

Grooming a Narrative

How Rhetoric and Old Lies Take on New Life in a Culture War

Politics and identity have blurred into something beyond being synonymous and into something where one dictates the other.

In the latest example of identity politics and rhetoric driving broader societal conversations, we see the demonization of the LGBTQ community unfolding before us through the term “grooming.” Conservative politicians and pundits have taken to labeling anyone who opposes their anti-LGBTQ legislations, such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay Bill”, as “groomers.” The term might be confusing to some, but is rooted in fear and used as a propaganda tool the same way the term “thug” has been used to create fear of various ethnic groups.

The term itself refers to the psychological manipulation and coercion that sexual predators use to abuse their victims without being caught. This likening of helping kids to understand personal and sexual identity in a different way than previous generations to predatory behaviors is an obvious, grotesque mischaracterization and a clear attempt to create fear and anger toward the LGBTQ community and those who support it.



It's just the latest attack from a right wing that has embraced increasingly extremist views in recent years. Fox News pundits seized the opportunity to use what was once a fringe conspiracy theory on par with Hilary Clinton running child sex trafficking rings to stir up fear that children are in danger of being "recruited" if identity is discussed at a young age.

The network ran segments devoted to pedophilia throughout March and April while simultaneously having pundits describe the actions of parents and teachers who want to allow children to express their transgender identity as "grooming." One guest pundit went so far as to suggest that children were "being ripened for grooming for sexual abuse by adults."

Elsewhere, conservative voices have likened affirming trans identities in young people to psychological torture. You may also recall that during the confirmation hearings for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, conservatives involved in her questioning brought up her sentencing record for child pornographers and some on the fringes of the right even suggested that supporting her confirmation was akin to supporting pedophilia.

It's a tactic that has been gaining traction on the right since last summer when the same conservative activists who developed a strategy to attack critical race theory started using the word grooming to attack progressive policies around gender and sexual identity. The choice of word is not accidental, playing

on modern conspiracy theories and fear as well as long held homo/trans phobic stereotypes.

Another Chapter in a Dark History

Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric has long relied on painting members of the LGBTQ community out as evil or pedophiles. This latest collective effort to discriminate now also ties in the work of LGBTQ allies, educators and anyone whose views don't align with conservatism. It is at best a poorly thought-out propaganda strategy and at worst an attack on important ideals surrounding personal freedoms and social equality within our society.

Social media has been used as a platform for divisive rhetoric in recent years. In 2020, posts began to circulate through the social media platform Facebook claiming that the acronym LGBT was being expanded to add the letter "P," which would stand for pedosexual and claimed that this is what the left means when they say "equality and acceptance."

Going as far back as the 1970s, efforts have been made to cast LGBTQ people as child predators or to sexualize their very existence. Back then, the goal was to roll back LGBTQ legal protections and used rhetoric that said "LGBTQ people cannot reproduce, therefore they must recruit" in an effort to stoke fear of an "other" coming to do harm.



By creating a moral panic, conservative voices create a vacuum in which logic and reason cease to exist. Reality and facts are no longer objective, policy and elections are no longer substantive but rather, shaped by public sentiments that are informed by contrived narratives and manipulated images, symbols and terminology.

This right-wing focus on fear is intentional and increasingly tied to white nationalism and groups that have only looked to become stronger in the wake of Donald Trump's loss to Joe Biden. In some cases, the same groups and cultural forces that were at play in staging the events of January 6, 2021 are again involved and their rhetoric pours out of representatives that walk the halls of congress and seek election across the country.

J.D. Vance, a Republican senate candidate from Ohio, recently argued that conservatives must “seize” the cultural institutions of the left and use them to reclaim the nation through a committed “de-wokeification program.”

The goal is ultimately political, but the price paid along the way is devastating for marginalized groups.

The Language of Hate and Politics

Language often shapes perception and because of that, it's a valuable tool for those who wish to use powerful human emotions such as anger to persuade people to vote for certain politicians or policies.



The language used to breed hate evolves like any other type of language, pulling on strings of nationalism or patriotism to evoke powerful emotions when fear and anxiety simply won't cut it. You've likely heard a racial justice advocate referred to as “Marxist” or “neo-racist.” Grooming is just the new version of a decades old trope for those with homophobic and transphobic views to compare people from the LGBTQ community with pedophiles.

It's a tactic that falls in line with other efforts to stir up hate for specific groups. Centuries ago, stories that Jews were ritually murdering children were often accompanied by accusations of witchcraft and used as an excuse to commit anti-Semitic atrocities.

The “Satanic Panic” of the 1970s and '80s, a term used to describe a period in which fears were stoked that satanic cults were committing ritual abuse against children, even alleging murder and sexual assault, has provided many of these contemporary conspiracies a template to build narratives about child abduction, secret societies and other abuses. They simply plug in language that directs the ire of people toward whatever group they want to isolate, be it liberals, the LGBTQ community, social justice advocates or any other group they view as harmful to what they define as traditional values.

Ultimately, the language battle is lost over time as people have experiences with and come to know the LGBTQ community. The fact is, the myths simply don't stand up to reality and people can see and experience that. Politicians and pundits alike know this in many cases, but simply don't care. The formula works to spark outrage and build an audience of outraged citizens who will help them retain power or ratings.

Along the way, they normalize homophobic rhetoric and the belief in conspiracy theory under the guise of protecting children. Sadly, the rhetoric becomes entrenched in personal identities and provides the fuel for a culture war that the LGBTQ community is forced to sit on the front lines of and endure the harm that comes with that war.