

Trans People Are Facing Authoritarianism and Eliminationism: Is Critical Scholarship Failing to Respond?

Jay Todd

University of Glasgow
jay.todd@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

We stand at a perilous juncture wherein trans and gender diverse people in the UK and beyond are increasingly subject to authoritarian and eliminationist political forces. Following the UK Supreme Court judgement of April 2025 and amid the continual emergence of political and policy apparatuses that increasingly call for heightened control, surveillance, and restriction of the scope of trans people's lives, including the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission's Code of Practice, and the 'Cass' and 'Sullivan' Reviews, in this piece I ask: are critical scholars failing to act with urgency to protect trans people when most needed? I argue that critical scholars should resist the installation of logics that enforce rigid, hygienically-policed sex/gender binaries, question individuals' selfhoods and autonomy, and undermine ethical standards, recognising in turn the consequences these hold for all marginalised groups and for conducting critical social science research. Moments of solidarity demonstrate the influence that critical scholars can wield to address the emergency nature of this moment, and to ensure that trans people and trans research can be valued and maintained within the academy. Failing to do so risks the loss of trans scholars and trans scholarship, one that critical scholars would carry as their failure and burden.

Keywords

transgender, Supreme Court, EHRC, Sullivan Review, trans geographies



Introduction: 15 April 2025

On 15 April 2025, I facilitated an evening workshop with young Black trans people and trans youth of colour, discussing their experiences of life in the UK. What they shared was full of trans joy – narratives that persist despite dominant UK discourse about young people’s so-called ‘gender-related distress’, to borrow the stigmatising term used by the ‘Cass Review’ into gender-affirming care for trans youth.¹ This Review is one of several biopolitical apparatuses increasingly restricting and surveilling the UK’s trans populace. Despite the young people’s indisputable joy and euphoria in embodying their transness, their stories also carried a sense that life is not working out as it should—more so than pre-COVID, pre-Cass, and before the current wave of extreme vitriol, the time when I had last worked extensively with trans youth.

Walking back to my hotel, I ruminated on how, through my research with trans people across the UK, I could feel societal conditions faced by trans people rapidly regressing. I thought about what, as a non-binary person and critical geographer, I increasingly name as authoritarian and eliminationist forces surrounding transness in the UK and beyond. These include sociopolitical, legislative, and activist efforts increasingly disguised within reports, consultations, and so-called evidence-gathering that function as trojan horses to repress and restrict trans people’s lives and bodies. I did not – could not – know that the following day’s events would throw trans and gender diverse people in the UK into demonstrable peril, bringing them – us – closer to societal exclusion and pariahship.

16 April 2025

The next morning, I jolted awake. I’d overslept. Muscle memory took over: I opened BBC News and read, ‘UK Supreme Court rules legal definition of a woman based on biological sex.’ Below, a photo of people toasting sparkling wine, Suffragette colours – liberatory greens, purples, whites – adorning smiling bodies, hands joined, fists raised. Flags and homemade signs dotted the crowd: ‘LARGE GAMETES’, ‘Women are born, not some bloke with a form’, ‘adult human female’ – slogans denying feminism’s core: that women are made, not born. I had to run for a train with no time to absorb the implications, knowing only this moment was incendiary. Pushing through Central London, panic flickered as I thought of the young people from the night before and what they might face. On board, I opened the judgment itself:

a person with the protected characteristic of sex has the characteristic of their biological sex only: a trans man with a GRC ... is a woman for the purposes of section 11 and a trans woman with a GRC ... is a man and not entitled to be treated as a woman under the EA 2010 (Supreme Court 2025, 83).

In reaching their decision, the Court had not heard directly from a single trans person. My incredulity broke only when I overheard a group of men nearby declaring that common sense had prevailed – that what I understood as a monumental regression, wounding to trans and cis people alike, was a victory.

¹ The Review’s *Final Report* uses ‘gender-related distress’ 52 times; it also uses ‘young people with gender-related distress’ to describe trans youth (Cass, 2024). Scholars evaluating the Review have found methodological flaws and misrepresentations of evidence (McNamara et al. 2024; Noone et al. 2025).

Trans Exclusion Becomes National Agenda

Over the next weeks and months, the ruling was seized upon and vastly exceeded,² including through the agenda pursued by Great Britain's Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI)-accredited human rights institution, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), through its April 2025 'interim update' and May 2025 draft Code of Practice (CoP) for services, public functions, and associations. This Code reportedly focuses almost exclusively on how providers should systematically exclude trans people from public services and spaces, including situations where they can be denied access to both men's and women's services. Conversely, critical geographers' research has, for decades, shown that assembling legislation, policy, and spaces around binary expectations is actively harmful to people (including cis folk) who do not conform to these binaries, and that policing spaces in terms of supposed 'biological sex', does not - cannot - work in real life (e.g. Bender-Baird 2016, Browne 2004, Doan 2010, Marshall 2021, Namaste 1996, Smith et al. 2023, Todd 2021, 2024).

These events led the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights to argue that responses to the judgement 'tend towards the exclusion of trans people from many aspects of society' (Council of Europe 2025). The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention has also issued two warnings on the UK's anti-trans movements; a 'red flag alert' which described 'evidence of genocidal intent and actions targeting' trans and intersex people, including political 'attempts to erase them as a class' (Lemkin Institute 2025a), and a statement calling for the EHRC to lose GANHRI accreditation in view of its violation of the Paris Principles and 'erosion of protection' for trans and intersex people, a situation the Institute stated would render trans lives 'unbearable' (Lemkin Institute 2025b). Emerging evidence demonstrates trans people are already being excluded from services and spaces they have long accessed, facing public outing, and consequently limiting the spatial scope of their lives as a safety mechanism (e.g. TransActual 2025).

Where Are the Critical Scholars?

During this accelerating crisis, I have thought a great deal about what critical geography is and should be. Seeing little action being actively taken within the discipline - one that has historically failed to include trans people and to shore up trans geographies scholarship (e.g. Brice 2023; Gieseck 2023; Kinkaid 2024; Rosenberg 2023) - I have asked myself "where are the critical scholars when we need them?" And - as I'm sure many have considered regarding interconnected struggles like anti-Black racism, decolonising the discipline, and galvanising support for Palestinian liberation - is critical geography - are critical scholars - failing to act with urgency when most needed?

Many urgent and severe events affecting trans and queer people have gone largely unaddressed by critical geographers, even though these have far-reaching consequences for everyone, including social science researchers. For example, the government-commissioned 'Sullivan Review' into data, statistics and research on sex and gender (Sullivan 2025a; 2025b),

² The ruling did not obligate creating spaces that exclude gender diverse people. Lord Hodge, delivering the judgement, counselled 'against reading th[e] judgment as a triumph of one or more groups ... at the expense of another' (Somerville, 2025, n.p.).

emerging from the previous government's aim to 'kick woke ideology out of science' (Rabesandratana 2023), has generated little critical comment. As Felicity Callard and I write in a peer-reviewed critical response (Todd and Callard 2026), the review seeks to install a singular model of binary, immutable 'biological' sex across research and data gathering across institutions including government, universities, the health service, and research organisations—presenting this binary as an unquestionable scientific truth that should, in most cases, be the sole basis for collecting sex and gender data. We note that the review implicitly casts trans and gender diverse people's existence, and ethical standards promoting their inclusion and accurate representation, as oppositional to truth, rigour, and desirable mainstream norms. Among other concerning implications, the review proposes universities 'consider paring back the scope and power of ethics committees' (Sullivan, 2025b 16-17; see Todd and Callard 2026 for a sustained discussion of its implications). The review has been welcomed by the Labour government and cited by the Trump administration, including in its document on 'Pediatric Gender Dysphoria', which advocates greatly restricting young people's access to gender-affirming care. Several UK parliamentarians have called for its recommendations to be fully implemented without delay.

When instruments like the EHRC CoP and 'Sullivan Review' not only devastatingly impact trans people, but carry other deleterious consequences, including for university and social science research, ethics, and funding (Todd and Callard 2026), it deeply concerns me that critical scholars and geographers, particularly senior academics, have said so little. Are critical scholars willing to accept the installation of logics that undermine ethical standards, enable the questioning and qualification of individuals' selfhoods, and enforce rigid, hygienically-policed spatial and discursive binaries of sex and gender, with potential consequences for all marginalized groups, when many have fought for decades to embed intersectional, feminist, and liberatory praxis within and beyond the academy?

Moments of Solidarity

Moments of disciplinary solidarity, conversely, show the collective influence that critical geographers can wield. I know that many are undertaking exhausting labour to resist the authoritarian moment, including by engaging with debasing public consultations like the EHRC's. Many will be supporting their trans colleagues and students, and acting in unrecognised ways, perhaps invisibilising their actions to protect themselves or others.

In the aftermath of the EHRC's 'interim update', which several experts argued to be segregationist in effect, several geographers co-organised an open letter to the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG). 533 geographers ultimately called for the organisation to act with urgency to engage with government, the EHRC, geography department leaders, schools and more, in defence of trans rights (Todd 2025). The organisation moved from declining to submit to the EHRC consultation (RGS-IBG 2025a) to more fully engaging, eventually making a submission (RGS-IBG 2025b). Yet even this submission refers to 'the balance of competing protected characteristics' (Ibid., n.p.), a trans-hostile and anti-feminist dogwhistle and falsehood of rights in competition often used

to pit cis women against trans people.³ Others at the forefront of interconnected struggles will recognise the suppression of criticality through the fallacy of such oppositional dynamics. Critical scholarship must involve critiquing our institutions, both those that directly represent us and those placing limits on marginalised people.

Trans Academics and Trans Geographies on the Sidelines

Many trans and queer academics will wonder how we address authoritarian threats looming while they, and trans and queer geographical work, are sidelined and siloed. To my knowledge, only one person whose work focuses on trans geographies – gender diverse or cis – holds a permanent academic contract in the UK. There are very few elsewhere (Giesekeing 2023). Meanwhile, trans colleagues are limiting their participation in conferences and other public academic events out of fear and worry. Relatedly, growing conversation among queer geographers reflects on the devaluing of our knowledges by and within academic institutions. A ‘trans geographies’ session at the recent RGS-IBG Conference involved discussing fears that UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) and other bodies’ funding may become inviable, particularly if funders adopt recommendations like those of the ‘Sullivan Review’. Beyond the discipline, research fellowships for women have emerged that prohibit trans women from applying (e.g. Newnham College 2025); doubtless, others will follow.

What happens, then, if gender diverse people are not present within academic institutions at all? What happens if the university, following those opposed to any academic deviation from conformance, make impossible our presence with any sort of dignity? Critical scholars must urgently act to prevent such questions becoming reality.

Call to Action

We stand at an unprecedentedly perilous juncture that will impact how trans and gender diverse people will experience their daily lives, in the UK and elsewhere. We need critical (particularly senior) geographers to grasp the emergency nature of this moment, and take action to address authoritarian and eliminationist threats facing trans and gender diverse people, and marginalised communities more broadly. Critical geographers must start valuing the potentialities of trans geographies scholarship beyond having relevance only for trans people. The discipline could play a huge role in ensuring that trans people and trans research are valued and maintained, and that trans people, and those conducting trans research, can continue to practice a critical geography ethos – one that values trans scholarship and collectivises around the kinds of struggles I have addressed – in the first place. Critical scholars would carry the loss of trans scholars and trans scholarship as their failure and burden.

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³ I do not intend to criticize any individual at the RGS-IBG or its response (and I thank those for involved for their sincere and careful engagement) but rather intend to demonstrate how successful and embedded certain anti-trans logics have become in the UK and elsewhere.

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