the personal algorithms used by contemporary search engines). An echo chamber, by contrast, is a structure of people who "come to distrust everyone on the outside." The key difference is that epistemic (and hence filter) bubbles omit the testimony of outsiders (or "the opposite side"), whereas echo chambers promote distrust of outsiders and correspondingly promote trust of insiders, which makes the omission of outsider testimony unnecessary. (Coady 2024, p.94, quoting Nguyen 2019)

Although often characterized in purely negative terms, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are sometimes socially beneficial, sometimes harmful. Bubbles and chambers are institutionalized in various forms, and increasingly via social media platforms (CitizenGO, Truth Social, Telegram, and so on for many anti-trans groups) (Ploch 2025; Righetti et al. 2025). For better or worse, such ideologically informed platforms reinforce members' organizational, diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. Yet, while many people live much of their lives within such bubbles and chambers, often they (are forced to) live outside them. Members interact with data and viewpoints that are in tension with their habitual perspectives, and so are difficult to accommodate within their ideological frames. People ease these "uncomfortable" counterfactuals by reinterpreting the latter to fit their ideological frames. That is, they revert to what one might call the "interpretative bubbles" that they share with their trusted epistemic community (Greene 2010; Pascale 2011). By reconfiguring or disregarding the claims and reasons given by their respective opponents, for example, pro-trans activists can interpret anti-trans messaging as blind bigotry, while anti-trans activists can interpret

pro-trans activist arguments as cynically deployed devices of patriarchal domination, or an affront to God. In such cases, one's interpretative community overpowers the alternative frames.

This fragmentation makes it almost inevitable that some elements of a moral panic will be fundamental for one or more of the disputant groups but insignificant or even non-existent for others. It is this diversity that creates allegations of disproportionality regarding one's opponents' responses. Hence, disputant groups A and B battle over facet 1, while disputant groups B, C, and E battle with each other over facet 2, and disputant groups A, E, F and G battle with each other over facet 3. Notice that where the disputes are between just two perspectives (as over facet 1), this is a polarized dispute within a pluralized moral panic. Where two formerly separate disputant groups (A and C) form an ideologically narrow coalition against another disputant group (F), this also constitutes a polarized dispute. The number of facets and perspectives matters, not the number of groups. However, so long as disputant groups are identifiable, it remains meaningful to characterize clashes as parts of a pluralized moral panic. This dimension sheds further light on the trans pluralized debate.

For example, a particular interpretation of the idea of "original sin" is a core conception for the NCR, yet irrelevant for trans activists such as Faye, whose core conceptions include a commitment to a contemporary human rights framing. A broadly human rights-based approach accords with those of many institutions and groups such as Amnesty International that campaign vigorously for legal and social recognition of pro-trans rights alongside gay and lesbian rights. These are "[humans] right to life, freedom and safety" (Amnesty International 2014, n.d.). Here, trans rights are seen as indispensable elements of an organizational frame that has human dignity as its core conception. On this view, dignity is synonymous with a fundamental respect for an individual's expressed self-conception. Another of Amnesty International's core conceptions is that gender is determined by psychology, rather than birth-biology. Gender here is accorded the same worth as fundamental religious or humanistic beliefs. All three are adjacent conceptions in this human rights-based morphological frame. Moreover, the parity between competing core conceptions ensures that toleration of peacefully expressed diversity is also an adjacent conception.

Such secular human rights-based organizational framing is opposed vehemently by organizations such as the US-based fundamentalist Christian group Family Watch International (FWI). In conscious opposition to secular ideologies such as that of Amnesty International, FWI denies the legitimacy of several "'human rights,' [including] abortion, prostitution and illicit sexual behaviors" (Family Watch International n.d.). Their core conception of legitimate sexual behaviors reflects their organization frame, which is a particular interpretation of Christian Scripture. Within this ideological morphology, personal judgment and one's emotional commitments are framed as defective and even evil to the extent that they deviate from that core conception. Consequently, they are to be respected only to the extent that they accord with that core conception. In that sense, personal self-determination holds the position of a peripheral conception for the FWI. On their view, the UN-defined "human rights" of trans people and misguided/evil people are relevant only as manipulative devices, framings which serve to undermine God's Creation.

Regarding perspectives on (dis)proportionality, it was noted above that many groups see the extent of media coverage of trans issues and the vilification of that population as disproportionate, given that very small percentages of any national population identifying as trans. Other disputants disagree vehemently. For example, the US "conservative" Catholic Darrick Taylor argued in the 2023 online *Crisis Magazine* that any legal acceptance of "gender affirming care" is not merely a "slippery slope," but a "cliff edge," leading to the elimination of the fundamental importance of birth-biology and (a particular interpretation of) Christian morality (Taylor 2023). The British evangelical "conservative" Christian Institute also condemns adherents to "the transgender ideology" on grounds others than of the number of trans people in the world. Their website states that "the [trans] movement" "seeks to completely destroy the distinction between men and women that God in his wisdom has created" (Christian Institute n.d..). The crisis is theological, an affront to the divine plan. Not to speak out against gender reassignment practices would violate one's own religious duties: "As Christians we are to speak the truth in love, applying biblical principles without compromise (Ephesians 4:15);

ultimately pointing them to life-changing repentance and faith in Christ" (Christian Institute n.d..). Proportionality is determined by the sanctity of each of God's creations, not by the percentage of the population who identify in ways that differ from their birth-biology. The birth-biology claim is also invoked by gender critical feminists, as is the claim that the existence of any man who identifies as a woman is offensive. Consequently, trans lives should be treated as outrages, such groups argue, irrespective of the proportion of the population who live them. From such morphological perspectives, a vehement anti-trans response is proportionate even against a tiny, marginalized minority, because their mere existence violates core conceptions that are sacrosanct. Here, the appropriate measures of disproportionality arise from the authority of the core conceptions of disputants' respective ideological positions, whether "pro" or "anti" trans.

(iii) Continual reframing and counter-framing

Pluralized moral panics are dynamic phenomena, driven by ongoing processes of "reframing" and "counter-framing" one's own position, as well as those of one's opponents as folk devils. A disputant's initial frame must be continually revised in light of new self-analysis and circumstances. In morphological terms, this requires disputants to revise their decontestation of their conceptions, both in terms of revisiting the conceptions' meanings and their locations within the three concentric circles (core, adjacent and peripheral). Moreover, it entails revisions of the group's organizational, diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. These processes of reframing and counter-framing provoke repeated reframing and counter-framing from others. Counterframing seeks "to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, version of reality, or interpretative [collective action] framework" (Benford quoted in Benfold and Snow 2000:626). Some such altered framings are deliberate attempts to manipulate the intended audiences into viewing one's opponents as folk devils. Others reflect the disputant's reframing of its own morphological commitments. Consequently, occupants of differing interpretative bubbles need not be acting out of bad faith – their reinterpretations might well be sincerely made. Their confusions and reframings during debates with members of others interpretative bubbles can be either honest or cynical or some inchoate mixture of both. For example, where a particular broadcast, print or social media platform is outside of their control, often trans activists, lesbians and others must contend with producers' desire to present the issues using sensational, comical or salacious diagnostic or prognostic frames (Marvin 2024).

Significantly different framings and counter-framings can be found in this pluralized moral panic when one turns to disputants that adopt more traditionalist perspectives, especially those who adopt a "culture wars" frame. Witness prominent US "family values" traditionalists such as the Abiding Truth Ministries (ATM). The latter's leader, Scott Lively, has argued that the LGBTQ+ debate is part of a dominant and deeply sinful "woke" agenda, that gay and lesbian relationships violate Biblical injunctions, with homosexuals being responsible for Nazism (despite being one of the Nazi's key targets during the Holocaust), child abuse, and fostering the spread of AIDS in Africa (Lively 2023; Lively and Abrams 2017; Perkins 2023). Gay, lesbian and trans individuals and groups are clear folk devils on this account. The ATM is, in turn, counter-framed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018, 2025) as a "hate group," as are groups such as Family Policy Alliance, Family Research Council, and MassResistance.

Similar counter-framings of trans rights as part of a woke agenda are core conceptions in the (rather fluid) "patriotic" organizational frames that have become increasingly popular with sections of the US and populations globally. The most significant actor here is US President Donald Trump as the leader of the MAGA ("Make America Great Again") movement. Throughout both of Trump's administrations, the MAGA movement has aggressively reframed trans rights as "unAmerican" and violently divisive. Its opposition to these rights is one of its most important peripheral conceptions, which draws on a diagnostic framing of trans rights as a violation of MAGA's core conception of a particular interpretation of American "greatness" and patriotism. Ostensibly at least, the MAGA

movement combines these core conceptions with a peripheral commitment to a particular understanding of a selective list of US constitutional values (Trump 2025).

Among numerous associated policy initiatives, on March 27 2025 Trump signed an Executive Order entitled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." The order seeks to ensure that the Smithsonian Institute and other cultural bodies end their propagation of a "divisive ideology" which holds "American and Western values are harmful" (White House 2025). Institutions are to remove exhibits that claim the US is racist, or portray (biological) men as women, or "celebrate male athletes participating in women's sports," as well as requiring federal parks to restore monuments to previously valorized heroes and events. With his concerns widening to educational institutions including universities such as Harvard, Trump's campaign against trans rights is likely to be pursued with the full force of the US federal state for at least the remainder of his second term.

In the present context, Trump's use of executive orders blurs the distinction between issues of personal morality and those of risk-management, thereby adding weight to Hier's contention that, instead of following the approach of Alan Hunt (1999, 2011) and others by replacing a moral panic analysis with that of moral regulation or governance, it is vital to recognize that "[moral] panics represent an extension rather than a subversion of routine moral regulation processes" (Hier 2011:528; see also Hier et al. 2011; Critcher 2014; Hier 2016).

Some reframings are more sophisticated than others, not least those arising as a response to significant conceptual changes. For example, as previously noted, many disputants treat the category of "transgender person" as an umbrella concept that reflects the complex intersectional liminality of trans life, a life often lived with a haunting sense of being constantly at the boundaries between gender categories (Faye 2021:xiv). While important as a rallying point for pro and anti-trans activities, some disputants argue that the label tends to flatten the nuances of the landscape of in-person and virtual communities of practice. Hence, the gay transexual activist Holly Woodlawn (1991:159) differentiated between straight men who "get excited over wearing" women's clothes, and "men . . . who want to live as women" through hormone treatment and electrolysis "so they can look real." One could add those trans people who have undergone more extensive surgical procedures, such as breast construction and genital remodeling, to address often more severe gender dysphoria. One can also add those people who resist the reduction of all identities to the male/female binary, presenting instead as neither male nor female (Alabanza 2023:35–67). The same holds for the more explicitly general "LGBTQ(I+)" labels. The tensions to which such diversity can lead within and between transgender, gay and lesbian communities are recorded by many pro-trans writers (Miss Major 2019: pp. 178–80; Johnson 2019:226–33).

Feminist groups have had to reframe in response to the increased prominence and complexity of transgender issues. For example, the feminist group the National Organization for Women (NOW) has come to defend the self-determination of all intersectionally constituted persons, including trans women. A reframed core conception of intersectionality now underpins their adjacent conception of social affirmation ("visibility"), and the peripheral conception to advocate the legal protection of trans identities (NOW [National Organization for Women] 2021). Yet, the pluralized nature of the trans moral panic is reflected in the fact that the transgender movement is "the Ugly Sister" of many other feminisms (Faye 2021:224–61). Central here are "gender critical feminists" (GCFs) or, as opponents label them, "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists" (TERFs).

This movement's ideological position has become prominent in social and broadcast media thanks to high-profile exponents including J.K. Rowling and Ricky Gervais, as well as public academics such as Germaine Greer. It is a complex movement, but some of its morphological conceptions are ubiquitous.[7] One relates to reframing. Hence, the GCF Keely Emerine Mix argued at a turbulent and now (in)famous Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) meeting (held at Seattle public library in April 2020) that "when our male oppressors pretend that they can be us, they change our narrative, they change our history, they change our stories – stories and narrative and history that they could never have participated in, and they put us at real incurrent danger" (WoLF 2020:9). In relation to their own reframing activities, GCFs reject the core conception of pro-transgender activists (whom

they sometimes label "gender identity ideologists") that one's gender is determined by one's instinctive psychological identity. Instead, they hold to the core conception that gender is determined solely by biology at birth. In a pro-transgender article on the Vox website, Katelyn Burns (2019) quotes the WoLF website. "Sex is grounded in materiality, whereas 'gender identity' is simply an ideology that has no grounding in science." She continues to quote: "The redefinition of the word 'sex' to mean 'gender identity' would have myriad harmful effects on women and girls, and women and girls as a distinct category deserve civil rights protections."

The grounding authority of birth-biology is, then, a core conception of this GCF ideology. Yet, others argue that GCFs' associated denigration of psychological identity is dangerous for gay and lesbian people, given that many more traditionalist actors also see non-straight sexual desires as either affectations or the result of mental illness requiring "correction" through conversion therapy. (The dangers of appealing to psychological essentialism are also evidenced by the fact that female emancipation was held back in many countries for generations by the claim that women lack the mental capacity to think rationally about politics.)

Another striking paradox of the GCF anti-trans morphological structure is its peripheral reinforcement of certain traditional diagnostic frames surrounding the relative capacities for agency that are found in biological men and women. For many GCFs, women who identify as men are victims of patriarchy, whereas men who claim to identify as women are patriarchy's agents. Often, biological-borne girls are presented in GCF framing as incapable of fighting patriarchy, victims pressurized into having mastectomies and undergoing chemical sterilization (Murphy 2019). The framing also relies on a limits of empathy, with some GCFs expressing incomprehension of some other women's desires to undergo operations to acquire key markers of a male body (Beck, in Deep Green Resistance 2020, 34:06 to 36:31 mins).

In relation to male to female transitions, GCFs emphasize peripheral conceptions of what they see as men's legalized invasion of female-only spaces, not least men's usurpation of women's opportunities for sporting scholarships and achievements, as well as allegedly further endangering ("real," that is borne) women in refuges and women's prisons (Murphy 2019). Men here are folk devils and women are their often helpless victims. Radical feminist lawyer Kara Dansky of WoLF put it thus at the Seattle public library meeting referred to earlier: "This is the new misogyny. It's the same as the old misogyny, but with a post-modern twist . . . Only men could oppress women for thousands of years, and then turn around, put on a dress and claim to be the most marginalized group in society" (WoLF 2020:36). The dynamics of this reframing and counter-framing are inextricably bound up with the dynamics of the contemporary media environment. Hence, GCF framings have been propagated widely through the many partial or complete recordings of the Seattle library event that have been shared widely on online and in social media (including FaceBook, YouTube, X/Twitter and Instragram). This extensive online dissemination has led to a large amount of comment from numerous disputant groups, across various social media platforms and websites including blogs, as well as off-line media.

Slothouber has argued that, underpinning the organizational frame of many anti-trans groups including GCFs and the NCR, one finds what Lee Edelman has called the essentialized "figure of the Child" (Edelman 2004, p. 11; quoted in Slothuber 2020:93). This image is allegedly a core conception for many disputants, with a framing purpose of "serv[ing] to regulate public discourse," especially around puberty blockers and the child's desire to determine their own identity. The image is "not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical child" (Edelman 2004, p. 11, quoted in Slothuber 2020:93). It is not the child that seeks to transition to another gender now, but rather the idea of a possible child who comes to regret their choice to transition. The biological essentialism sitting at the core of the "figure of Child" underpins the peripheral conception of the illegitimacy of puberty blockers and other gender transition procedures. Slothuber (2020:93–97) finds this figure disseminated through many trans-skeptical items in mainstream and social media, so as to propagate a moral panic that serves the social dominance of cis-normativity. There are obvious dangers, however, with attributing metaphors, with all of their possible their implications, to groups that do not use them explicitly, as Edelman and Slohouber do here.

Relatedly, counter-framing can be taken to strange extremes. For example, in a 2020 radio/Youtube conversation with Julia Beck, the GCF Jennifer Murnan attributed to transgender activists "the idea that you become nothing but a floating mind, disembodied, that that is everything that you are" (Deep Green Resistance 2020, 32:34 to 32:42 mins). It is certainly the case that not all trans persons seek to undergo reassignment surgery. Yet, even among those who do not seek this route, generally people undergo hormone treatments. For this reason, critics might well view Murnan's claim as a radical diagnostic counter-framing of many trans morphologies. Pro-trans activists insist on the vital importance of embodiment within their organizational frame. It is a core conception that the body must be brought to match the individual's sense of gender identity. From this perspective, transitioning is vital because appropriate embodiment is a central component of a coherent and unalienated life. Hence, Murnan's attack on trans positions seems to rest on a highly implausible diagnostic counter-framing of a core conception of many pro-trans ideologies. This mismatch of interpretative bubbles reflects a profoundly significant difference in gender ontology. Gender critical feminists identify the determining criterion (a core conception) of one's gender as biological (especially genital and DNA) structure at birth. By contrast, pro-trans activists hold psychological factors as their core conceptions, thereby rendering birth-biology irrelevant to one's true gender.

(iv) Discontinuous moral panics

While any number of disputant groups in a moral panic seek to create and sustain that panic, other disputant groups can seek to mitigate it: (a) by de-escalating tensions: (b) by shifting the terms of the debate; or (c) (a tactic to achieve both (a) and (b)) by diminishing media sensationalization and restricting debate, for example, to the legislative or constitutional realm. Shifting the judgments regarding the sense of crisis will be central here, something that directly affects multiple elements within the moral panic, including disputants' judgments regarding the (dis)proportionality of the parties' respective responses to the provocative phenomena. Discontinuities between responses have appeared repeatedly in the preceding discussion. Their existence stems from the prevalence of the various bubbles and echo-chambers that have proliferated with the exponential growth and fragmentation of the social media environment.

(v) Ambiguous responsibilities

The dynamic multipolarity of the process of pluralized moral panics makes it difficult if not impossible to determine who if anyone bears primary responsibility for beginning or sustaining a pluralized moral panic. Notice that this feature significantly undermines Zielińska and Pasamonik's distinction between "Activators" and "Opponents." Responsibilities are further merged by the complexities of the alliances that result from the process of pluralized moral panics.

In term of media activity, here one of the most interesting members of WoLF is the radical lesbian feminist Julia Beck. Beck's prognostic framing is such that, between 2019 and 2021, she disseminated WoLF ideology by actively engaging with US-conservative media. In January 2019, she spoke at a prominent event hosted by the Heritage Foundation, a self-identified "conservative" think-tank and pressure group supporting "traditional American values," including the traditional heterosexual family and patriarchal capitalism (Heritage Foundation 2019). In February 2019, she appeared on Fox News' Tucker Carlson Tonight. In April 2019, Beck gave evidence to the US House Judiciary Committee, opposing pro-transgender modifications of the (US) Violence Against Women Act and the (US) Equality Act (Fox News 2019; Heritage Foundation n.d.; Murphy 2019). Beck's appearance was posted on several YouTube channels and widely shared on other social media. Beck's other media appearances have included interviews on GCF-friendly websites, podcasts, television and radio, such as Feminist Current, Deep Green Resistance, and Women's Liberation Radio News (Deep Green Resistance 2020; Murphy 2019; Pettersen 2021).

The paradox is clear: Beck and others have allied themselves with "family values" outlets in the MAGA/NCR media so as to counter patriarchy and the marginalization of lesbians ("lesbian erasure"). Their prognostic frame sits uneasily with their adjacent/peripheral conceptions. Beck's prognostic strategy indicates some of the ways in which media fragmentation exerts a profound influence over a disputant group's morphology and framings. It also highlights the ways in which the diversity of media outlets helps to blur the lines of responsibility for creating and sustaining a pluralized moral panic. In Beck's case for example, who bears what responsibility for increasing tensions over trans rights: trans activist disputant groups, Beck and WoLF, or the owners of the MAGA/NCR media on which Beck appeared? One's answer to the question is very likely to be heavily influenced by one's existing position regarding the legitimacy of calls for greater trans rights.

The multiple cases covered above exemplify the five distinctive features of pluralized moral panics that emerge when one applies an analytic model combining ideological morphology theory and collective action frames to the trans moral panic. These features are (i) the fragmentation of disputant groups; (ii) the proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles; (iii) continual counter-framing and reframing; (iv) discontinuous moral panics; and (v) ambiguous responsibilities in the creation and escalation of moral panics. This section has highlighted many concrete examples of these features. For example, transgender women are diagnostically framed differently by pro-trans feminists than they are by anti-transgender GCFs and members of the multi-facetted NCR. The analysis has shown how conflicts between the diverse strands of NCR, GCFs and pro-trans feminists are inflected by disputed framing processes relating to gender and sexuality. Further differences of framing arise when one also considers lesbians who are pro-trans, and people who are intersex. Concerns and questions that arise between some of these disputants do not arise for others. Issues are of great importance for some disputants, while being insignificant or invisible for the same disputants in other contexts and times. Heroes for some disputants over transgender rights are villains or irrelevancies for others. Hate speech for one group is moral truth for another, and so on. It is unsurprising, then, that a fragmented social media creates particularly potent avenues for such drivers as climates of unease that evolve into climates of inter-group fear, oppression and enmity. The next, concluding section will summarize the article, paying particular attention to the key features of the theory that it developed and the analysis of the current trans debate to which it led.

Summary and significance of the pluralized theory

Even during the final revisions of this article, there were significant developments in the pluralized moral panic over transgender rights. The Trump administration doubled down on its marginalization of trans rights by moving to withdraw all funding from what it sees as federally-funded "woke" projects, ranging from parts of the community college sector such as "Pride Centers" in San Diego (Echelman 2025) to the intensification of its campaign against trans and other "woke" diversity initiatives in US universities, most famously Harvard. The American Civil Liberties Union describes "Trump's anti-trans crusade" as "a gross overreach of presidential power and yet another attempt to punish trans people just for existing" (Francois 2025). The UK Supreme Court delivered a landmark ruling on 16 April 2025, which decided that when used in the Equality Act 2010 the terms "woman" and "sex" referred solely to birth-biology and never to gender psychology. Anti-trans feminist groups such as *For Women Scotland*, who brought the case to the Supreme Court, were of course jubilant. The Labour Government reacted with apparent relief that the British state now has a clear position on whether trans men and trans women are indeed men or women. Trans activists from various groups are united in their condemnation of the decision. Government bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, employers and campaign groups are now struggling to determine their legal requirements under the law.

This article has argued that the complexities of such reactions tend to be flattened out by both classic and polarized theories of moral panic (Morphological theory). Neither can adequately capture the dynamics of the pluralized moral panics that have become typical following the fragmentation of

the news and campaigning media environment. While many commentators focus on the rise of social media as a new arena with scant connection to print and broadcast media, this article sees the relationship between old and new in far more complex and symbiotic terms. The article moved on (Morphological theory) to suggest a framework that will enable scholars to analyze the complexities of these pluralized moral panics. This framework is a revised form of Michael Freeden's morphological theory of ideologies.

It was shown that Freeden's (1996) classic formulation conceives all patterns of political thought through the metaphor of three concentric circles of "decontested" ideas and values. Where Freeden refers to these ideas and values as "concepts," it is argued here that they are better referred to as "conceptions;" that is, as abstract concepts that have been specified in particular ways. For example, the conceptions of the concept of "freedom" include (i) the absence of interference by others (often associated with varieties of classical liberalism), (ii) self-mastery (often associated with varieties of interventionist liberalism and socialism) and (iii) the absence of vulnerability to the arbitrary power of other natural or artificial persons (often associated with varieties of republicanism). The inner of the three morphological circles contains the ideology's decontested "core" conceptions. These are the bundle of conceptions that are fundamental to the ideology's "worldview." They provide the center of gravity for the adherents to that ideology. The middle circle is made up of further specifications of the core conceptions, derived from the "logical" and "cultural" associations that they have within the worldview of the particular ideology. In morphological theory, these are called "adjacent" conceptions. The outer circle contains the "peripheral" conceptions. These are the practical arrangements and commitments that the group members agree will, given the prevailing external circumstances, best realize their core and adjacent conceptions.

In addition to the minor terminological change from "concept" to "conception," this article has modified the classic morphological theory in four key ways. Firstly, the modified morphological analysis is concerned with social as well as political ideologies and worldviews. Secondly, the morphological theory expounded in this article rejects all attempts at "macro-family" analysis. That is, it does not seek to analyze diffuse ideologies such as "liberalism," "conservatism" or "socialism." The closest one might get are varieties of these ideological families, and even those are very heavily contextualized in their concrete environment. Thirdly, it denies any sharp distinctions between core and adjacent conceptions, and between adjacent and peripheral conceptions. All conceptions stand on a continuum, rather than as occupants of discrete concentric circles. Nevertheless, an adjacent conception that blurs with a core conception will be too close to the center to blur with a peripheral conception. An adjacent conception that blurs with a peripheral conception is too far from the center to blur with a core conception. Fourthly, the theory expounded here reconceives the process of decontesting concepts into conceptions by drawing on collective action frame theory, particularly diagnostic, prognostic, motivational and organizational frames. Applied with sensitivity to the nuances of meaning, this theory introduces structures, categories and processes that provide fresh insights into pluralized moral panics. It rests on a form of analysis that is closer to presuppositional analysis in the history of social and political thought, than it is to computer-based qualitative methods (Tyler 2009).

Section three (Transgender rights: a pluralized moral panic) used this theory to analyze the current pluralized moral panic around issues of transgender identities in the US and UK. Five features emerged from that analysis that are distinctive of pluralized moral panics. Firstly, it highlighted the fragmentation of disputants in the moral panic. Secondly, it demonstrated the proliferation of ideologies and interpretative bubbles, which leads, thirdly, to continual reframing and counter-framing of one's position and those of one's opponents. Fourthly, the application of the theory showed that these processes create discontinuous moral panics, which, fifthly, lead to ambiguous responsibilities regarding the creation and intensification of those conflicts.

The modified morphological theory and the five distinctive features of the trans debate that it uncovers will help researchers to analyze the nuances of other, increasing common pluralized moral panics. They will help us to better understand the intricacies of what Stanley Cohen (2002: xxv) called our "more 'complex and brittle' social order." The new theory of pluralized moral

panics seeks to enable scholars to better identify nuances with the commonplace categories such as "trans," adding a distinctive nuance to its disaggregation into "transgender," "transvestite," "gay," "lesbian," "pan-sexual" and so on. Moreover, it exposes the immense analytic inadequacies of categories such as "left-liberal," "conservative," "socialist" and "radical." In short, hopefully, this first statement of the new theory will go some way to helping researchers to more effectively capture the complex and shifting dynamics of contemporary pluralized moral panics. Potential areas of application include debates regarding the ascribed statuses regarding citizenship and immigration, as well as intersectional debates regarding race and ethnicity, age and many other ideologically driven conflicts (For gestures in those directions, see Dotter 2004; Modood et al. 2025; Schur 1980). Through these applications, this new theory can help us to better understand the conflicted world that, together, we create.

Notes

1. Given the article's rejection of uncontextualized analytic categories, it is important to note that the terms "pro-trans" and "anti-trans" are here solely used to refer to tendencies among umbrella groups, not to analytic categories, including what are called here "disputants."
2. Except where quoting Freeden directly, the following argument distinguishes an abstract "concept" from its concrete specification as a "conception." Freeden does not usually make this linguistic distinction, although "conception" better captures the ideational results of decontestation than does "concept."
3. *Pace* Righetti (2021) and others, qualitative analysis software can capture only imperfectly the nuances of a text, where the same complex ideas can be expressed by differently-situated actors, in numerous ways, and without any necessary overlap of words or phrases.
4. For the philosophical underpinnings of this claim, see Bosanquet 1923, chapters 2 and 11, and Tyler 2009 and Tyler 2011.
5. The term "conservative" here refers to particular strands within US Catholicism, rather than to the macro-family level rejected earlier in this article (see Gatye, Chelini-Pont, and Rozell 2022).
6. There is insufficient space here to reflect on the distance between this view and scholars who frame moral panics through Bourdieu's structuralism (Dandoy 2015).
7. Knowledge of institutional allegiance is necessary here. For example, Ploch's (2025) analysis is radically under-mined, because, lacking this knowledge, Ploch has to assume that TERFs are defined merely by shared needs and beliefs. Ploch uses these beliefs to identify TERF posts on X and in academic literature, unsurprisingly finding that their results confirm their assumptions, even if not all themes appear in every post or article.

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