

# 24.150 Liberalism, Toleration, and Freedom of Speech, Fall 2023

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Today: continuing with Appelbaum, wrap-up discussion of this section of the course, discussion of paper questions (if desired)

2

The screenshot shows the website for the AAA/CASCA Annual Meeting. At the top left is the 'transitions' logo. To the right is the text 'AAA/CASCA Annual Meeting' and a search bar. Below this is a navigation menu with links for 'General Information', 'Program', 'Accessibility', 'Exhibits & Sponsorship', 'Registration', and 'Travel Planning & Housing'. There is also a language selector for 'English'. The main content area features a night cityscape background with the text 'TRANSITIONS' and 'November 15-19, 2023'. A 'Learn More' button is positioned at the bottom center of the main image.

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## Let's Talk About Sex, Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology

**Reviewed by:** Society for Anthropological Sciences

**Session Time:** 12:15 PM to 1:45 PM

**Session Type:** Oral Presentation Session

**Organizer:** Kathleen Lowrey

**Participants:** Kathleen Lowrey Carole Hooven, Elizabeth Weiss, Silvia Carrasco, Kathleen Richardson, Michèle Sirois, Kathleen Lowrey

**Session Description:** While it has become increasingly common in anthropology and public life to substitute 'sex' with 'gender', there are multiple domains of research in which biological sex remains irreplaceably relevant to anthropological analysis. Contesting the transition from sex to gender in anthropological scholarship deserves much more critical consideration than it has hitherto received in major disciplinary fora like AAA / CASCA. This diverse international panel brings together scholars from socio-cultural anthropology, archaeology, and biological anthropology who describe why in their work gender is not helpful and only sex will do. This is particularly the case when the work is concerned with equity and the deep analysis of power, and which has as an aim the achievement of genuine inclusivity. With research foci from hominin evolution to contemporary artificial intelligence, from the anthropology of education to the debates within contemporary feminism about surrogacy, panelists make the case that while not all anthropologists need to talk about sex, baby, some absolutely do.

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3

4

September 25, 2023

Dear panelists,

We write to inform you that at the request of numerous members the respective executive boards of AAA and CASCA reviewed the panel submission "Let's Talk about Sex Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology" and reached a decision to remove the session from the AAA/CASCA 2023 conference program(me). This decision was based on extensive consultation and was reached in the spirit of respect for our values, the safety and dignity of our members, and the scientific integrity of the program(me). The reason the session deserved further scrutiny was that the ideas were advanced in such a way as to cause harm to members represented by the Trans and LGBTQI of the anthropological community as well as the community at large.

While there were those who disagree with this decision, we would hope they know their voice was heard and was very much a part of the conversation. It is our hope that we continue to work together so that we become stronger and more unified within each of our associations. Going forward, we will undertake a major review of the processes associated with vetting sessions at our annual meetings and will include our leadership in that discussion.

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5

Elizabeth Weiss, PhD

Professor of Anthropology

## Discussing sex is no longer allowed at Anthropology conferences

September 25, 2023, my fellow panelists and I received a letter from the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) informing us that our conference panel, "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology", which had been accepted, is being removed from the program due to the "harm" it will cause the "Trans and LGBTQI community". We've responded to their accusation. Below is our response, the AAA/CASCA letter, and our panel submission. Feel free to quote any of these materials in whole or in part.

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6

<https://elizabethweiss74.wordpress.com/discussing-sex-is-no-longer-allowed-at-anthropology-conferences/>



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7



Kathleen Lowrey, an associate professor at the University of Alberta, organized a panel called, "Let's Talk About Sex Baby: Why Biological Sex Remains a Necessary Analytic Category in Anthropology." Amber Bracken for The New York Times

### Anthropology Conference Drops a Panel Defending Sex as Binary

Organizers said the session did not have scientific merit and was harmful to transgender members. Critics of the move say the discipline is unfriendly to dissenting views on the subject.

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8

By **Vimal Patel**  
Sept. 30, 2023

For a big annual conference on anthropology, Kathleen Lowrey, an associate professor at the University of Alberta, put together several panelists around a controversial theme: that their discipline was in the midst of erasing discussions of sex, which they believe is binary — either male or female.

Dr. Lowrey invited a slate of speakers and called the discussion, “Let’s Talk About Sex Baby: Why Biological Sex Remains a Necessary Analytic Category in Anthropology.”

Let’s not talk about it, conference organizers said this week, removing the panel that was accepted preliminarily in July.

In a [joint statement](#) on Thursday, the two sponsors of the conference, the American Anthropological Association and the Canadian Anthropology Society, said that they wanted to protect the transgender community: “The session was rejected because it relied on assumptions that run contrary to the settled science in our discipline, framed in ways that do harm to vulnerable members of our community.”

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9

Dr. Lowrey said that she and the other panelists were blindsided by the decision and that none of them had been contacted about any concerns from the anthropology groups since the panel received its July approval. In [a statement](#), the panelists said that it was a “false accusation” that their ideas were intended to harm the transgender community.

The move was [criticized](#) by some academic freedom advocates who said that the two anthropology groups had caved to political pressure and proved the panel’s point: that the discipline was unfriendly to dissenting views on sex and gender.

But Ramona Pérez, the president of the American Anthropological Association, rejected the attacks. She said the decision had “no impact” on the panelists’ academic freedom, because the association was a professional group, not an educational institution.

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11

The statement also compared the panelists’ views to eugenics.

“The function of the ‘gender critical’ scholarship advocated in this session, like the function of the ‘race science’ of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is to advance a ‘scientific’ reason to question the humanity of already marginalized groups of people,” the statement said.

The headline read: “No Place for Transphobia in Anthropology.”

Discussion of sex and gender has become a fraught and politically charged topic, especially in the context of transgender rights. Anthropology, as a discipline, is particularly sensitive to such conversations because it studies both culture and human evolution. In recent decades, many anthropologists have moved to a more nuanced view of sex, one that often rejects it as simply binary.

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10

She also rejected that idea that the discipline was removing the discussion of sex, noting that there were more than 30 events at the annual program, set for November in Toronto, that would discuss the subject.

The panel was nixed, she said, only after complaints that it did not have scientific merit and that it was harmful to some of the association’s 8,000 members.

“This was an intention to marginalize, not engage scientifically,” Dr. Pérez said.

Agustin Fuentes, an anthropology professor at Princeton, was consulted by the American Anthropological Association about the panel and supported the group’s decision. He said current research in anthropology had shifted toward the term “gender/sex” instead of “sex.”

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12

Biological sex, he said, is itself fluid, citing those born with XXY chromosomes, for instance.

And anthropology, he said in [a statement](#) with two other academics, “tends to resist universal arguments in favor of understanding humans in all of their variation. Therefore, the over-prescription of the idea of a biological binary for something like sex not only ignores the evidence, but goes against the most basic empirical underpinnings of our field.”

The would-be panelists represented women from four countries, mostly anthropologists, coming from diverse viewpoints, Dr. Lowrey said. Several have been at the [center of controversies](#), on this topic and others, and the speakers said they would have had a lively debate even without an audience.

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13

Dr. Lowrey’s panel received preliminary approval based on a relatively anodyne abstract, reviewed by people without subject-matter expertise, Dr. Pérez said. It was later, when others took a closer look at more detailed plans for each presenter, that the association started receiving complaints by biological, evolutionary and cultural anthropologists, Dr. Pérez said.

“We looked at who was actually in it,” she said, and “we began to see that this really was one of those times where people who have an alternative agenda come into professional associations, try to get into these conferences, in order to push an agenda that doesn’t actually match up with the discipline.”

The American Anthropological Association’s executive board voted unanimously to remove the panel from the program. Monica Heller, the president of the Canadian Anthropology Society, said her board voted unanimously to support the American group’s decision.

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15

One of the panelists, Elizabeth Weiss, a physical anthropologist at San Jose State University, said her position was that sex is binary but gender is not.

[Her plan](#) was to deliver a presentation titled, “No bones about it: Skeletons are binary; people may not be.”

In an interview, Dr. Weiss said that while discussions about both sex and gender were important and valuable, “our panel’s unifying theme was that it was important to treat them separately sometimes. Not always. But sometimes.”

She cited cases where an anthropologist might be interested in the biological effects of being female — for instance, looking at sex preferences in infanticide of past populations.

Dr. Pérez said in a letter to the panelists this week that her association needed to take a closer look at how panels were vetted, and that it hoped for a “more unified” group.

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14

Dr. Pérez said that she was not aware of another instance when the executive board had stepped in to remove an accepted panel.

For her part, Dr. Weiss said that Dr. Pérez’s call for unification was “chilling” because unity was not necessarily good for a scientific conference.

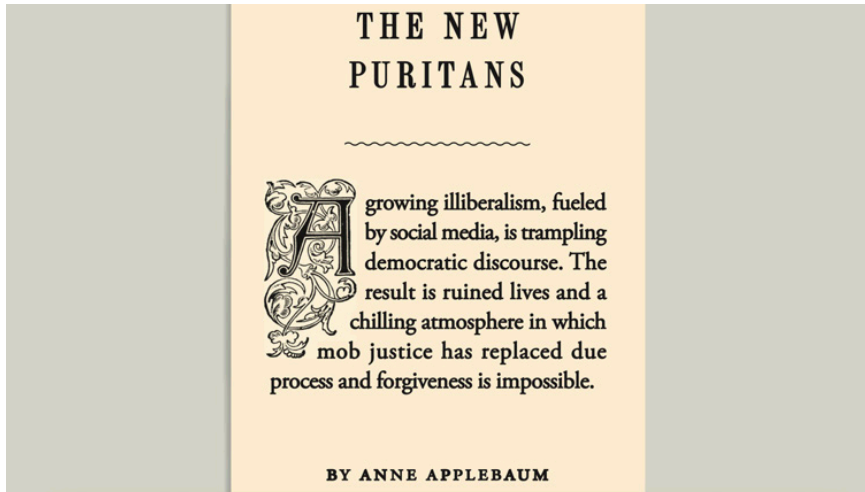
“Today it’s the trans issue,” she said. “Tomorrow it might be something else. We’re on a slippery slope of starting to basically censor disagreeing viewpoints. And some of those disagreeing viewpoints might actually be right.”

**Vimal Patel** is a higher education reporter for The Times, focusing on speech and campus culture. He was previously a reporter for The Chronicle of Higher Education. [More about Vimal Patel](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 2, 2023, Section A, Page 15 of the New York edition with the headline: Anthropology Conference Drops a Panel That Asserts a Belief That Sex Is Binary. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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16



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Q1. Applebaum thinks cancellation (as she describes it) is bad, but what is the problem? Am I not free to avoid talking to you or associating with you, even if you've done nothing wrong? Isn't a company free to fire its 'difficult' employees who make others feel uncomfortable, if it chooses? (Note that in the US much employment is 'at will,' meaning the employer need not have a 'just cause' to fire you.) How would Douthat answer these questions?

### 10 Theses About Cancel Culture

What we talk about when we talk about "cancellation."

July 14, 2020

liberalism is supposed to clear a wider space for debate than other political systems and allow a wider range of personal expression. So you would expect a liberal society to be slower to cancel, more inclined to separate the personal and the professional.

The goal [of attempted cancellations] isn't to punish everyone, or even very many someones; it's to shame or scare just enough people to make the rest conform.

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### 10 Theses About Cancel Culture

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Attempted cancellations on the right are mostly battles for control over diminishing terrain, with occasional forays against red-state academics and anti-Trump celebrities. Meanwhile, the left's cancel warriors imagine themselves conquering the entire non-Fox News map.

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(Is there any moral to be drawn from this, if it is true?)

## 10 Theses About Cancel Culture

What we talk about when we talk about "cancellation."

July 14, 2020

### 10. If you oppose left-wing cancel culture, appeals to liberalism and free speech aren't enough.

to defend a liberal position ... you need more than just a defense of free speech in the abstract; you need to defend free speech for the sake of some important, true idea...no merely procedural argument for granting [such ideas] a platform will sustain itself against a passionate, morally confident attack.

liberals...who fear the left-wing zeal for cancellation need a counterargument that doesn't rest on right-to-be-wrong principles alone. They need to identify the places where they think the new left-wing norms aren't merely too censorious but simply wrong, and fight the battle there, on substance as well as liberal principle.

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21

THE NEW  
PURITANS

James Madison proposed that the U.S. Constitution ensure that 'no person shall be ... deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.' ... Nevertheless, these [cancelled] Americans have been effectively deprived of it.

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22

THE NEW  
PURITANS

Applebaum's stages of cancellation:

1. People stop talking to you. You become toxic.
2. Even if you have not been suspended, punished, or found guilty of anything, you cannot function in your profession.
3. You try to apologize, whether or not you have done anything wrong.
4. People begin to investigate you...Nobody is perfect; nobody is pure; and once people set out to interpret ambiguous incidents in a particular way, it's not hard to find new evidence.

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23

THE NEW  
PURITANS

The censoriousness, the shunning, the ritualized apologies, the public sacrifices—these are rather typical behaviors in illiberal societies with rigid cultural codes, enforced by heavy peer pressure.

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24

THE NEW  
PURITANS

if we drive all of the difficult people, the demanding people, and the eccentric people away from the creative professions where they used to thrive, we will become a flatter, duller, less interesting society, a place where manuscripts sit in drawers for fear of arbitrary judgments. The arts, the humanities, and the media will become stiff, predictable, and mediocre. Democratic principles like the rule of law, the right to self-defense, the right to a just trial—even the right to be forgiven—will wither.

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25

Q2. 'Applebaum overlooks the difference between government and private sanction. If a government throws you in jail without due process, you have no remedy. If Company Z fires you without due process (but in fact you did nothing wrong and are a good employee), another company will see your value and hire you. So there's no need to get all up in arms about "cancellation.'"

How do you think Applebaum would respond?

26

**The Washington Post**  
*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## San Francisco school board votes to rename dozens of schools — including Washington and Lincoln



By Valerie Strauss

January 29, 2021 at 3:53 a.m. EST

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27

Q3. Is it worth getting worked up about who our public schools are named after? (Two kinds of people get worked up: those who want to change the names, and those who are upset that the names are being changed.)

28

## Some general questions about the case for free speech

Two “pro free speech” positions:

1. “Free speech absolutism”: No thought/opinion/idea/view is such that the expression of it may be legally punished.
2. The expression of thoughts/opinions is a good to be balanced against other goods; when they conflict, it is sometimes better to suppress expression.

If you were to be pro free speech, which would you prefer? Why? (don't answer yet!)

29

## A useful distinction (reminder)

1. **Expressing an opinion** and **inciting lawless action** are different acts.
2. One may, on an occasion, incite violence **by** expressing an opinion. If the State punishes you for incitement, by (1) it has not punished you for expressing an opinion.

Analogy: **killing** and **firing a gun** are different acts...

30

## Some general questions about the case for free speech

Two “pro free speech” positions:

1. “Free speech absolutism”: No thought/opinion/idea/view is such that the expression of it may be legally punished.
2. The expression of thoughts/opinions is a good to be balanced against other goods; when they conflict, it is sometimes better (for the State) to suppress expression.

If you were to be pro free speech, which would you prefer? Why?

31

## Some general questions about the case for free speech

“Free speech doesn't mean speech free from all consequences.”  
What does this mean? Is it true? Which consequences are ‘okay’?

32



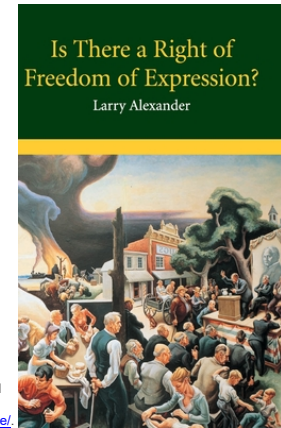
next time

Some general questions about the case for free speech

Questions or topics you would like to discuss?

(May include, eg, "I still don't get how X's argument is supposed to go...")

Freedom of expression:  
limits and opposition



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