

The 'private' life of US politics part two: affect, intimacy and public bathrooms

by Kate Gilchrist

In **part one** of this two-part blog post, I looked at the rise in popularity of populist politics in the US, as represented by Donald Trump. In light of the presidential elections it seemed timely to try to understand why there has been such a shift in the political climate here (**although it is by no means confined to this region**). I sought to provide an alternative analysis to the more usual economic, historical and socio-political explanations and in reading Lauren Berlant's introductory chapter to *Intimacy: a special issue* [1] (1998), it struck me that her theoretical insights could be applied as a way of thinking about the *affective* life of US politics. Therefore in this second post I once more consider Berlant's thoughts on public intimacies to examine a significant debate which has taken place as a backdrop to the elections, dubbed a 'culture war' – transgender rights and **the use of bathrooms in public schools**.

To briefly recap on Berlant's theoretical insights, she builds upon Jurgen Habermas' [2] theory of 'critical publicness', which posits that liberal democracy depends on the development of a highly politicised 'public intimacy'. Such public intimacy is developed within the domestic sphere of the family, café culture, and mass media, and Berlant argues that there is no clear division between public and private, individual and collective subjectivities, with such spaces orientated towards, and formed within, a public audience. Berlant argues that the political sphere and public institutions can be read as 'institutions of intimacy'. It is this she terms the 'intimate public sphere', and it is through 'modes of attachment that [we] make... collective scenes intimate spaces' (1998, 288). We can thus examine the ways that intimate attachments actually 'make people public, producing personal identities and subjectivities' through such public institutions.

Berlant further says that we have become psychically attached to such a public-private boundary, as it makes the world 'intelligible' (1998, 283) and claims to stabilise what is inherently unstable. Therefore anything which disrupts such a binary is 'experienced as an irruption of the most sacred and rational forms of intimate intelligibility, a cancelling out of individual and collective destinies, an impediment to narrativity and to the future itself' (1998, 287).

Building walls with bathroom stalls

Such a sense of psychic 'crisis' is perhaps revealed in the current political and legal debates around transgender rights and use of public bathrooms. In May, North Carolina passed its House Bill 2 (the so-called HB2 law) that prevented cities in the state from allowing transgender people to use public bathrooms based on **their gender identity**. In response, **President Obama** published a directive to protect the rights of transgender people to use the public bathroom of their choice, under the federal Title IX law and the Attorney General launched a lawsuit against North Carolina. But the subsequent backlash has been swift. At the time of writing, North Carolina and 23 other states in the US had launched their own legal battle **against the Obama administration** challenging the validity of the federal ruling.

The surrounding furore has seen the spheres of 'private' and the 'public' evoked directly in opposition, as claims to protect '**individual privacy**' in the intimate public space of the school – itself, I would argue, an institution of intimacy – become messily mixed up, with protesters simultaneously claiming that there has been a '**violation of public trust**' as they try, and fail, to uphold the public/private and gendered binaries.



Gendered, heteronormative, biologically determinist scripts have been evoked, with critics calling the federal law a danger to women, **girls' and daughters**, and framing it as a violation of **common sense**, with Tim Moore, Republican speaker quoted by the New York Times as saying: 'We all have to wonder what other threats to common sense norms may come before the sun sets on the Obama administration.' Indeed Judith Butler defines regulative gender norms as governing: 'by standing for common sense by providing a tacit or seemingly foundational sense of scale and appropriateness for collective life' (Berlant, 2011).

Family misfortunes

Applying Berlant, we can again see how such statements structure our very modes of attachment within public institutions by reinforcing a binary division of whose body is allowed to enter what space and when, as well as which (*feminised*) body is under threat from which (*heterosexual, masculinised*) body. Such rhetoric shapes not only public institutions, but intimate lives and subjectivities, continually producing and hierarchising our gendered identities, privileging the cisgendered, and the heterosexual. The federal ruling has been declared by its critics as an issue about the **health and safety of children**, as well as 'an attempt by federal law to break up the [private] **family unit**'. But by calling upon the supposed danger to family unit and to children, there is also a clear inference that such a law is the loss of society's future through both the 'private' reproductive unit of the family and the next generation itself, recalling Berlant's suggestion that blurring of the public-private binary is experienced psychically as a threat to the future itself.

While the Obama administration's support of the transgender community and promotion of transgender rights represents success for such minorities at a political level, by considering the debate from an affective perspective we can view it as part of one of the very 'institutions of intimacy' that Berlant cites. It is here that affective tensions are playing out in ways which are reinscribing the gender binary, essentialising gender differences and promoting gendered scripts of who requires protection from whom, whose body is allowed into which space, and ultimately constructing a wholly heteronormative vision of what is an 'intelligible future'.

[1]Berlant L (1998) 'Intimacy: A Special Issue' *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998), pp. 281-288

[2]Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).



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