

# WRONGED AND DANGEROUS

Viral Masculinity and the Populist Pandemic

Karen Lee Ashcraft

BUP Copyright Material: Individual use only. Not for resale. Uncorrected Proof



First published in Great Britain in 2022 by

Bristol University Press  
University of Bristol  
1–9 Old Park Hill  
Bristol  
BS2 8BB  
UK  
t: +44 (0)117 374 6645  
e: [bup-info@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:bup-info@bristol.ac.uk)

Details of international sales and distribution partners are available at [bristoluniversitypress.co.uk](http://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk)

© Bristol University Press 2022

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5292-2139-8 hardcover

ISBN 978-1-5292-2140-4 paperback

ISBN 978-1-5292-2141-1 ePub

ISBN 978-1-5292-2142-8 ePdf

The right of Karen Lee Ashcraft to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved: no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission of Bristol University Press.

Every reasonable effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyrighted material. If, however, anyone knows of an oversight, please contact the publisher.

The statements and opinions contained within this publication are solely those of the author and not of the University of Bristol or Bristol University Press. The University of Bristol and Bristol University Press disclaim responsibility for any injury to persons or property resulting from any material published in this publication.

Bristol University Press works to counter discrimination on grounds of gender, race, disability, age and sexuality.

Cover design: Liam Roberts Design

Front cover image: iStock/Lefont

Bristol University Press use environmentally responsible print partners.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CMP, Poole



# Reality in Hard and Soft

## *Upgrading gender*

Reality divides itself neatly, or so we in the West like to think. There are things fixed in nature, like gravity, or the certainty of a sunrise. Then there are things we can change, like minds. Social behavior and cultural norms are pliable—ideas about beauty, for instance, or the age at which a child becomes an adult. Whereas biology is more of a given, in that bodies require at least some accommodation. Reality comes in two forms, more or less: immovable and movable. The material world and the socially constructed one. Hard and soft.

Like any plague, the COVID-19 pandemic shattered this neat divide, even as we tried to uphold it. We spoke until our heads spun of COVID-19 as a cold, hard fact. *The virus doesn't know, or care, who you are.* The virus puts a “hard limit” on cultural fancies, as one commentator put it.<sup>1</sup> It doesn't speak social; it exists on another plane.

A virus transmits on a frequency more formidable, we said—communicability instead of communication, physical rather than social. Hard, not soft.

Sure enough, COVID-19 blew right past the human-made lines some hoped might stop it. National boundaries were no match. Privileged people, everywhere, had to face their sudden lack of immunity to the ills of others. I'm talking about those of us in places spared from prior contagions, such as SARS or Ebola, by the buffers of physical distance and resource abundance. Those of us insulated in dominant groups, oblivious to pandemics that ravaged our marginalized neighbors, like HIV/AIDS. Those of us who count on the prejudice of plagues. The ‘virus doesn't discriminate’ mantra was meant for us. We are the ones who had to pinch ourselves that this was happening.

The virus *did* discriminate, though. As we know by now, COVID-19 tore readily and fatally through some communities more than others, just like our social arrangements ‘told it to.’<sup>2</sup> Sure, the virus didn't exactly ‘see’ race and class. It traveled their well-worn paths of differential protection

and risk. It exploited the bodily effects of living in habitats of privilege and disadvantage. It took advantage of comorbidities accumulated over years of hard labor and poor health care. It piled on to these biological manifestations of social and economic inequity and, conversely, respected some physical markers of privilege.

From one frequency to another, the virus ‘got the message,’ more fluent in social signs than we care to admit. Plagues do show prejudice after all.

COVID-19 served up a fresh reminder of how painfully hard the soft can be. Cultural dynamics spread and control viruses. They contribute to ending or saving lives, and I don’t just mean through social contact or distancing, wearing a mask or not. Look no further than the disproportionate impact of the virus on certain people and places. Social divisions make that so. Their synthetic quality doesn’t make them soft. Fabricated doesn’t mean fake, weak, or trivial. These divisions reside in everyday practices, so they are as real, physical, and consequential to survival as any ventilator.

The COVID-19 pandemic refused our habitual split of hard and soft realities. It showed us that both can be intractable and flexible, and demonstrated how they are entangled. Among the pandemic’s few mercies, it gave us another chance to admit their interconnection and think again. Will we take it?

\*\*\*

A premise of this book is that our social and physical worlds profoundly affect one another. Before you shrug that off as an obvious point, let me be more precise. I mean that they are mutually influential to the point of inseparability.

*What we call* the social world—human communication, language, culture, identity, relationships, discourse, meaning, and so on—is, in fact, a physical world too. At the simplest level, all manner of body parts and processes are necessary to communication. Some we acknowledge: mouths moving, eyes seeing or fingers reading, hands signing or ears hearing, brains interpreting. Some we don’t, such as reflexes firing, pheromones wafting, and hormones interpreting. Communication also involves objects and atmospheres, natural and built. It depends (these days, heavily) on devices. And we are just getting started.

Likewise, *what we call* the physical world—biology, nature, environment, objects, and other ‘stuff’—is deeply enmeshed with the social as well. Again, we can only scratch the surface, but it’s enough to note that entire fields revolve around their interrelation. Epidemiology, epigenetics, climate studies, biosemiotics, and informatics, to name a few. Yet we marvel at the possibility that trees have a social life because, well, it seems antithetical to hard science.<sup>3</sup>

Somehow, we continue to believe we can separate the physical and social, and that it's helpful to do so. Mostly because it lets us grasp their relative power: One is strong, the other weak. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* We imagine a physical realm that is pure material, one that exists alongside yet apart from the comparatively immaterial social sphere. We speak of a soft world built on top of a hard world. As if both exist, but only in the latter do things get real. We say it's mainly in the physical realm that problems like disease, financial ruin, and environmental disaster reside, impervious to our talk about them.

We imagine these things, I said; we speak or say them. But imagining and speaking are also physical acts. To say is to do, no matter how loudly we insist they are opposites (*actions speak louder than words!*). Ironically, we disprove the hard–soft split in the physical process of thinking and expressing it. No wonder we cling to it, though. Over a century of Western thinking has implanted this binary in our bodies. Why didn't I say brain? Because wherever in the body it fires, it's a physical reflex, yet the split itself makes that hard to remember.

This book works from an assumption that the social and physical worlds are already one. As shorthand, we will call this unified quality **sociophysical**, meaning that reality is social and physical at once. The social is also physical, and vice versa. They're not divisible in real life, and together they make the world as it is, and is becoming.

Just yet, the point may seem too abstract—overwhelming, perhaps, or underwhelming. To deepen its flavor, we need to let it simmer for a bit. My hope is that Part I lets you taste how a sociophysical approach helps us understand gender differently, as a powerful force that operates under the radar. By the end of the book, I hope you develop a taste *for* the potential of a sociophysical approach to address big problems in new ways. By drawing a through line from gender to the global surge of populism to public health, for example, as we will do.

\*\*\*

A moment ago, I said COVID-19 gave us an opportunity to take a long, hard look at the interconnection of social and physical dimensions. The pandemic's toll is too awful to call this a silver lining, but I would say it's no small gift. COVID-19 told a cautionary tale about another pandemic, and I hope we will pause long enough to listen.

The spread of populism around the world preceded the rise of COVID-19 by a good decade. Many observers warn that this new breed of populism threatens democracy.<sup>4</sup> That may be so, but this book attends to another concern, one that is both existential and pragmatic. A short version is that today's surge of populism is permeating governments. Almost everywhere it comes to power, this brand of populism appears to take on the task of

administration by furiously opposing it. Emphasis on the *fury*. To put it mildly, and not metaphorically, this is proving to be an unhealthy mode of governance. It raises a pressing global concern, especially when you consider the formidable and urgent challenges we face as a planet, like climate change.

COVID-19 gave us a sobering glimpse of the devastation possible when anger is in charge. We will abridge this problem as “anger management,” with a twist—management *by* (not of) anger. It’s a state of affairs in which the primary governing platform and strategy is the escalation of outrage. And it’s a management style of deadly consequence. In this sense, the new breed of populism is, literally, a public health problem. COVID-19 revealed these true colors, granting an opportunity to discern and address anger management before it becomes even more fatal.

\*\*\*

Part I prepares us to take that opportunity, but in an uncommon way. It begins with what may seem like a totally unrelated and trivial observation, which COVID-19 also confirmed: The way we usually address gender is not up to the present challenge or nimble enough for the task ahead. Mainstream habits of talking about gender are stunted and stuck. Stale reflexes keep tripping us up, deflecting deeper awareness. This is a problem to the extent that we need a good grip on gender to address populism, and I will demonstrate that we do.

Right now, though, you may wonder why we would take this ‘lite’ detour when heavy challenges like pandemic recovery and climate change demand our attention. Why *on earth* would we start with a tangent like gender if matters of life and death hang in the balance?

Because gender is a leading sociophysical force that animates populism today. That is the case this book will make, but first things first.

So far, we are simply closing in on two lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic which, respectively, appear major and minor. First, the public health hazards posed by proliferating populism and, second, stubborn habits of analyzing gender. Their character and relation will become clear soon enough, so a plain preview suffices for now. Basically, we need to upgrade our gender skills in order to understand contemporary populism, and we need to address contemporary populism for the sake of survival. As hyperbolic as that may sound, it is not overstated. Nor is it cause for panic. It’s just reason for analysis and action of a different kind.

\*\*\*

Gender is all about hard and soft, or so we continue to make it. For starters, there’s nature versus nurture, that timeworn debate that puts the question in

competitive terms. Is gender hard-wired *or* culturally produced? Biologically determined or socially constructed?

For a time, some of us tried to have it all by answering “both” with a reassuring distinction between sex and gender. *Sex* granted hard biological givens, while *gender* recognized the soft power of culture to make sense of biology. But this handy analytical distinction didn’t hold up well in real life. The two are not easily separated since we live them in light of one another, so the question of which is more powerful persisted.

The social construction camp emerged the victor in this fight, or at least the mainstream tide turned in their favor. (I should say *our*, as I pitched my tent in this camp for years.) Today, many would say that gender is a social construct overlaid on biology. Bodies supply the raw material, but culture mostly determines what we do with them. In this view, biology doesn’t predestine gender, because bodies are amenable to being made over.

There it is again, a soft world built on top of a hard world. Only this time, the soft world wins.

Not so fast, say populists around the world today, many of whom dub such thinking “genderism” and fiercely oppose it.<sup>5</sup> Culture wars over gender and sexuality have become a favorite battle for most populist movements, first on the map of easy roads to outrage. Their cause in that war? Straightforward on the surface: *Listen up, you soft “snowflakes,” people are born men and women. The gender binary is the natural order of things.* Less clear is what’s at stake in this fight, a matter this book will bring to light. The short answer is just about everything.

Populist supporters are not the only ones attached to the gender binary and biological primacy, or vestiges thereof. Strange bedmates can be spotted here. Despite much re-education around gender pronouns, public discourse continues to reference ‘men’ and ‘women’ as a matter of course, the building block of conversation. Those of us who do this (and I include myself here) take the gender binary for granted and hint its hard reality every time we speak. We agree, if only tacitly and for convenience, that the world mostly gives itself in two, male and female. We may think ourselves enlightened enough to make exceptions when specified. Sort of like, binary until proven otherwise (guilty?).

Though it serves different ends, faith in biology also reverberates among the most progressive gender choirs. Advancements in knowledge and thinking around intersex, trans, and non-binary existence, for example, have many singing ‘born this way’ for good reason. Biological sciences today undercut the binary and support gender diversity.<sup>6</sup>

The complications don’t stop there. Thus far, we are only talking about hard and soft *explanations* of gender. There is another layer, which is that ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ are themselves designations that drip with gender.

Like so. Hard (natural) versus soft (social) sciences, defined by the divide between material/physical and social/cultural realms. The humanities split

from biology, as if human culture isn't natural but human bodies are. The hard sciences more rigid and technical, real and important. The soft ones more malleable and intuitive, not as difficult. The way people seem impressed when they learn you're a professor but deflate when they learn your field. 'Only' a social science. *Oh well, that does make more sense (since you're a woman)*. The field and the woman fall together, it seems—the softer disciplines made in her image and diminished by association.

Actually, what I mean to say is that the nature *and* value of things—scientific fields among them—are secured through relation to the gender binary. Hard and soft, strong and weak, active and passive, wild and domesticated, technical and intuitive, serious and frivolous. Math and engineering versus communication studies. Class struggle versus culture war and identity politics.

To live in the West and its long shadow is to be wedged in this hard–soft binary, which *is* the gender binary. We may wrestle with it, some more skillfully than others, but few among us wrench free.

This book does not advocate the hardness or softness of gender. It neither defends nor dismisses biological or cultural influences. I won't even try to choose between them, pinpoint their relative sway, or assert their separate but equal power. I seek instead to rethink their dogged separation and to show how that split jeopardizes our common future.

Sociophysical: We have more options when we appreciate how social and physical become as one.

\*\*\*

You might recall that gender registered right away in coverage of the developing COVID-19 pandemic. As a memory jog, two early themes arose. First, men seemed to die from the virus more often than women. Not surprisingly, this observation was met with a hard–soft debate over cause.<sup>7</sup> What's the main culprit, biological or social factors? Nature versus nurture all over again.

A second gender theme arose as lockdowns and layoffs gained steam. While men appeared to pay a greater physical toll, women bore the brunt of the economic toll. This “shecession,” as it became known, hit especially hard for women made vulnerable in compounding ways, for instance, through race and class inequities, sexual marginalization, heightened occupational risks, job loss, and the lion's share of care and schooling responsibility.<sup>8</sup> While I do not dwell on these initial themes here, they return later in the book.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, Part I homes in on two additional pandemic storylines that stuck around and exemplify what I see as tenacious bad habits when it comes to talking about gender. One concerns the *leadership* of, the other *public compliance* with, virus mitigation:



- Narrative 1: Populist “strongmen” are failing at pandemic leadership, compared to the more effective strategies of level-headed women leaders.
- Narrative 2: Men appear more resistant to face-covering, a trend quickly abridged as “mask-ularity.”

In different ways, both storylines exhibit worn-out reflexes of gender analysis. I use the first—a tired tale of gendered leadership—to diagnose these bad habits (in Chapter 2) and the second, mask-ularity, to model a way out of them (in Chapter 4).

What follows is for the gender novice, the seasoned critic, and anyone in between. If you’re new to the subject, my hope is that you’ll acquire a taste (as in appetite and aptitude) for gender in this section. If you’re used to thinking about it, or even well-versed in gender studies, I hope to join you in developing heightened sensitivity to the taste (as in sensation) of gender. The point is to initiate a shift for all of us: from *thinking about* gender at some remove to *feeling* how gender comes to matter in the world.

Ultimately, that is where Part I is headed, toward a sociophysical approach that dissolves the man–woman binary, redefining gender as a substance felt in everyday encounter. The goal is to appreciate how gender is made of real, tangible *stuff*—ideals and behaviors, bodies and objects, pressures and fantasies, sights and sounds, odors and textures. In this approach, realms of experience we demarcate as social and physical, soft and hard, collapse into one, developing together in ordinary moments of living.