

A research text dump on Robert Jensen's ideas

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Introduction, Critiques & Discussion

Robert William Jensen (born July 14, 1958) is a former professor of journalism from the University of Texas at Austin. From 1992 to 2018 he taught graduate and undergraduate courses in media law, ethics, and politics.

He has focused much of his work on the critique of pornography and of masculinity, developed in his 2017 book, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men*. He also has written about white privilege and institutional racism. He also sits on the editorial board of the academic journal *Sexualization, Media, and Society*.

Book Review of An Inconvenient Apocalypse

Title: ‘We’re going to pay in a big way’: a shocking new book on the climate crisis

Subtitle: In *An Inconvenient Apocalypse*, authors Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen write that society needs to be better prepared for an inevitable collapse

Author: Veronica Esposito

Date: 31 Aug 2022

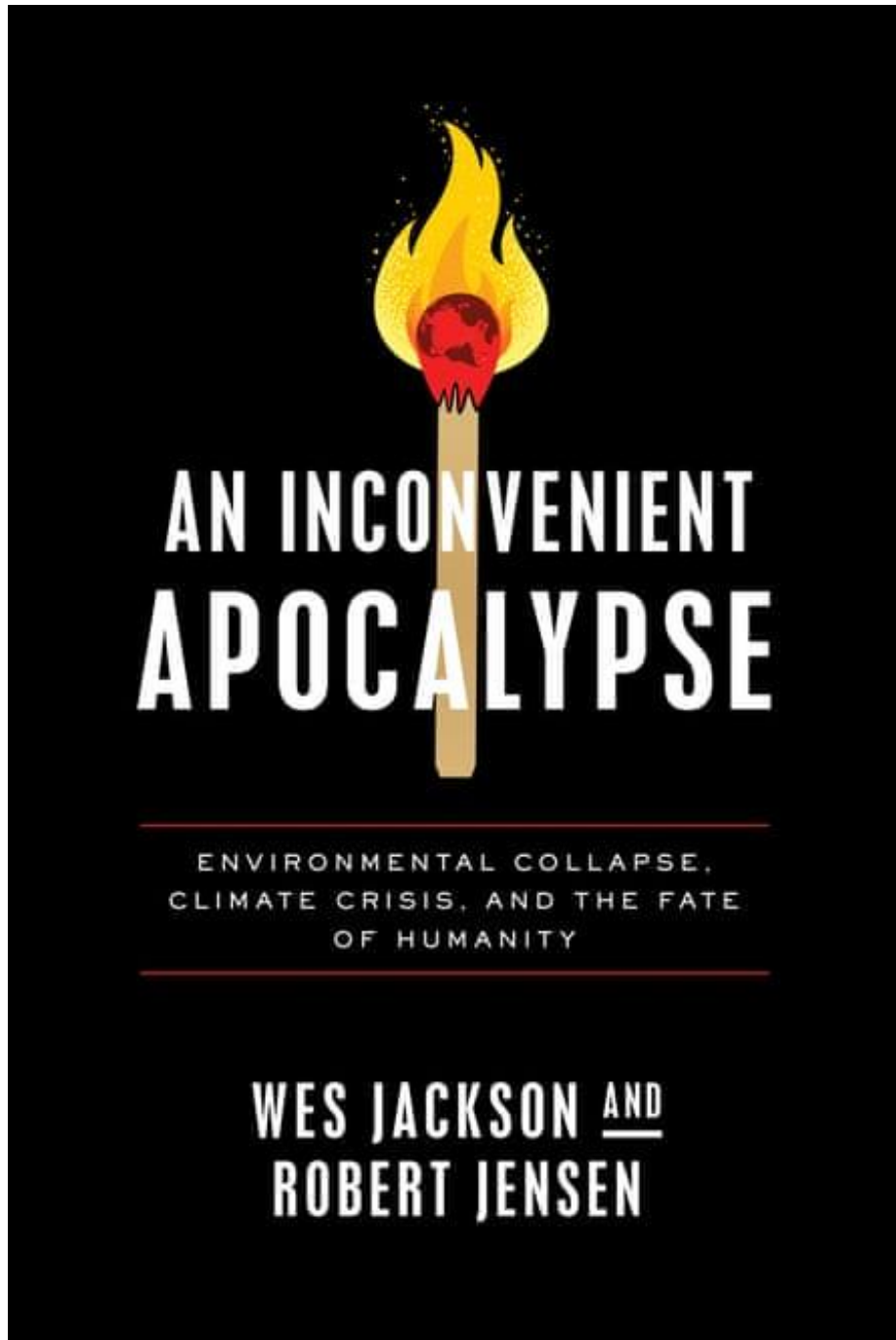
Source: <www.theguardian.com/books/2022/aug/31/an-inconvenient-apocalypse-climate-crisis-book>

In *An Inconvenient Apocalypse*, authors Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen style themselves as heralds of some very bad news: societal collapse on a global scale is inevitable, and those who manage to survive the mass death and crumbling of the world as we know it will have to live in drastically transformed circumstances. According to Jackson and Jensen, there’s no averting this collapse – electric cars aren’t going to save us, and neither are global climate accords. The current way of things is doomed, and it’s up to us to prepare as best we can to ensure as soft a landing as possible when the inevitable apocalypse arrives.

“The book tries to be blunt and honest about the depth of the crisis,” said Jensen, “and to be blunt and honest about the current solutions, which do nothing to deal with the depth of the crisis.” Jackson added: “Now humanity is on a whole different journey than a gathering-hunting society. I saw that we were going to pay for this some day, and we’re going to pay in a big way.”

Jackson and Jensen make for an interesting pairing. The former is an agronomist, having spent his career studying the problem of soil erosion and developing The Land Institute, which seeks to develop grains that can be used for sustainable agriculture. For his efforts he has garnered a MacArthur “genius” grant and a Right Livelihood Award, among other honors. Jensen is a longtime journalist who has written books on ecology, masculinity and radical feminism. He has received backlash for propounding exclusionary and harmful views against transgender people, specifically targeting transgender women, and in response to the criticism he has doubled down on these viewpoints, continuing to promulgate them.

In Jackson and Jensen’s view, the dawn of agriculture represents something like original sin. This is what got humanity on to the course of increasing energy use and material wealth that has brought us to the current ecological crisis. Via this reading of human history, the authors seem to be arguing that our trajectory as a technological species capable of high energy use and large-scale agriculture is a mistake that has taken us to a place we never should have been, and has doomed us. In conversation Jackson endorsed this viewpoint, telling me that our way of life has us “caught in a big Ponzi scheme that we’ve probably had for 10,000 years. We know how Ponzi schemes tend to end. They’re not nice things to have to deal with.”



Photograph: University of Notre Dame Press

The answer to this Ponzi scheme involves shrinking humanity from the current 7.7 billion people to a more sustainable 2 or 3 billion. *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* doesn't describe how exactly this decline in population will occur, nor reckon with the enormous trauma that the elimination of the majority of humanity will inflict on humans and our societies. Although the book is nominally oriented toward social justice, the authors make no effort to address the fact that such a population decline would probably be an absolute disaster for marginalized ethnicities and sexualities, those who are disabled or mentally unwell, and basically anyone not deemed fit for survival in the new world. In conversation, Jensen offered this explanation:

"A lot of past talk of population control has been based in white supremacy, but that doesn't mean we can ignore the question of what's a sustainable population. That's the kind of thing that people have bristled against. We don't have a solution. But the fact that there aren't easy and obvious solutions doesn't mean that you can ignore the issue."

According to Jackson and Jensen, once the collapse occurs and the Earth's population declines, it is up to humans to figure out how to live in a "low-energy" future – that is, one where fossil fuels are no longer used and we essentially are back to relying on our own muscles and those of beasts of burden. In terms of what that low energy world might look like, *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* articulates an ethos that might be summed up as the paleo diet, but for society. Because 10,000 years of so-called progress has left us in "dire straits", the answer involves looking back to the prehistoric millennia before humans developed agriculture, began writing down their history, and built societal hierarchies. Insofar as *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* describes how this future could look, it involves tradespeople and agricultural workers elevated to the high-status ranks of society, the affluent getting taken down some notches, a wholesale elimination of the cosmopolitan, consumerist world, and religion playing a prominent role. One is tempted to sum it up as "make the Earth great again".

The world of *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* is a very bleak one, and also one with no middle ground. The authors write that "the future of continued endless expansion that we have long imagined is over and a new future defined by contraction is coming". Any attempt to find some kind of middle way through these two poles is simple "denying, minimizing and ignoring" a problem that we must all face. The emphasis on this book is on being blunt and stating truths that the authors believe to be self-evident – there is little effort by Jackson and Jensen to argue their case or to convince others. To be fair, Jackson and Jensen seem to be aware that their style will put off many, stating their expectation that many readers will simply abandon their book. Jensen said: "We set out to write a book that, in some sense, everybody will have a reason to dislike."

For a book predicting the mass death of most of humanity and the end of life as we know it, *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* is chillingly cerebral. There is virtually no room for acknowledging – much less processing – the emotional toll that such a message will take on both the authors and their readers. That can make the book feel cold and condescending. In conversation, Jensen showed more vulnerability, offering some of

the feelings that his vision for humanity raised within himself. In this reader's opinion, letting this vulnerability through more often in *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* would have made for a more relatable and ultimately more compelling read.

"I've wrestled with what this means in everyday life," and Jensen, "and these are distressing questions. It's about wrestling with that sense of grief, rather than trying to avoid it. And when you wrestle with that, it means you don't wake up every day on the sunny side of the street. It's weighing on a lot of us. My goal is just try to open up space for people to say what's on their mind."

Bob Jensen Is Wrong and Bad at His Job, Explained

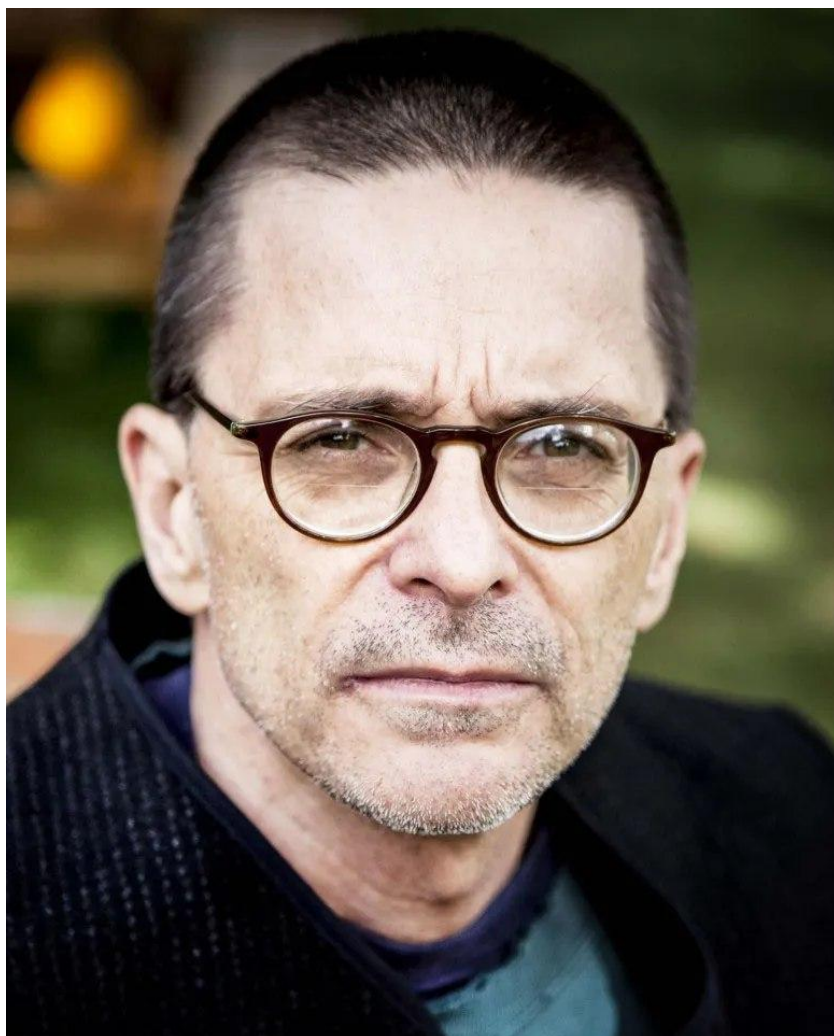
Author: Andrea Grimes

Topics: Transgender, LGBTQ, Journalism, Trans Rights, Texas, politics, journalist, feminist, texan, bloody mary expert, she/her,

Author's contact: andrea dot grimes at gmail

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Bob Jensen (the bespectacled bro there on the left whose furrowed brow is signaling just how worried he is that you're doing feminism wrong) is a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Nobody likes him, and activist communities have done what they can to distance themselves from his hateful, intellectually worthless rhetoric against sex workers and transgender people.

Because of where he works and who he knows, I guess, he still manages to get published from time to time. On Thursday, the *Austin American-Statesman* published an opinion piece from Jensen wherein he blames feminism (but not his feminism, which is the *correct* feminism) for making Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's "bathroom bill" seem like a bad idea. (The bill, which is fundamentally unenforceable, would force people to prove their genitalia corresponds to the restroom Dan Patrick thinks they should use.)

Patrick has marketed this bit of legislation as the "Women's Privacy Act," and Jensen takes up his cause in the pages of the local paper. Jensen begins, even as in the immediately preceding sentence he identifies Dan Patrick as a "relentless publicity seeking politician," by buying (and selling) Patrick's premise and framing of the "bathroom bill" as being about some kind of deeper gender identity issue:

"The core question: If someone is born unambiguously male as defined by chromosomes, genitalia, secondary sex characteristics but claims to be female (or vice versa), what does that actually mean?"

There are all kinds of questions behind Patrick's bill, but at the "core" of all of them is not the question of what it means to be transgender, but rather what it means to be the kind of asshole who'd rather fabricate a panic about people peeing than address any number of pressing public issues. (The fact that foster children are dying in the custody of a state that purports to be "pro-life" and that Texas' maternal mortality rate resemble nothing so much as a war zone are a couple I'd be interested in having my elected officials explore with rather more urgency.)

Gender identity is in no way at the "core" of what Dan Patrick is trying to do; Dan Patrick is trying to make sure Dan Patrick is a name we're still talking about in two, four or six years. For a professor of journalism at one of the finest public institutions of learning in the world to take Dan Patrick's framing at face value — and not only that, to do the work of promoting that premise *for* Dan Patrick — is laughable. It devalues the institution of journalism, and it devalues the institution which employs Bob Jensen.

The barest investigation of Jensen's claims exposes his astounding intellectual inadequacies. That he's proud enough of this appalling wankery to pitch it to a newspaper — well, it would be sort of adorable if it weren't so goddamned dangerous.

I don't think what Jensen has written *deserves* a response, but if journalists and editors are going to take his (and Dan Patrick's) bullshit seriously, I guess those of us who don't want to see trans people assaulted by bathroom vigilantes who feel empowered by the Dan Patricks and Bob Jensens of the world are going to have to engage.

So let me engage.

Jensen writes: “This is a serious question about biology and reproductive-based sex categories, and the transgender movement has yet to offer a coherent answer.”

- There is no such thing as a singular “transgender movement.”
- On the subject of coherent answers to the question of assigned sex and gender identity, I suggest Bob do a Google. He will undoubtedly be frustrated by the results, which are, on the whole, not going to tell him what he wants to hear, which is that none of the foremost feminist intellectuals on the subject either subscribe to or give a shit about what Bob Jensen thinks.

Jensen: “People’s internal subjective experiences may feel coherent to them, but the assertion of such an experience does not constitute an explanation, and public policy should be based on claims that everyone can understand.”

- Instead, one supposes, public policy should be based on Bob Jensen’s explanations of the internal subjective experiences of total strangers, and if those experiences fail to satisfy Bob Jensen, he will holler in the newspaper about it.

Jensen: “But such a feminist challenge to the social norms of institutionalized male dominance doesn’t require asserting that a male human can become a female human.”

- This essentialist drivel follows your general Feminism 101 stuff about how gender roles are malleable bullshit. If you can make sense of it, good job to you, I hope you are doing important work like figuring out how we are going to live on Mars someday and not wondering what the fuck is the matter with Bob Jensen.

Jensen: “A more radical feminism — one that doesn’t shy away from challenging male dominance — offers a different approach.”

- Let us take a moment to appreciate the irony that this revolutionary approach to “challenging male dominance” is coming from a wealthy white dude who got his ass published the local newspaper of record. Why? I guess because it was easy enough for the op-ed desk at the *Statesman* to say yes to a guy with “professor of journalism at the University of Texas” after his name, or, more likely, nobody at the op-ed desk at the *Statesman* cares or knows that what this fool has to say is dangerous, steaming twaddle.
- Hello, *Statesman* op-ed page editors! I hope you’re enjoying the part you’ve played in disseminating the kind of silencing, hateful transphobic rhetoric that gets real people killed.

Jensen: “I’ve heard many stories from women about men following them into public restrooms and being threatened, a strategy some men use to harass and sexually assault women.”

- It is true that many men spend their lives thinking of new and disgusting ways to harass, assault and demean women, and I do not doubt that one method of doing so is creeping on women in public restrooms.
- Sexual assault is illegal.
- Even if you do it in a public restroom.
- And (PAY ATTENTION TO THIS ONE BOB, IT IS THE IMPORTANT PART, I DID THIS IN ALL CAPS SO THAT WHILE YOU ARE SKIMMING THIS POST AND BEING MAD AT THIS HERE MOUTHY BITCH YOU WILL NOTICE IT) claiming to be transgender is not a defense to prosecution for sexual assault.
- So, I fixed that for you?
- Oh wait, you’re not actually concerned about women getting raped in restrooms, you’re just here to demonize trans people in general and trans women in particular by advocating for the *literal policing* of restroom use, because your feminism is bullshit and you are not actually invested in freeing people from white supremacist heteropatriarchy, because actually doing so would mean fewer opportunities for Bob Jensen to play the important public role of Bob Jensen?

Jensen: “Even more common is girls’ struggle with being sexually objectified throughout the culture, which creates a range of difficult emotions around their bodies, especially about being seen by boys and men.”

- Wherein Bob Jensen, Who Is Afraid Men Will Pretend To Be Women, Explains What It’s Like To Be A Girl
- I don’t have a funny thing to say about it, I just want to reiterate that this is a dude writing in the newspaper about how he thinks men will pretend to be women in order to rape women, describing what he imagines it’s like to be a woman.

Jensen: “I don’t endorse Patrick’s reactionary right-wing politics, but I do take seriously the experiences of girls and women who have to find a way to live as safely and sanely as possible in patriarchy.”

- He does not, of course, take seriously the experience of transgender girls and women, and in particular transgender girls and women of color, who are vastly more likely than anyone else to experience physical, emotional and sexual assault and abuse.
- He does not, of course, take seriously fact that his loathsome crap and derivations thereof contribute to increased suicide and self-harm rates among transgender people.

Jensen: “Where possible, the best solution is single-person spaces for maximal privacy for everyone.”

- I have to admit, I am legitimately stunned by Bob Jensen’s admission that his shit stinks.

Jensen: “But in public facilities used by large numbers of people at a time, multistall bathrooms and collective changing rooms should be segregated by biological sex, and we should guarantee the safety of those spaces.”

- Great news, Bob! This happens everywhere, every day, all the time already.

Jensen: “Let me be clear: I am not arguing that male-to-female transgender people are waiting to harass and attack women.”

- Yes you are, you disingenuous buttnoodle.

Jensen: “Instead, this position recognizes that some men will exploit any opportunity to move into female space, and girls and women have a right to be free from the male gaze in such private spaces.”

- Please allow me to redirect you to my earlier statement, wherein I note that 1. SEXUAL ASSAULT IS ILLEGAL 2. NO MATTER WHERE YOU DO IT 3. EVEN IF YOU ARE TRANSGENDER and, bonus, 4. NO RAPIST ON EARTH IS GONNA STOP DOING RAPE IN PUBLIC RESTROOMS BECAUSE DAN PATRICK AND BOB JENSEN SAID THEY SHOULDN’T because 5. THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS CARCERAL AND NOT PREVENTIVE, YOU CONTEMPTIBLE THUMBSUCKER

Jensen: “A feminist critique of the ideology of the transgender movement is not an attack on people who identify as transgender but simply asks questions that shouldn’t be glossed over and asserts the rights of women in a patriarchal society.”

- Supporting legislation that invites, nay *demands*, vigilante-style policing of people’s assigned sex (*in a state teeming with gun enthusiasts*) is indeed an attack on transgender people, and if Bob Jensen actually does not know that, his failures as a cultural theorist are deeper than I thought they were.

- The fact that the lieutenant governor of the second largest state in the union is trying to pass a “papers please” anti-trans bill pretty thoroughly demonstrates that nobody, *fucking nobody*, is “glossing over” Bob Jensen and Dan Patrick’s boring-ass thoughts about what it means to be transgender.
- The fact that the *Austin American-Statesman* is publishing Bob Jensen’s boring-ass thoughts about what it means to be transgender signals mightily that we are in no way in danger of missing Bob Jensen’s boring-ass thoughts about what it means to be transgender.
- To presume that any of us here on this miserable, doomed planet are in need of Bob Jensen’s boring-ass thoughts about gender identity is the most Bob Jensen premise that ever premised — to wit; where would these poor helpless ladies of Texas be without Bob Jensen to save them from the patriarchy he will definitely dismantle after he shares his important thoughts about the patriarchy, it’s definitely next on his list, absolutely he will get to the ending patriarchy part, just one more thought

Jensen: “The internal subjective experience of transgender people should not trump the objective threats that girls and women experience routinely.”

- I’m tired, can some white dude who took a freshman psych class in the last thirty years or so come collect this dude and his infantile conception of objective reality.

“But instead of falling into a tired liberal versus conservative script for the debate, let’s use the moment to deepen the discussion with a critical feminist perspective.”

- When you’re asking the same questions as Dan Patrick, you can be one thousand percent sure that what you’re *not* doing is deepening any goddamned discussion.
- Anyone who’s interested in critical feminist perspectives of anything on earth can start by disengaging with Bob Jensen, who is doing the thing dudes do when they don’t have anything interesting to say: Saying whatever they have to say anyway, and telling people it’s interesting.
- Jensen hasn’t deepened any discussion; the questions he’s asking about sex and gender identity got left behind by feminist academics decades ago. He’s a hack *and* he’s late.

But look, I’m not the thought police. If Bob Jensen believes his wholly pedestrian ideas about gender identity are important (he can’t, apparently be bothered to engage with an entire world of feminist thought on the subject, perhaps because it would require his engagement with people other than Bob Jensen), he’s free to think his goofy bullshit and write about it, laughable as it may be.

But if Bob Jensen actually gave the smallest, steamiest shit about “challenging male dominance” and ending white capitalist heteropatriarchy, he’d do us all the biggest possible favor and shut the entire fuck up, permanently.

Book Club Discussion of *It's Debatable*

Title: Robert Jensen – *It's Debatable*

Author: Male Allies Challenging Sexism

Source: <www.menchallengingsexism.org.uk/robert-jensen-its-debatable-book>

For our last meeting of 2024 on 30 December we discussed the dropped chapter from Robert Jensen's *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics*.

Chapter 5, titled '*Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology*', is freely available on Jensen's website. The chapter was dropped from the book following "*a constructive conversation*" between Jensen and the publisher Interlink Publishing.

On his website (linked above) Jensen explains part of the reason for the chapter being dropped and also links to Interlink's intended statement on not including the chapter in the book.

Unfortunately that page on Interlink's website (www.interlinkbooks.com) seems to have never materialised.

At the start of the group Björn noted how some of the content of the chapter will probably have been very familiar to most of us, but that some of it would have been quite new to others, in particular the ecological / eco-feminist parts. David agreed and thought first half was really well presented. He considered it a very valuable and thorough summary of 'gender critical' arguments. For David, the ecological arguments opposing transgender ideology were new, such as the argument that we cannot use science and engineering to change what we are given by nature.

Robbie agreed with David's that Jensen provided a very good summary and that perhaps for those of us familiar with the subject there was perhaps not much novel content. To Robbie the eco-angle was also somewhat new and he wondered whether there would have been scope to link it to transhumanism, which Robbie is quite familiar with. Transhumanism as Robbie explained it is a "project that disassociates the meat puppet of the human body from the gendered soul". In this context he mentioned Martine Rothblatt, a well-known proponent of transhumanism and the work of Jennifer Bilek and her blog The 11th Hour. Bilek has been researching the gender industry and the connections between technology, transsexualism, and transhumanism for over a decade and Robbie would very much have liked for Jensen to have extended this chapter to include transhumanism and some of Bilek's contributions in that sphere. In particular with regards to the way in which capitalism plays a part in it all (i.e. following where the money comes from and goes to).

Prior to reading *It's Debatable*, John had also not made the connection between transgenderism and transhumanism and recognised that in theory there are no limits to what humans could do. We could try and find a technological solution to pretty much anything leading to extreme forms of biohacking and the total changing of our

natural selves. In a way a transhumanist approach means that biological facts – i.e. the fact that you are a man can be reframed into a ‘technical’ problem that can be solved with a ‘technical’ solutions, such as invasive body-modification through the use of invasive surgical procedures and chemicals.

Björn noted how on a deeper level much of what Jensen mentioned seemed deeply interlinked with the patriarchal aim of having power / overpowering, which is expressed in many different ways, from violence towards others (sexual violence and exploitation, war, slavery etc.) to violence against nature (exploitation of animals, deforestation, environmental pollution etc.). Björn added how the vast majority of billionaires are men (approx. 86% according to a recent Forbes piece) with men like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison, Mark Zuckerberg etc. driving technological advances and from a desire to ‘overcome’ nature and its limitations as well as making money.

“Sex is in some sense assigned by someone, such as the woman giving birth, or a midwife assisting with a home birth, or a doctor in a hospital. But “assigned” implies an arbitrary decision. If I am assigned a seat at a dinner party, for example, it’s understood to be the choice of the host. But sex is observed at birth, not assigned.” Robert Jensen – *Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology* (p. 3)

John took the discussion back to transgenderism and noted how skilfully Jensen pointed out the inconsistencies in much of the activist language as well as the fact that many people seem to willingly accept that there is no proof under the banner “you just have to believe”. Alongside that stands another point of view, which prescribes that men who say that they are women have the right not to have any questions asked of them. The problem with these fixed ideas is that they shut down any discussion and that those who pursue debate regardless are judged to be bigoted. All of this goes completely against any sort of scientific enquiry of course.

David remarked that the fact that the chapter was dropped from the book, really makes the point for Robert Jensen and people’s lacking willingness to exchange ideas on the subject. In relation to this Björn pointed out that there is a passage in the published book, available online here, that explains why the chapter *Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology* was not included in the book. In a way it is a real win to have this note in the book for future generations to see and consider. Particularly as the note on the publisher’s website does not appear to ever have gone live, which is curious to say the least. It’s almost as if Interlink Publishing / Olive Branch Press had second thoughts about their decision to drop the chapter. Perhaps they decided not to publish the note on their website because the debate had changes so much in the time between their decision and publication of the book. Or perhaps they were worried that people would remember the book more for the content that was omitted, rather than the content that made it into the book. John pointed out that there isn’t such a thing as bad publicity and felt uncertain that a ‘fear of bad press’ was a likely reason for not publishing a statement.

The discussion then went back to the start of the book and Jensen’s reference of critical race theory. Robbie felt the link to critical race theory, which holds that many

aspects of western society contain inherent racial bias was very useful. In particular with regards to the very different ways in which left-leaning people have responded to this theory and to gender ideology. Robbie expressed incredulity about those ‘on the left’ who accept men who claim to be a different sex (i.e. women), reject the idea that white people can claim to be another ethnicity (i.e. black), as in the example of Rachel Dolezal.

Our discussion then turned to our real-life interactions with people who see themselves as being very pro ‘trans rights’. William felt that reading Jensen’s chapter has given him a lot of information and context that he did not have before and as a result he felt better prepared to have discussions with others about the subject matter. William very much felt that what Jensen provided would support him in bringing his point of view across much more clearly, equipping him with well considered points.

At this point John a further point, namely that having open conversations with friends may be ‘just’ uncomfortable or difficult, having these at work may indeed be career-limiting (as experienced by many women and some men). John felt that it was troubling to recognise how many of us feel unable to state our opinions, particularly as it prevents us from being the change we want to see.

In this respect we spoke about the various SEEN Networks that have been popping up in the UK since 2022. According to their own website, SEEN is “a staff network committed to promoting and supporting sex equality and equity between women and men in our workplaces, and helping all staff to thrive at work and fulfil their potential”. Since the start of the first SEEN in 2022, there are now at least 13 networks across sectors.

We continued by discussing the benefit of SEEN Networks, in that it gives members an opportunity to come together, organise events and try and change the culture at work by opening up discussions from within. Whilst in practice SEEN Networks are often more tolerated than actively promoted by organisations, it is nonetheless important that they exist as their mere existence, challenges the established culture.

Going back to John’s question about real-life conversations regarding different points of view, Robbie pointed out that he has often found himself trying to open up conversations and brokering discussions and failing due to people being unwilling to engage in debate. For him, this resulted in being forced out of the Green Party along with many other members of the party. You can find out more about them on the website Greens In Exile. Robbie mentioned that there is now a badge for the exiles reading ‘Greens in Exile’. Robbie feels that wearing it helps open up discussions about what is happening in the Green Party in particular, but in society in general as well.

The discussion then turned to the final passage of the book. Robbie felt quite confused with the last line of the book in which Jensen said that “*A radical feminist analysis, rooted in an ecological worldview, offers a path to a deeper analysis and potentially more effective responses.*”. Robbie felt that the book ended rather abruptly at this point and he was left with wondering about the available choices would be if they weren’t either a “*liberal embrace or a conservative rejection*”. Robbie’s confusion

stemmed from a realisation that meeting people in different arenas requires a ‘need’ to adapt your language and as such he was unsure which responses radical feminism would be able to provide in those contexts. Robbie’s confusion stemmed from a rather literal reading of the passage. Björn, who had taken the sentence in a more philosophical way, felt that Jensen was trying to say that issues are complex and our responses to them should be informed by deep thinking and critical analysis from a radical feminist perspective. Only by engaging in that way, can we ensure that the responses we come up with are better than the blanket responses of ‘affirmation’ on one side versus ‘rejection’ on the other.

To round the discussion off, Chris noted how Jensen had vehemently rejected the term ‘TERF’ and how important this was, in a sense of not describing ourselves or others using derogatory and incorrect terms. Neither radical feminists nor MACS exclude people who identify as trans. We are simply concerned about protecting vulnerable women, children, same-sex attracted people and bisexual people and want to stop anyone from doing anything nasty.

Chris’ point garnered some support, whilst others felt it was possible to reclaim derogatory terms like ‘TERF’. In the end we had to agree to disagree, whether such a reclaiming is indeed possible. We ended the discussion by reflecting on our takes on various ‘labels’ currently doing the rounds that reflect ‘gender critical’ views. These included ‘gender atheist’, ‘gender realist’ or ‘sex realist’ (a term that someone had come across on Reality’s Last Stand).

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Robbie agreed with David’s that Jensen provided a very good summary and that perhaps for those of us familiar with the subject there was perhaps not much novel content. To Robbie the eco-angle was also somewhat new and he wondered whether there would have been scope to link it to transhumanism, which Robbie is quite familiar

with. Transhumanism as Robbie explained it is a “project that disassociates the meat puppet of the human body from the gendered soul”. In this context he mentioned Martine Rothblatt, a well-known proponent of transhumanism and the work of Jennifer Bilek and her blog The 11th Hour. Bilek has been researching the gender industry and the connections between technology, transsexualism, and transhumanism for over a decade and Robbie would very much have liked for Jensen to have extended this chapter to include transhumanism and some of Bilek’s contributions in that sphere. In particular with regards to the way in which capitalism plays a part in it all (i.e. following where the money comes from and goes to).

Prior to reading *It’s Debatable*, John had also not made the connection between transgenderism and transhumanism and recognised that in theory there are no limits to what humans could do. We could try and find a technological solution to pretty much anything leading to extreme forms of biohacking and the total changing of our natural selves. In a way a transhumanist approach means that biological facts – i.e. the fact that you are a man can be reframed into a ‘technical’ problem that can be solved with a ‘technical’ solutions, such as invasive body-modification through the use of invasive surgical procedures and chemicals.

Björn noted how on a deeper level much of what Jensen mentioned seemed deeply interlinked with the patriarchal aim of having power / overpowering, which is expressed in many different ways, from violence towards others (sexual violence and exploitation, war, slavery etc.) to violence against nature (exploitation of animals, deforestation, environmental pollution etc.). Björn added how the vast majority of billionaires are men (approx. 86% according to a recent Forbes piece) with men like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison, Mark Zuckerberg etc. driving technological advances and from a desire to ‘overcome’ nature and its limitations as well as making money.

“Sex is in some sense assigned by someone, such as the woman giving birth, or a midwife assisting with a home birth, or a doctor in a hospital. But “assigned” implies an arbitrary decision. If I am assigned a seat at a dinner party, for example, it’s understood to be the choice of the host. But sex is observed at birth, not assigned.” Robert Jensen – *Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology* (p. 3)

John took the discussion back to transgenderism and noted how skilfully Jensen pointed out the inconsistencies in much of the activist language as well as the fact that many people seem to willingly accept that there is no proof under the banner “you just have to believe”. Alongside that stands another point of view, which prescribes that men who say that they are women have the right not to have any questions asked of them. The problem with these fixed ideas is that they shut down any discussion and that those who pursue debate regardless are judged to be bigoted. All of this goes completely against any sort of scientific enquiry of course.

David remarked that the fact that the chapter was dropped from the book, really makes the point for Robert Jensen and people’s lacking willingness to exchange ideas on the subject. In relation to this Björn pointed out that there is a passage in the published book, available online here, that explains why the chapter *Defining Sex/*

Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology was not included in the book. In a way it is a real win to have this note in the book for future generations to see and consider. Particularly as the note on the publisher's website has now gone, which is curious to say the least. It's almost as if Interlink Publishing / Olive Branch Press had second thoughts about their decision to drop the chapter. Perhaps they removed the note on their website because debate had moved on a lot in the last year or so since the decision was made. Or perhaps they were worried that people would remember the book more for the content that was omitted from the book, rather than the content that made it into the book. John pointed out that there isn't such a thing as bad publicity and felt uncertain that a 'fear of backlash' was a likely reason for the page having been taken down.

The discussion then went back to the start of the book and Jensen's reference of critical race theory. Robbie felt the link to critical race theory, which holds that many aspects of western society contain inherent racial bias was very useful. In particular with regards to the very different ways in which left-leaning people have responded to this theory and to gender ideology. Robbie expressed incredulity about those 'on the left' who accept men who claim to be a different sex (i.e. women), reject the idea that white people can claim to be another ethnicity (i.e. black), as in the example of Rachel Dolezal.

Our discussion then turned to our real-life interactions with people who see themselves as being very pro 'trans rights'. William felt that reading Jensen's chapter has given him a lot of information and context that he did not have before and as a result he felt better prepared to have discussions with others about the subject matter. William very much felt that what Jensen provided would support him in bringing his point of view across much more clearly, equipping him with well considered points.

At this point John a further point, namely that having open conversations with friends may be 'just' uncomfortable or difficult, having these at work may indeed be career-limiting (as experienced by many women and some men). John felt that it was troubling to recognise how many of us feel unable to state our opinions, particularly as it prevents us from being the change we want to see.

In this respect we spoke about the various SEEN Networks that have been popping up in the UK since 2022. According to their own website, SEEN is "a staff network committed to promoting and supporting sex equality and equity between women and men in our workplaces, and helping all staff to thrive at work and fulfil their potential". Since the start of the first SEEN in 2022, there are now at least 13 networks across sectors.

We continued by discussing the benefit of SEEN Networks, in that it gives members an opportunity to come together, organise events and try and change the culture at work by opening up discussions from within. Whilst in practice SEEN Networks are often more tolerated than actively promoted by organisations, it is nonetheless important that they exist as their mere existence, challenges the established culture.

Going back to John's question about real-life conversations regarding different points of view, Robbie pointed out that he has often found himself trying to open

up conversations and brokering discussions and failing due to people being unwilling to engage in debate. For him, this resulted in being forced out of the Green Party along with many other members of the party. You can find out more about them on the website Greens In Exile. Robbie mentioned that there is now a badge for the exiles reading 'Greens in Exile'. Robbie feels that wearing it helps open up discussions about what is happening in the Green Party in particular, but in society in general as well.

The discussion then turned to the final passage of the book. Robbie felt quite confused with the last line of the book in which Jensen said that "*A radical feminist analysis, rooted in an ecological worldview, offers a path to a deeper analysis and potentially more effective responses.*". Robbie felt that the book ended rather abruptly at this point and he was left with wondering about the available choices would be if they weren't either a "*liberal embrace or a conservative rejection*". Robbie's confusion stemmed from a realisation that meeting people in different arenas requires a 'need' to adapt your language and as such he was unsure which responses radical feminism would be able to provide in those contexts. Robbie's confusion stemmed from a rather literal reading of the passage. Björn, who had taken the sentence in a more philosophical way, felt that Jensen was trying to say that issues are complex and our responses to them should be informed by deep thinking and critical analysis from a radical feminist perspective. Only by engaging in that way, can we ensure that the responses we come up with are better than the blanket responses of 'affirmation' on one side versus 'rejection' on the other.

To round the discussion off, Chris noted how Jensen had vehemently rejected the term 'TERF' and how important this was, in a sense of not describing ourselves or others using derogatory and incorrect terms. Neither radical feminists nor MACS exclude people who identify as trans. We are simply concerned about protecting vulnerable women, children, same-sex attracted people and bisexual people and want to stop anyone from doing anything nasty.

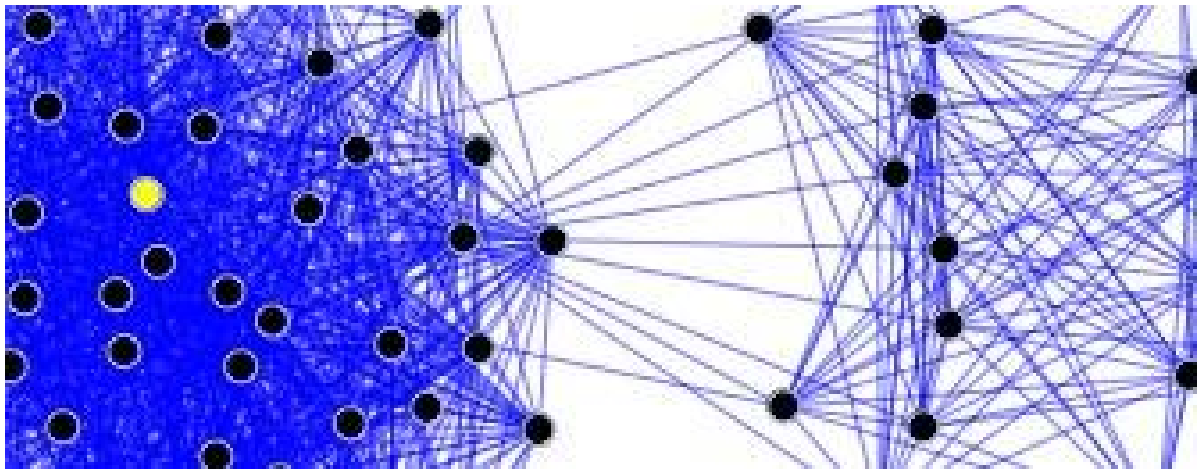
Chris' point garnered some support, whilst others felt it was possible to reclaim derogatory terms like 'TERF'. In the end we had to agree to disagree, whether such a reclaiming is indeed possible. We ended the discussion by reflecting on our takes on various 'labels' currently doing the rounds that reflect 'gender critical' views. These included 'gender atheist', 'gender realist' or 'sex realist' (a term that someone had come across on Reality's Last Stand).

Outside: An Exodus From Patriarchy on the Backs of Women

Source: <https://quinnae.com/2010/10/27/outside-an-exodus-from-patriarchy-on-the-b>

Date: October 27, 2010

Author: Katherine Alejandra Cross



Intersectionality is often lost on those who most need to make certain connections.

The operation of Kyriarchy in its peculiarly patriarchal forms never fails to impress me. As I look at a certain clique of radical feminists who claim to be fighting against a system of gender oppression in our world I find myself confronting women and men who have, in truth, merely internalised patriarchal power arrangements and are regurgitating them in a strange way. I'm speaking, of course, about radfem transphobia. Joelle Ruby Ryan, a trans woman academic, recently attended a conference in New Hampshire called Pornography as Sexual Violence. In trying to present on the often untold story of how trans pornography impacts both our community and gender in general, she found herself attacked by two transphobic feminists: Robert Jensen and Lierre Keith. Her story, passionate and quite understandably outraged in tone, can be found [here](#).

In it she quotes at length a screed from Ms. Keith. You'll forgive me if I decide to take a shotgun to yon barrel of fish. Some might say that it only dignifies the remarks of such people to debate them or to fisk them. I prefer, however, to think of it as providing a learning resource to someone who might find themselves oppressed or harassed by such ideas. The power of symbolic violence- the use of rank, position, privilege and entitlement to impose meaning on a subordinate person- should not be understated. I and many other trans people have learned the hard way why such arguments are wrong, but someone still struggling to find themselves and feeling vulnerable might be hurting. To me, the more responses there are to this kind of nonsense, the better. Now, on with the show.

A Journey Down a Familiar Path

Keith begins by saying the following:

Well, I've personally been fighting about this since 1982. I think 'transphobic' is a ridiculous word. I have no strange fear of people who claim to be 'trans.' I deeply disagree with them, as do most radical feminists.

When I was a wee lass back in high school I used to argue with this rather tiresome Republican boy (incidentally his name was Robert as well) who one day angrily declaimed "there's no such thing as homophobia! I'm not irrationally afraid of gay people! And 'homo' means same! I'm not afraid of things that are the same!" Now, I know what you're thinking. "He has a career waiting for him in Fox News!" Quite. But secondly he sounds quite a lot like our friend here who's supposedly from the opposite side of the political spectrum, which is not uncommon when dealing with this minority of radical feminists whose stock and trade is inverting reactionary arguments and using them against the oppressed in the guise of being *anti*-oppression.

When we talk about -phobia in a social science context any person who is not being flagrantly obtuse, disingenuous, or some other flavour of miscreant, understands what is being said. It is not a phobia in the psychiatric sense of the term, like arachnophobia. It is a term that connotes an irrational *bigotry*, like xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and so on. To shed association with the word merely because you don't have a pathological aversion to us does not obviate transphobia because *that isn't what the word means*.

Try this on. I am a rich person stuck in a poor person's body. I've always enjoyed champagne rather than beer, and always knew I belonged in first class not economy, and it just feels right when people wait on me. My insurance company should give me a million dollars to cure my Economic Dysphoria.

It's rather hard to discern what she's trying to say here. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in a thrashing attempt at coming up with some example of why trans people don't exist she decided to be classist.

Or how about this. I am really Native American. How do I know? I've always felt a special connection to animals, and started building tee pees in the backyard as soon as I was old enough. I insisted on wearing moccasins to school even though the other kids made fun of me and my parents punished me for it. I read everything I could on native people, started going to pow wows and sweat lodges as soon as I was old enough, and I knew that was the real me. And if you bio-Indians don't accept us trans-Indians, then you are just as genocidal and oppressive as the Europeans.

There is one major problem with this line of reasoning. Race is not gender. The genders that people access, enact, know themselves to be, transition into or out of, are properties of every person in a given society (and most societies have people that might be classed as transitioning in some capacity). Not every person has, say, some version of Hopi culture that is part of their life, identity, socialisation and so forth. Race and gender do operate in similar ways, yes, but are also very qualitatively different. To put it very succinctly, trans people transition for the same reason that Ms. Keith expresses her gender the way she does, because that is what feels best to her. Race does not work like that, strictly speaking.

Shifting gender can be defined a myriad of ways. You can, for example, be a cis woman who was raised with frilly pink dresses but grew into a butch or Gothic inspired style. That is clearly not socially the same as transgender transition, but it is a kind of gender change that exists on a smaller scale. Comparing it to switching races is something a conservative-minded individual would do, however. For example, many racists argued against allowing people of colour to love, marry, and raise children with whites using very naturalist language on the subject. Whites and people of colour were likened to different species. A similar operation of power exists when trans people are compared to non-existent race switchers- a sense is created of an uncrossable boundary, no attention is given to how we *put* the boundary there in the first place. The ideology that once brutally attacked interracial relations now attacks certain gender evolutions: as something unnatural and as something that denies some essence.

A person can express the full range of genders, but it is far harder for an individual to do so for race because when it comes to race *there is a culture to appropriate*. Contrary to certain assertions, however, women *en toto* do not have a culture. We are a gender that is part of a welter of cultures and women exist at multiple social localities. People of certain racial backgrounds do too, but we also have unique cultures and histories qua our ethnic, national, and racial origins that cannot very easily be transitioned into. This also does not even begin to address how white supremacy and patriarchy necessarily had to operate differently in order to function as regimes of power; such distinctions in ideology and cultural construction of race and sex were necessary because of the qualitative differences inherent to each social location.

Thus gender and race are not simply transposable and any analogy based on that will break down, or at least require more qualified buttressing than Keith gave it. Unless Keith is willing to say that her own gendered evolution is akin to “race change” there is no logical reason for her to say *mine* is.

Now, she can argue correctly that gender is quite often oppressive. The problem is, both she and Mr. Jensen are accessing the same system of gender. Indeed, Mr. Jensen because of his appearance and the clothes he wears accrues many privileges to himself because of this, as does Ms. Keith in certain milieux. She and Mr. Jensen also argue that I am constructed. That’s true, but only insofar as *they* are.

You see, we return to a point I’ve had to make again and again recently in various guises. There is no outside to power; there is no outside to gender.

Gender is no different. It is a class condition created by a brutal arrangement of power. I can’t fathom how mutilating people’s bodies to fit an oppressive power arrangement is frankly anything but a human rights violation. And men insisting that they are women is insulting and absurd.

There is no such thing as ‘woman’ or ‘man’ outside of patriarchal social relations. These are not biological conditions—they are socially created, by violence in the end. If I can’t be a rich person born in a poor person’s body, then I can’t be a woman born in a man’s body. Not unless you are going to argue that man and woman are biological or essential conditions. The whole point of feminism is that they are neither

Now we come full circle here to a particular meta-critique of this... argument. Remember when I said recently that the “x trapped in a y’s body” trope was problematic? This is exactly why. If you note the structure of all of her examples and her ‘critique’ of trans people you find a common theme that is familiar to us all: the Great Trans Narrative, which is the “single story” of our people. The way she’s describing things is based not on trans people’s stories, really, but such stories as they’ve been filtered through the cis dominated media which has a penchant for telling happy little stories of hyper-stereotyped transformation. When they don’t find it, they browbeat us into telling it, luring us with promises of getting the word out and all the rest. So they insist on photographing us when we’re putting on makeup or binding or getting dressed. They insist on focusing on surgery and physical changes. They always talk to doctors who are sure to be our chaperones, the men in white coats we’re supposed to need to validate our “condition.”

So this is what Jensen and Keith are working from, and most trans people will tell you that’s not *them*. It’s certainly not me. Yet we’re forced to defend ourselves as if that’s what’s really happening to us, as if that’s what the majority of us are saying. If one trans person repeats this narrative in sincerity, we are *all* called to account for it, in a way these two would no doubt find misogynist if the same standard were applied to a cis woman having to account for something problematic espoused by another cis woman.

Thus, we are tarred with a “single story” that they caricature and pin to us, considered a monolithic group, and all experience to the contrary is ignored. But there is yet more to unpack from this.

If men and women are social creations, quite an indisputable statement when you look at it, really, then this opens up quite a can of worms when used to attack trans people. First of all:

- If men and women are socially created that means that birth assignment is meaningless. If birth assignment is meaningless, then on what basis are you asserting a trans woman is “really” a man?
- If man and woman are socially constructed and oppressive categories only, then why do you identify as a woman (and presumably Mr. Jensen as a man)?
- If they are oppressive and the binary is a social problem, how do you square that with identifying as a lesbian, which presumes an ontological and biological figure of “woman” and a gender binary in most interpretations of the term?

Now I dare not say that there’s anything wrong with identifying as a man or a woman or a lesbian. There isn’t, intrinsically. And that’s the point. She’s playing a rhetorical shell game here where she has access to an ostensibly unproblematic identity of woman because she was born with a vagina and her attending physician at birth put an F on her birth certificate- while simultaneously arguing that gender is socially constructed and that’s why we as trans people do not exist.

Theories of Biological Foundationalism: The Feminist Intervention Against Transphobia.

The argument completely gridlocks under any close scrutiny; in the terms of her own logic it does not make any sense. If there is no biological basis to gender and sex, then people should not only be theoretically able to occupy any gender position regardless of birth physiology, they should be doing this all the time, and it should be looked on as something that disproves a fundamental patriarchal tenet (the use of birth genitals to assign an ineluctable sex caste to an infant that is guaranteed to mark their entire life- one of two castes).

You see, in order to say I'm a man, Mr. Jensen and Ms. Keith have to argue that even though I know myself to be a woman, have been treated as such by society (and thus experienced patriarchy as a woman firsthand repeatedly), and thus for all social intents and purposes *exist as a woman*, there is still some ontological base they can hearken to and say "look! It's all fake!" That base, of course, is biology. What my knobbly bits were at birth. Biological essentialism. In the words of feminist scholar Linda Nicholson- "biological foundationalism." You see, in 1994 Nicholson coined this term to separate out a kind of essentialism she had found among certain feminists in the 1970s and 80s, one that claimed to be constructivist but nevertheless moored its assumptions on the true existence of two unproblematic, absolute sexes, male and female, that were knowable from birth and inexorable. This was the "coat rack" theory of sex that held gender was like clothing hung on the rack, but the rack itself (the foundational sex) was unchanging, rigid, and would always be there.

Later feminist theorists, including many transgender ones, would question this reasoning; in no small part because they recognised that it allowed too many lazy assumptions to creep into feminist discourse and allowed an easy reification of patriarchal essentialist ideas (women are bad at maths, etc.).

That same year, another feminist, Marxist feminist scholar Hilary Rose, would say the following:

My difficulty with radical feminism... is not that it admits the body, for I welcome this, but that in a peculiar mirror image of the patriarchal ideology it opposes it frequently reduces women (and men) to nothing but biology...

If you are going to discard experience, one's life and self-knowledge, one's agency, you have little recourse but to the indefatigable patriarchal mainstay: essential sex. That's how Ms. Keith "knows" I'm a man, because of what's on my birth certificate and nothing more. Whatever else she thinks she knows comes from media made by cis people for cis people. Even allegedly trans positive media, like the movie *Transamerica*, are made for the cis gaze, not for trans people in any real sense. All too much academic writing about trans people, again, is by cis people who read back to the cis population certain things they already "know" about us. Thus we come back to that fundamental truth.

Believing is seeing.



That sign does come in handy now and again.

And Ms. Keith and Mr. Jensen believe quite passionately that the patriarchal media is right about us. After all, when has that media ever gotten something wrong? Thus they can look at us and simply confirm what they think they already know.

It is worth returning to Linda Nicholson, however, as she represents an interesting intervention against feminist essentialism and transphobia by a cis woman, which was even less common at the time. She asks a very obvious series of questions:

Janice Raymond claims that no one born without a vagina can claim to have had comparable experiences to those born with one. My question is, How can she know this? How can she know, for example, that some people's parents were not operating with a greater slippage between biology and character than is true for many in contemporary industrialised societies and thus really did provide their children with male genitals experiences comparable to those born with vaginas? Historical change is made possible by some people having experiences that really are different from those that have predominated in the past.

To this I would add, of course, from the trans side of the discussion, that what we experience as we are growing up is not a perfect analogue to what the average cis person of our coercively assigned gender experiences. As I have written, how I experienced my childhood was in part through internalising both male typed and female typed socialisation, and the problems that arose from that (the self-loathing, self-objectification and so on) are not easy to talk about with someone who is angry at you for existing. It's hard to talk about at all due to how charged it is, but in those painful stories lie a certain truth: that a Manichean vision of how boys and girls are raised is inaccurate and problematic, for more reasons than just transphobia.

Nicholson also says quite explicitly here:

A feminism of difference and the biological foundationalism on which it rests, however, are also false not only because of the failure of both positions to recognise the historicity of their own insights but also because neither allows for the ways in which even within contemporary European-based societies the belief system their insights reflect possesses a multitude of cracks and fissures.

In other words, they do not account for the historical inaccuracy of their own ideas (gender and sex have changed over time) and there are too many exceptions to a biologically foundationalist schema for the theory to be acceptable by itself. Not putting too fine a point on it, Nicholson goes on to say that trans women are one such "crack" in the "insights" of such foundationalist thinkers.

I could quote Nicholson all night simply because her mind is amazing and her work, especially for its time, is thoughtful. But the point has been made, and it's useful to quote feminist theorists here as well for two reasons. One, it demonstrates that feminism does not belong to Keith or Jensen, and two, it lays bare the reality that transphobic feminism *does* rest necessarily on essentialism and imports unexamined patriarchal assumptions. Allow me the indulgence of bringing her words back into the discussion once more:

...Inevitably characterisations of women's "nature" or "essence"- even if this is described as a socially constructed nature or essence- tend to reflect the perspective of those making the characterisations. And as those who have the power to make such characterisations [note: remember what I said earlier about symbolic violence, this is it- QM] in contemporary European-based societies tend to be white, heterosexual, and from the professional class, such characterisations tend to reflect the biases of those from these groups. It was thus not surprising that the gynocentric move of the seventies soon gave way to outcries from women of colour, lesbians, and those of working-class backgrounds that the stories being told did not reflect their experiences.

And I would add, trans people. Quite a few people, from Lou Sullivan to Carol Riddell to Sylvia Rivera to Sandy Stone, articulated a trans feminist criticism of transphobia and transmisogyny very early on. There is a rich history to draw on here.

But let's, alas, go from intellectually stimulating historiography to low rent screed once more and return to Ms. Keith. We're not quite finished yet.

[The Trans Community is] in fact deeply misogynist and reactionary when it comes to any understanding of male power. Indeed, they often claim it 'oppresses' them to even use the words 'men' and 'women.' Meanwhile, men are raping and brutalizing women on a mass scale. I hate to say this, but it's porn culture that really created the whole concept of trans. I watched it happen... for your own edification, you might want to read up on Pat Califia, whom I talk about at length, and whose life and writing proves every point radical feminists make about queer politics, pornography, violence against women, sado-masochism, the eroticization of power and breaking boundaries (including the boundaries of children), and trans. All of it is right there"

To first take on the fact that she "watched it happen" I would simply again reiterate: believing is seeing. By the late 70s and 80s trans people were gaining a little more visibility in left wing communities. But speaking from a privileged position as she does, Keith doesn't believe we existed until she saw us. If you want a good living and breathing definition of cis-centric, you've found it. The visibility she observed was the outcome of a lot of fighting. Inasmuch as it was a genesis of any kind of trans identity it was one that grew out of new empowered understandings of trans ness born from not being ashamed of having that history.

But because her politics comes preheated, she simply saw in that what she needed to see.

In appropriating the rape of women to make her point she says "meanwhile" as if trying to say while we trans people are whinging that we are being called men or women, this atrocity is occurring, she also engages in another rhetorical sleight of hand: positing that we do not care about and are not affected by rape. I have a friend, a trans woman, who suffers badly from PTSD born of a sexual assault tinged with transmisogyny. I would... kindly ask Ms. Keith not to tell me what my issues are, and what the people I love have and have not experienced. The terrorising of women through rape is real and has been of pressing concern to trans women for some time. Because we're raped too, and often murdered right after. Men try to dominate us with

sexual violence as well. Because in the end, Ms. Keith, we're typed as women- and thus people that need to be put in their place.

When we fight against misgendering, we're fighting against the same forces that see us placed six feet under all too often. We are defined as un-rapeable because we were "born as men"- just as women of colour were defined as un-rapeable due to their supposedly innate sexuality. This we return to Joelle Ruby Ryan's entire reason for being at the conference: conducting a presentation that expounds on this point and elevates the often marginalised voices of trans people who find themselves sexualised, objectified, and targeted because of it. Like many marginalised peoples' patriarchal men have used sexualisation and a myth of lasciviousness to oppress us. Hence, transmisogyny. Ms. Keith would do very well to learn this. She had quite the opportunity at this conference.

Escape From Male Privilege: Robert Jensen's Failure

With all of this said, I would not like anyone to think that Robert Jensen is being let off the hook. I'm just going through this in chronological order.

He, like a small number of white cis radical feminist men, tends to gravitate uncritically towards white cis women who are radfem and look to them to set the tone of what constitutes the most radical, most anti-patriarchal feminism. In his exercise in achieving a cathartic cleansing of his male privilege, he looks to people he perceives are the most enlightened, most radical, most transgressive feminists. Unsurprisingly, the people he finds are largely white, cis, and from the middle classes like himself. According to Dr. Ryan, Jensen defended, up and down, 70s lesbian feminism. Whither the many criticisms of it from radical women of colour (see: The Combahee River Collective manifesto, or, as always, This Bridge Called My Back), never mind trans people? Apparently that doesn't matter as much, to him. White privilege much?

In his grand exercise to be the best rad fem possible he simply ends up enacting unexamined white male privilege in a new way. What he did at the conference put him, a man, in the bizarre position of claiming the utmost fealty to feminism while attempting to silence a woman, define her history and identity for her, define the meaning of her body, and politely tell her that she could not speak for herself. He then would claim any attempt to assert herself would be "anti-feminist." If there is a patriarchal appropriation of feminism to be found, it is in his person and in his words. A commenter on Dr. Ryan's blog makes the following point about a different project of Jensen's:

Jensen and Dines attempted to force models to engage in discourse where they tell the women working for a porn site that they essentially suffer from "false consciousness" while refusing to actually listen to or believe the women when they disagree and talk from their own lived experience. They also dismiss the women's interest in disengaging from an insulting and abusive conversation that invalidates and devalues them. For Jensen and Dines, harassing adult models and actresses is "free speech." Additionally,

they go as far as suggesting it is “anti-feminist” for women to resist submitting to some White, cis male’s impositions and entitlement regarding their bodies and sexuality. There is also language in the article that show utter contempt for any models and actresses in the porn industry and for masturbation in general. There is a complete absence of any attempt to empathize with or understand the models, but rather only attempts to impose an abstract narrative of women’s objectification upon them, which in itself is objectification — that is, treating the women as mere objects due to their line of work; objects to be debated and theorized about rather than treated as actual people with agency and self-knowledge.

Perhaps you’re seeing a pattern here, as I am. A man telling a woman what to think and how she should feel. How quaint?

As I have said many times before, I did not transition so I could better fit beneath the heel of patriarchy. I did not transition to have men tell me what to do, what to think, and what I mean. If you’ll allow me a bit of my own righteous anger for a moment: I did not transition to have men tell me a goddamn thing. It matters not to me how they identify. Mr. Jensen’s pro-feminism is merely another guise of the same old transphobia. Where he should be exercising the utmost caution in exercising his white and male privilege, he’s using it with the most reckless abandon. Where is he most cautious and hands off? White, bourgeois cis women. And the beat goes on, as they say.

So you have radical feminist women importing patriarchal biological essentialism, and a radical feminist man using trans people as a means of enacting as much white male privilege as he can bring to bear.

For yet another shell game, let’s consider what Dr. Ryan recalls here:

It was a humiliating and grueling experience—having your identity attacked and told that your politics are reactionary and inherently anti-feminist. And when I complained about the oppression of transgender women, Bob informed me that that was not due to radical feminists, but due to the patriarchy.

Mr. Jensen seems to forget one critical fact. There is no outside to patriarchy. Thus, yes, transphobia and transmisogyny do indeed find their ultimate roots in patriarchy. But, critically, that does not obviate the fact that radical feminists *could be influenced by patriarchy*, and thus act accordingly. Thus they could be said to be perpetuating patriarchal norms and ideas, and thus the distinction between them and the source is an academic matter only. The oppression of trans women may not have found its origins in radical feminism, but Jensen’s version of radfem is not helping, and it only promotes hatred against trans people.

Put it another way, his abrogation of responsibility for transphobia and his insistent denials that he is not being bigoted put him in exactly the same shoes of another white cis patriarch: Carl Paladino. Many of you will remember his recent tirade against gay people wherein he asserted that gays were unfit to teach, were not normal, and has in the past spent an inordinate amount of time talking about gay men wearing speedos. All the usual. He then defensively went on to say that any assertion that he’s a bigot

or promoting violence against LGBT people is a dirty lie. Jensen has engaged in the same, classic, reliable white male prejudice bait and switch (which as people like Juan Williams and Sarah Palin demonstrate, is not limited to just white males, it's there for all your internalised and horizontal prejudice needs): say something bigoted, then deny responsibility for the way such words construct peoples' reality. Words have meaning, power, and impact. They shape the world. It's why I write. But they also can do great harm, and in Jensen's ill considered verbiage is contained exactly the same *patriarchal* ideas about gender and sexuality that see trans people attacked, raped, and murdered.

Denying responsibility for that is an exercise in every privilege he possesses.

What is striking about both Mr. Jensen and Ms. Keith is that what they are attempting to do is a very clear attempt at finding that theoretical El Dorado that lesbian separatists searched in vain for in the 1970s, which is an outside to patriarchy; indeed this was built on a political fixation on finding an outside to society as a whole, which was a major goal of certain radical projects in the 1960s and 70s. The quest for outside, the quest to escape patriarchy, male privilege, society, was particularly strong among white cis men and women, because in part there was an allure to shedding the privileges of their skin and, if applicable, their gender. If it was possible, they as individuals would not be responsible for Kyriarchy any longer.

But of course, to posit a way out of patriarchy built on the experiences of middle class white cis women required denying the voices, experiences, and histories of just about everyone outside of that privileged circle. The dream was one that, ultimately, obviated everyone else's.

That dream still transfixes Robert Jensen, to be sure. Yet he seeks to pave his royal road to the mythic Outside to Patriarchy on the backs of women: sex workers, women of colour, trans women. We are to bend knee to the service of his quest to be free of male privilege and free of patriarchy's imposition of responsibility on his shoulders. To reiterate myself, I did not sign up for that, Mr. Jensen.

Individuals like Robert Jensen represent a major reason trans people feel unwelcome in academia, he is one of the cis people blowing that stiff headwind against those of us trying to produce knowledge. How ironic that for all his protests to the contrary, he's just another white man attempting to obstruct the progress of trans women of colour.

Get out of my way, Robert.

Gender and Sexual Diversity

Author: Dexter M. Thomas

Date: June 21st, 2014

The recent article by Robert Jensen, "Some Basic Propositions about Sex, Gender, and Patriarchy," espouses concepts that both reflect and perpetuate cissexism

and transphobia. Jensen correctly anticipates that readers will recognize much of his article as unabashedly transphobic. He reacts by preemptively dismissing any such observations as mere “tactics.” In the third to last paragraph he writes, “Labeling a radical feminist position on these public policy issues as inherently “transphobic” or describing radical feminist arguments on the issues as “hate speech” are diversionary tactics that undermine productive intellectual and political discussion. A critique of an idea is not a personal attack on any individual who holds the idea.”

An online search for terms like “hate speech” and “diversionary tactic” leads one to any number of authors repining how their opinions will be or have been similarly “misrepresented.” Regardless, it is insufficient to simply assert by force of will that those who recognize one’s opinions as transphobic or one’s statements as hate speech are merely engaged in the use of “tactics.” Rather, such a preemptive dismissal is itself a “tactic.” It is a disrespectful and derisive dismissal of the anticipated experience of individuals directly impacted by those statements and opinions.

Jensen’s precognitive defense is possibly due to his own personal history. In a quick Google search, I found a 2012 post alleging that, “Robert Jensen had personally challenged the identity of a trans woman speaker. This woman, named Joelle Ryan, found herself berated on full account of her trans identity, and observed as Jensen proceeded to lambast every aspect of transgender culture.” This may not be the first or last time Jensen’s opinions will be “mis”characterized as transphobic hate speech.

Unfortunately, anti-transgender prejudice is so deeply rooted and systemic that it is rarely noticed or even considered. Discussions of anti-transgender prejudice, often amongst individuals never directly impacted, are replete with misunderstanding and misused or ill-defined concepts and terminology. For clarification, I’ll attempt to break down some of the relevant terminology in a nutshell:

- Cissexual(or cisgender) refers to possessing a self-identity congruent with one’s birth assigned sex and gender. Broadly, people who are not trans* are cisgender.
- Cissexism and transphobia have been defined in various ways, but generally imply that being transgender is inferior to being cisgender. This is often a consequence of the underlying perception that gender is properly and unambiguously determined by a simple “biological” sex dichotomy (male or female). Gender ambiguity is seen as a violation of a natural binary order. Whether intentional or not, both transphobia and cissexism have severe consequences for the victims of these attitudes.

For anyone interested in learning more, Dr. Eric Anthony Grollman wrote a great article on this titled, “What is Transphobia? And, What is Cissexism?”, where he also elaborates on a growing body of research examining the wide-reaching negative consequences of anti-transgender prejudice.

Jensen interprets transgender via the myopic lens of his personal ideology. He seems to have little or no genuine appreciation of the experience and perceptions of those who

are transgender. And I strongly disagree with and felt deeply offended by his article. Below I summarize some of my reasons.

Point of clarification: I would like to disclaim that “transgender” is an umbrella term for many people who defy mainstream expectations and assumptions regarding gender, and can be used to refer to transsexuals as well as people who are gender nonconforming in other ways — for example, feminine men, masculine women, transfeminine, trans-masculine, genderqueers (who do not identify exclusively as either women or men), to name a few. There are many different ways to experience and interpret gender as human beings. And there are also several ways to conceptualize gender.

Since Jensen focused exclusively on the mainstream media use of “transgender” in terms of the medical procedures that an individual might undergo (e.g., hormones and surgeries), I will do my best to limit my scope somewhat to this specific sub-group who require surgical intervention to function optimally – particularly in my response to his “Ecology” argument.

Still, it’s extremely important to note that many trans* people find such definitions to be objectifying (as they place focus on body parts rather than the person as a whole) and classist (as not all trans people can afford medical intervention). For these reasons, I personally favor definitions based on self-identity. And while I am an advocate of gender transgression and do not identify within the gender binary, there are many transgender people who do and deserve equal respect, validation, and inclusion.

Biological and Cultural

Jensen sets up the foundation of his argument by drawing the reader’s attention to the classification of humans as a “sexually dimorphic species”. Ignoring, for the moment, distinctions between biological sex and gender, even human biological sex is not as simple as Jensen’s ideology demands. The construct of sexual dimorphism can be a handy tool for classification, but it is a vast oversimplification that denies the reality of millions of humans. And while many humans can be categorized as either male or female based upon simple biological characteristics, there are many people who do not fit neatly into these categories. The lives and personal experience of these millions of individuals are just as valid and important as those of the majority. One can not simply dismiss value of their existence because they cannot be pressed neatly into an overly simplistic and rigidly binary worldview biologically and/or socially.

Nature presents us with a variety of sex spectrums. For those unfamiliar with such variations, here is a snippet:

Sex chromosomes — XY chromosomes = man and XX = woman, right? Wrong. On the Y chromosome, a gene called SRY generally causes a fetus to develop male. But the SRY can show up on an X, turning an XX fetus essentially male. If the SRY gene does not work on the Y, the fetus develops essentially female. An XY fetus with a functioning SRY can essentially develop female. In the case of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, cells in the body are not entirely receptive to androgens (masculinizing hormones).

Subsequently, the body ends up appearing female-typical but the individual lacks body hair (which is dependent on androgen-sensitivity). Women with complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome are less “masculinized” in their muscles and brains than many other cisgender women, because cisgender women in general are more receptive to androgens.

Genitals — The genitals of every sex and gender come from the same stuff, and many individuals (who are not intersex) have ambiguous genitalia and are still referred to as men or women. Moreover, a person can appear to be male-typical but is biologically female-typical, or vice versa. For instance, cisgender men with extreme Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia may be entirely male-typical but discover later in life that they have ovaries and a uterus. Even though these individuals have XX chromosomes and ovaries, their adrenal glands make so many androgens that their bodies develop male-typical (including their muscle development and gender identity).

Hormones — All genders and sexes make the same hormones, just in different quantities, on average. The average man has more androgens than the average woman. But what about athletic women, who are more likely to have naturally high levels of androgens? There’s a lot of variation here, also – such as the 1 out of every 10-20 women who have polycystic ovarian syndrome.

In other words, while we may be classified as a sexually dimorphic species, the reality of sex and gender are biologically diverse. Attempting to clearly delineate the wonderful and vast spectrum of human experience into two simple cissexual categories will take a lot of endocrinologists, gynecologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, and so forth. None of whom are going to be able to simply run a test that can do so. While science could inform their decisions, they’d have to decide which of the dozens of characteristics of biological sex matter.

But apparently, a professor of journalism can make this decision with the following delineating criteria: “... only females can bear and breastfeed children, which no male can do.” and, “Other observable or measureable physical differences (average height, muscle mass, etc.) between males and females may be socially relevant depending on circumstances. Sex-role differentiation based on those differences may be appropriate if it can be shown to be necessary in the interests of everyone in a society.”

While Jensen pays lip service to the existence of individuals who are intersex, he immediately invalidates their lives with these statements — both of which are riddled with flaws and have very concerning implications. Should an intersex person who can breastfeed and bear children be forced to identify as female? Is an intersex person who can’t, inherently male? Is a woman who has entered menopause or had a mastectomy in some way less female? Is that really all there is to being female – the ability to bear and breastfeed children? Are cisgender men who can lactate female? What about transgender men who have the ability to bear and breastfeed children (e.g. Matt Rice and Thomas Beatie)? Such examples illustrate the absurdity of attempting to fit everyone – intersex and/or (cis/trans)sexual – into false sex and socially constructed gender dichotomies.

Based on this flawed delineating criteria, Jensen concludes, “Therefore, human communities have always, and will always, recognize two distinct sex categories, male and female. There has always been, and always will be, some sex-role differentiation in human communities.”

To claim that human communities have always recognized two distinct sex (or gender) categories is culturally ignorant and untrue. For instance, most, though not entirely all, American Indian tribes recognized social gender categories beyond “male” or “female” collectively known as Two-Spirit. In 1700 AD in England, there were writers who described themselves as members of a third sex (e.g. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Magnus Hirschfeld, Edward Carpenter, etc.). These are just two of many historical examples I could provide.

In the present day Australians have been able to use “X,” an additional gender marker since 2003. Germany identifies “Indeterminate” sex on birth certificates. The Hijra of India are a well-known and populous third sex type in the modern world, and in 2009 India started listing eunuchs and transgender people as “others”, distinct from males and females of cisgender experience. There are also “Gaddhi” in the foothills of the Himalayas, another third sex/gender. There are three gender options legally in Nepal, New Zealand (indeterminate), Pakistan (khawaja sara), and Thailand (kathoeys). And the list of human community complexity and acknowledgement of diversity goes on and on. If you’re interested in learning more, PBS has an interactive map of gender-diverse cultures.

To impose the false sex and gender dichotomies prevalent in the United States on to the rest of the world, and throughout the history of human communities, is incredibly ethnocentric.

Jensen writes, “... we should assume that all or part of any differences in observed behavior between males and females in these matters are a product of cultural training, while remaining open to alternative explanations.”

The “nature vs. nurture” debate is old news. The two aren’t diametrically opposed, and humans are influenced by nature *and* nurture (e.g. just take a peek into the fields of behavioral endocrinology, epigenetics, and neuropsychology). In regards to sex/gender differences, there is also a growing body of literature supporting the hypothesis that one’s internal sense of gender and sexual anatomical attributes are hard-wired in the brain^{<>1}, which are subsequently influenced by (but not determined by) social environments. These results are further evidenced by the failure of behavioral interventions, such as the case of John Money and David Reimer. This is a notorious case that still influences thinking regarding gender — particularly among radical feminists. To this day, because of this misguided thinking, some intersex children are still subjected to mutilating medical procedures and are forced to conform to one of two sex categories (male or female) that are not biologically in concordance with the true diversity that exists in the world.

Patriarchy

Sexism is not an overly simplistic, unilateral form of oppression, where men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed, end of story. As Julie Serano puts it:

... there are numerous forms of sexism—that is, numerous double standards based on a person’s sex, gender, or sexuality. In addition to traditional sexism (where men are viewed as more legitimate than women), there is heterosexism (where heterosexuals are viewed as more legitimate than homosexuals), monosexism (where people who are exclusively attracted to members of a single sex are viewed as more legitimate than bisexuals/pansexuals), masculine-centrism (where masculine gender expression is viewed as more legitimate than feminine gender expression) and so on.

While sexism has been historically framed in terms of patriarchy, the existence of transgender persons and gender identities beyond the false gender dichotomy threaten this ideology. The very gender binary that Jensen is perpetuating — that those assigned male at birth grow up to be men and those who are assigned female at birth grow up to be women — results in marginalizing individuals who do not naturally conform to the binary, such as intersex persons, gender non-conforming / gender fluid / pangender individuals, transgender persons, etc.

Ecology

Jensen writes, “Many people... are critical of high-tech medicine’s manipulation of the body through the reckless use of hormones and chemicals ... or the destruction of healthy tissue to conform to arbitrary beauty standards” and, “People are not machines, and treating the human body like a machine is inconsistent with an ecological understanding of ourselves as living beings who are part of a larger living world.”

Here Jensen perpetuates the fallacy that being transgender is a cosmetic issue and motivated by a simple “want” to be female or male, by someone who was not assigned such at birth. However, extensive medical research into transsexuality dating as far back as the 1920s and into present day have demonstrated otherwise, and consequently, medical standards of care have included Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS) as a necessary procedure for decades. “Gender Dysphoria” is the present name for this condition in the American Psychiatric Association (APA), and treatment follows the standards of care established by the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH, formerly HBGDA), which includes GRS. The American Medical Association has also stepped forward advocating the necessity of surgery and its coverage. In fact, like the AMA, the American Psychiatric Association also support GRS as a medically necessary part of treatment.

Treatment of Gender Dysphoria incorporates surgical and endocrine intervention, because analytical and aversion therapies have historically proven damaging. The futility and harmfulness of electroshock therapy, anti-psychotic drugs or conversion (“ex-gay”) therapy is well-documented: modern medicine has realized that this approach

simply does not work, and usually results in suppression, suicide or extreme antisocial behavior. Aligning body to mind for this sub-population of the trans* spectrum, however, can work.

Gender Dysphoria is currently (and controversially) listed as a mental health issue, but as I mentioned earlier, ongoing study of both genetic "brain sex" and Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) show the possibility of some biological causal factors. For instance, a researcher famous for his groundbreaking work in phantom limb syndrome has provided a great deal of evidence that the brain has innate, hard-wired templates for human anatomy. He reasoned that this hard-wired template may also be responsible for a person's internal sense of gender and how this relates to one's sexual anatomy, "both of which develop through different biological mechanisms, probably in utero". Ultimately, he found support for this hypothesis that one's internal sense of gender and sexual anatomical attributes may also be hard-wired in the brain.

Studies of EDCs show another, possibly concurrent potential that exposure to chemicals that simulate hormone characteristics can affect the signals sent out to determine psychological gender and biological sex, which appear to develop at different times during gestation. In all fairness, nothing is conclusively proven at this point (for the etiology of transexuality OR cissexuality), but a growing body of empirical data from EDC and brain studies tends to support an innate origin or component of intersexuality, transexuality **and** cissexuality. I provide this information only to demonstrate the wide spectrum of diversity in nature — not to infer that an understanding of the etiology of homosexuality, heterosexuality, transexuality, cissexuality, or any other variation is a prerequisite to respecting our basic rights and freedoms.

There is more. Without GRS, many transsexuals experience severe logistic limitations — for example, with employment, where we can go (i.e. the gym, public restrooms, swimming pools), difficulties in establishing relationships, in hospitals, or in prisons that house by physical sex rather than gender identity creating potentially risky or extremely isolating situations. There is also an extremely high risk of violence faced upon the accidental discovery that one's anatomy does not "match" perceived gender. I could go on and on. But in sum, no other supposedly "cosmetic" issue so completely affects a person's rights and safety.

In response to an aversion toward "treating the human body like a machine", would the author similarly argue that we must abolish hormone therapy for women who are unable to conceive babies? Or deny young men with severe gynecomastia (a common condition characterized by the benign enlargement of breast tissue in males) surgical intervention? How is it that cissexual individuals have a right to medically necessary care, but for transsexual individuals it's "cosmetic"?

Public Policy

The author writes: "Forcing female-only spaces to accommodate people who identify as transgender reinforces patriarchy as a system and harms individual females."

This statement is entirely cissexist and based on the belief that women of transgender experience are not as legitimate as women of cisgender experience. They are.

Overall, I found Jensen's "public policy" section to be misguided and extremely concerning. The people harmed here are transwomen who are denied access to the space consistent with their gender identity. And regarding his "serious moral questions about our collective obligation for children's welfare," what about the extreme distress experienced by a child whose gender identity is not affirmed? His framing of GRS as a "freedom to choose" issue is simplistic and uninformed.

Conclusion

While I understand that Jensen may be experiencing some kind of cognitive dissonance between his belief in the gender binary and the existence of transgender persons, it's unethical to resolve the dissonance through scapegoating the transgender community — a community that face incredible health disparities.

According to a report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey titled 'Injustice at Every Turn', a series of bias-related events lead to "insurmountable challenges and devastating outcomes for study participants". This isn't an imaginary demographic. These are 6,450 transgender and gender non-conforming study participants who are very, *very* real. And the devastating health disparities impacting this demographic are not a product of a patriarchal gender ideology, but rather the very anti-transgender prejudice that individuals like Robert Jensen perpetuate.

I really hope that Jensen and others in the academic community who may share his perceptions will take a new approach, and instead actually try to make a genuine effort to understand the experience and perceptions of persons who are transgender.

As Dr. Eric Anthony Grollman so aptly put it: "The strict social norms regarding gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality also constrain the freedoms of cisgender people, as well. We all risk facing ridicule, being shunned, or even experiencing discrimination and violence, if we step outside of the narrow range of acceptable gender identities and expressions. As others have said, transphobia hurts us all."

Dexter M. Thomas is a social psychology researcher. Read other articles by Dexter, or visit Dexter's website.

Jensen's Writings

Rejected Chapter: *Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology*

Author: Robert Jensen

Source: Chapter-5-Note-to-Readers-v2.pdf

& Chapter-5-Defining-Sex-Gender-Beyond-Trans-Ideology-v2.pdf

Note: Originally written for the book *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2024). <https://robertjensen.org/books/its-debatable/> (v2, updated August 9, 2024)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, feminist analyses of how the law reflects and supports a patriarchal system emerged in the 1970s and '80s,¹ around the same time that critical race theory (CRT) scholars were developing analyses of the role of the law in supporting white supremacy.² Some of those feminist critics focused on pornography (defined as graphic sexually explicit material that eroticizes male dominance and other hierarchies) and its role in the subordination of women, a kind of sexist hate speech.³ At the same time, a number of prominent CRT scholars made a case for regulating racist hate speech,⁴ while cultural critics were documenting the negative racial stereotypes in mass media.⁵ These analyses of sex and race were, and remain, similar in moral and theoretical dimensions—so much so that a 1993 conference at the University of Chicago Law School on “Speech, Equality, and Harm: Feminist Legal Perspectives on Pornography and Hate Propaganda” included major figures in both movements.

¹ Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy, eds., *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

² Kimberlé Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1996).

³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: Dutton, 1988).

⁴ Mari J. Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

⁵ Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, eds., *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990); James A. Snead, *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, eds. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (New York: Routledge, 1994).

By the time I retired from teaching in 2018, a respectful internal debate continued within the left about how best to deal with racist hate speech, with disagreements about public policy but a consensus that racist hate speech was a bad thing. At the same time, a pro-pornography argument had prevailed in most academic and political circles that lean left. The most common left position today views pornography as just a form of sexual expression⁶ and women's participation in pornography as one of many forms of "sex work."⁷ Radical feminists who continue to critique the sexual-exploitation industries (pornography, prostitution, strip bars, massage parlors) have been marginalized in many academic and activist spaces. Many leftists and feminists who share concerns about men's buying and selling of objectified female bodies stay quiet because it has become a mark of left/feminist politics to ignore or denigrate the critique of pornography.

Why did the two debates go in such different directions? Both issues raise complex questions about the connection between various forms of expression (everyday speech and mass media) and potential negative effects (on individuals and societies). Reasonable people with shared values can disagree about public policy in both arenas. But why did liberal/progressive/left people continue to critique racist expression and media depictions but ignore or embrace sexist media that is sexually explicit? And why did this happen even as the evidence accumulated of pornography's negative effects, including the psychological and physical harms to women used in the production of pornography?⁸

This is what I have called the paradox of pornography.⁹ In my adult life, two trends are uncontroversial. First, pornography has become more widely available and accepted, for various social, economic, and technological reasons. Second, the pornography industry has produced images that are more overtly cruel and degrading to women, as well as more overtly racist, than ever before. As the amount of pornography produced has increased and become more normalized, the degradation it portrays has intensified. How can a media genre become more mainstream at the same time that it becomes more misogynist and racist? Why would liberals/progressives/leftists who routinely critique sexism and racism give pornography a pass? I'll return to this question later in the chapter but for now want to point out that a radical feminist critique of institutionalized male dominance, especially when it challenges the ways we have learned to be sexual beings, often faces deep resistance not only on the right but

⁶ Tristan Taormino et al., eds., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

⁷ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁸ Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, eds., *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Walter S. DeKeseredy, "Understanding the Harms of Pornography: The Contributions of Social Scientific Knowledge," *Culture Reframed*, 2020, culturereframed.org.

⁹ Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2007), 16–17. (Out of print, available at robertwjensen.org).

also on the left. When it comes to feminist challenges to one of patriarchy's central demands—that men have a right to sexual pleasure without concern for the well-being and social status of women—the left has proved it isn't a reliable ally.

I have found the same disjuncture between what I understand to be left principles about challenging oppressive power and the left's rejection of the radical feminist critique of transgender ideology. The left typically argues for a radical, structural, politicized response to oppression. But in this case, the left embraces the transgender movement's liberal, individualist, medicalized response to the problem of patriarchy's rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms.¹⁰

In this chapter I will argue that trans activists are pursuing a politics that is intellectually incoherent, anti-feminist, and at odds with an ecological worldview. A left critique of patriarchy should embrace the radical feminist critique.

SEX/GENDER DEFINITIONS: INTELLECTUAL COHERENCE

In my experience, one of the easiest ways for a political debate to get derailed is a lack of attention to definitions. The best example of this today is the debate about transgenderism, which requires clarity about two key terms, sex and gender. I have written about this online since 2014¹¹ and in a 2017 book,¹² but I will restate the key points, since definitions seem to get muddier as time goes by. Here is how I understand the words “sex” and “gender” in this context, following longstanding feminist analyses.

Sex differentiates between male and female based on the physiological characteristics associated with distinctive roles in reproduction. Sex does not change depending on social settings. Sex is binary and biological.

Gender differentiates between masculine and feminine based on a society's ideas about the meaning of male and female, and those claims are not uniform across or within societies and not static within any one society through time. Gender is a social construction, one that in contemporary societies reflects thousands of years of patriarchy, or institutionalized male dominance.

Sex is about male/female. Gender is about masculinity/femininity. What about man and boy, woman and girl? In this book and in everyday conversation, I use man/woman to mean adult males and females, and boy/girl to mean male and female children.

Starting in the 1960s, feminists distinguished biological sex from cultural constructions of gender and challenged the patriarchal claim that men's domination of women is natural and inevitable because of biology. Cultural ideas about gender emerge out of sex differences— obviously, if we were not a sexually dimorphic species it is hard

¹⁰ I made this argument in the first article I wrote on the subject, “Some Basic Propositions about Sex, Gender, and Patriarchy,” *Dissident Voice*, June 13, 2014, dissidentvoice.org.

¹¹ All these articles are archived at robertwjensen.org.

¹² Robert Jensen, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men* (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2017), 119–151.

to imagine the concepts of masculinity and femininity emerging. But today's gender norms reflect the unequal distribution of power between men and women since patriarchy emerged and developed over the past few thousand years.

That was once a nearly universal feminist position, but the increasing influence of the transgender movement means that shared definitions cannot be assumed. Today, what is sometimes called gender-identity theory has led to different uses of these terms. Here are definitions from the American Psychological Association:

Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics.¹³

The key difference is clear: For radical feminists, gender is external, in the sense of social norms to which people react. In other circles, gender may be understood as an internal sense, perhaps innate and immutable, perhaps generated independent of society.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health¹⁴ explains in its Standards of Care that “we use the phrase transgender and gender diverse (TGD) to be as broad and comprehensive as possible in describing members of the many varied communities globally of people with gender identities or expressions that differ from the gender socially attributed to the sex assigned to them at birth.”¹⁵

The deceptive phrase in both those passages is “sex assigned at birth.” Sex is in some sense assigned by someone, such as the woman giving birth, or a midwife assisting with a home birth, or a doctor in a hospital. But “assigned” implies an arbitrary decision. If I am assigned a seat at a dinner party, for example, it's understood to be the choice of the host. But sex is observed at birth, not assigned. The only potential uncertainty about the sex of newborns involves the small portion of the population born “intersex,”¹⁶

¹³ “Understanding Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression,” American Psychological Association, March 9, 2023, www.apa.org.

¹⁴ Although the name implies that the group is a purely professional medical or scientific organization, it also is an advocacy group and a significant percentage of its members are activists, as evidenced by leaked messages. See Mia Hughes, “The WPATH Files,” March 4, 2024, environmentalprogress.org; Hannah Barnes, “Disturbing Leaks from US Gender Group WPATH Ring Alarm Bells in the NHS,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2024, www.theguardian.com. For details about the group's mixing of advocacy and research, see Jesse Singal, “Research into Trans Medicine Has Been Manipulated,” *The Economist*, June 27, 2024, www.economist.com.

¹⁵ Eli Coleman et al., “Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, Version 8,” World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2022): 511, www.wpath.org. Also available at *International Journal of Transgender Health* 23, Suppl. 1 (2022): S1–S259, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

¹⁶ “What Is Intersex?” interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth, January 26, 2021, interactadvocates.org.

with what are called disorders of sexual development or differentiation.¹⁷ (Some prefer differences in sexual development.¹⁸) The term “sex assigned at birth” is inappropriate in light of the stability of the categories of male and female, evidenced by successful human reproduction over millennia.

It feels a bit odd to have to keep restating something so straightforward, but one more time: Sex is binary and biological.¹⁹ Male and female are marked by the kinds of gametes we produce, sperm or egg. Not every person born has the capacity to reproduce (there are anomalies) and not every person will reproduce (people make choices). But that does not change the fact that male humans can participate in reproduction only when their small gametes come together with a large gamete of a female human.

Some trans activists work hard to persuade people that holding onto these biological realities puts one out of step with contemporary scholarship. One prominent scholar is often cited as having demonstrated there really are five sexes,²⁰ but that 1993 article simply describes various intersex conditions and makes no substantive argument that changes our understanding of the reproductive roles that define male and female. That scholar has since said that she wrote that article with “tongue firmly in cheek,” intending to be provocative.²¹ More recent attempts to argue that sex is a spectrum also ignore the realities of reproduction, leading one biologist to describe such assertions as “sex-spectrum pseudoscience.”²² Arguments for “multimodal sex”²³ obfuscate but don’t change biological realities.²⁴ As a philosopher and sociologist put it, in understated fashion, “the denial that humans are sexually dimorphic mammals appears, at the very least, problematic for a range of scientific disciplines.”²⁵

I hedged in the previous paragraph by saying “some trans activists” because within the trans movement one can find a wide variety of definitions of terms used in the debate. Some intellectuals supportive of trans activism have argued that sex and gender

¹⁷ Khawar T. Mehmood and Rebecca M. Rentea, “Ambiguous Genitalia and Disorders of Sexual Differentiation,” StatPearls, March 20, 2023, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

¹⁸ “Differences in Sex Development,” UK National Health Service, August 15, 2019, www.nhs.uk.

¹⁹ M. A. Cretella, C. H. Rosik, and A. A. Howsepian, “Sex and Gender Are Distinct Variables Critical to Health,” *American Psychologist* 74, no. 7 (2019): 842–844, psycnet.apa.org.

²⁰ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes,” *The Sciences*, March/April 1993, 20–24, edisiplinas.usp.br.

²¹ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes, Revisited,” *The Sciences*, July/August 2000, 19, nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

²² Colin Wright, “Sex Is Not a Spectrum,” Reality’s Last Stand, February 1, 2021, www.realityslaststand.com.

²³ J. F. McLaughlin et al., “Multimodal Models of Animal Sex: Breaking Binaries Leads to a Better Understanding of Ecology and Evolution,” *Integrative and Comparative Biology* 63, no. 4 (2023): 891–906, academic.oup.com.

²⁴ Colin Wright, “Debunking Pseudoscience: ‘Multimodal Models of Animal Sex,’” Reality’s Last Stand, March 6, 2023, www.realityslaststand.com.

²⁵ Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan, “How Can Universities Promote Academic Freedom? Insights from the Front Line of the Gender Wars,” *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy*, Issue 27, September 18, 2022, doi.org.

both are socially constructed,²⁶ but trans activists increasingly argue that gender is an innate characteristic²⁷ and that biological sex is socially constructed.²⁸

The growing list of different trans identities, such as nonbinary and pangender, has not helped clarify matters.

“Nonbinary is used as an umbrella term referring to individuals who experience their gender as outside of the gender binary.”²⁹ But if gender is socially constructed, then in some sense everyone is nonbinary to some degree because no one (at least no one I’ve ever met) embraces and exhibits every trait associated with conventional masculinity or femininity. Pangender describes “a person whose gender identity is comprised of many genders or falls outside the traditional cultural parameters that define gender.”³⁰ That suggests gender is not confined to masculine and feminine or some combination, but other genders that can’t be named. How does asserting an identity based on what can’t be defined help us understand anything?

Stepping into the world of gender-identity theory and transgender ideology is like living in a mashup of *Alice in Wonderland* and *1984*. Words mean whatever one chooses them to mean, except when institutions such as schools dictate how they should be used, overriding any disagreement a person might have with the hard-to-follow dogma of transgenderism.³¹

There is greater specificity in use of another key term, “gender dysphoria,” which is a diagnosis made by psychiatrists and psychologists. I’ll quote at length from the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, updated in 2022, which sets the standards for mental health professionals:

Gender dysphoria as a general descriptive term refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender. However, it is more specifically defined when used as a diagnostic category. It does not refer to distress related to stigma, a distinct although possibly co-occurring source of distress. Transgender refers to the broad spectrum of individuals whose gender identity

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁷ “Coming Out: Living Authentically as Transgender or Non-Binary,” Human Rights Campaign, n.d., www.hrc.org.

²⁸ “Biological Sex Is a Social Construct,” Growing Up Transgender, November 1, 2018, growingup-transgender.com.

²⁹ Coleman, “Standards of Care,” 580.

³⁰ “LGBTQ+ Inclusion: Glossary,” UW Medicine, n.d., www.uwmedicine.org.

³¹ This imposed dogma has been the subject of legal challenges in the UK, where women have fought for the right to state what are often called “gender-critical” beliefs, such as asserting that biological sex is immutable. See Susanna Rustin, “The Law Is Now Clear: You Can’t Be Punished for Having Gender-Critical Views. So Why Does It Keep Happening?” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2024, www.theguardian.com. For an insightful analysis of the many UK women who have been targeted for challenging transgender ideology, see Jenny Lindsay, *Hounded: Women, Harms and the Gender Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024).

is different from their birth-assigned gender. Cisgender describes individuals whose gender expression is congruent with their birth-assigned gender (also nontransgender). Transsexual, a historic term, denotes an individual who seeks, is undergoing, or has undergone a social transition from male to female or female to male, which in many, but not all, cases also involves a somatic transition by gender-affirming hormone treatment and genital, breast, or other gender-affirming surgery (historically referred to as sex reassignment surgery).³²

There is no doubt that some people experience gender dysphoria, and anyone experiencing psychological distress should be able to access mental health treatment. But an appropriate treatment that will be most effective depends on a clear understanding of the source of the distress. As noted above, a previous version of the DSM had used the term “sex-reassignment surgery,” which had replaced the earlier term “sex-change surgery.” Neither term makes much sense, since such surgery cannot change a male human into a female human or vice versa. The newer terms “gender-affirming surgery” or “gender-confirmation surgery” make sense if gender is indeed an innate sense of being male or female, a claim that is not established medically or scientifically.

All this raises some obvious questions. Are males who identify as trans claiming to be female (and vice versa)? Or are they only claiming to experience themselves as female? If there is such a thing as an innate gender identity that should determine one’s sex category, is that gender identity primarily generated in the brain? If so, what does it mean to say “brain sex” is different from “body sex,” since we have no reason to think there are dramatic differences in male and female brains³³ that would make such a claim intelligible? As one research team put it, “Overall, male/female brain differences appear trivial and population-specific.”³⁴

Given the confusion around these questions, let’s one more time remember the basics of sex in humans:

an individual’s sex is based on the type of gamete (sperm or ova) his or her primary sex organs are organized around, through development, to produce. Males have primary sex organs organized around the production of sperm, and females, ova. Brains do not define an individual’s sex. Brains, like any other part of one’s body, exhibit average differences between males and females. A brain, like any other organ, does not have its own sex, separate

³² *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR), (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2022), doi.org.

³³ Gina Rippon, *Gender and Our Brains: How New Neuroscience Explodes the Myths of the Male and Female Minds* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019); Cordelia Fine, *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

³⁴ Lise Eliot et al., “Dump the ‘Dimorphism’: Comprehensive Synthesis of Human Brain Studies Reveals Few Male/Female Differences Beyond Size,” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 125 (June 2021): 667–697, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

from the body. The terms “male brain” and “female brain” simply refer to the brains residing in the bodies of males and females, respectively.³⁵

One more possibility: Some who endorse trans ideology may believe that gender identity resides in a nonmaterial soul. If so, that’s a type of theological claim about a supernatural realm of existence, which is not open to scientific study. One can claim to have the soul of a man or a woman, but that tells us nothing about the nature of a psychological condition or human physiology.

Another approach is to ask what is the etiology (the cause or set of causes of a disease or condition) of gender dysphoria or transgenderism? There is nothing resembling a coherent account of the cause or causes of gender dysphoria, let alone a consensus among researchers.³⁶ In other words, there is no known biological explanation for the condition of being transgender. I say that not with condescension but with genuine concern that protocols for “gender-affirming care”—puberty blockers for children, cross-sex hormones, and surgeries that destroy healthy tissue—have become routine even when there is so little known about the conditions they are supposed to treat. After a caseworker at the transgender center of a prestigious children’s hospital resigned rather than continue to participate in what she believed to be unethical treatment, she wrote:

Some critics describe the kind of treatment offered at places like the Transgender Center where I worked as a kind of national experiment. But that’s wrong. Experiments are supposed to be carefully designed. Hypotheses are supposed to be tested ethically. The doctors I worked alongside at the Transgender Center said frequently about the treatment of our patients: “We are building the plane while we are flying it.” No one should be a passenger on that kind of aircraft.³⁷

If your head is spinning after even this brief summary of terminology, I’m not surprised. I have talked to many ordinary people since I first started writing about this issue, and the most common reaction is confusion—in private, people routinely acknowledge that they don’t know how to make sense of the assertions of the transgender movement.

³⁵ Colin Wright and Samuel Stagg, “Gender Ideology’s Shaky Twin Pillars,” *City Journal*, May 22, 2023, www.city-journal.org.

³⁶ Randi Ettner and Antonio Guillaumon, “Theories of the Etiology of Transgender Identity,” in *Principles of Transgender Medicine and Surgery*, 2nd ed., eds. Randi Ettner, Stan Monstrey, and Eli Coleman (New York: Routledge: 2016), 3–15; Fatima Saleem and Syed W. Rizvi, “Transgender Associations and Possible Etiology: A Literature Review,” *Cureus* 9, no. 12 (2017), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; Sira Korpaisarn and Joshua D. Safer, “Etiology of Gender Identity,” *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America* 48, no. 2 (2019): 323–329, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

³⁷ Jamie Reed, “I Thought I Was Saving Trans Kids. Now I’m Blowing the Whistle,” *The Free Press*, February 9, 2023, www.thefp.com. See also, Jesse Singal, “Journalists Are Exhibiting Far Too Much Credulousness toward Jamie Reed’s Critics,” *Singal-Minded*, March 7, 2023, jessesingal.substack.com.

But rather than be defensive about the lack of clarity in terminology and the ambiguity of transgender arguments, many trans activists celebrate the lack of definition as a strength of the movement, an indication of open-mindedness. Jack Halberstam, a leading trans scholar, argues that the body is always under construction and that the binary of male-female may possibly have run its course. (I'm tempted to add, "whatever that means," since I'm not sure what it means and suspect I am not alone.) The very act of naming and categorizing imposes limits that constrain the imagination, according to Halberstam, hence the use of an asterisk, "trans*" rather than "transgender":

I have selected the term "trans*" for this book precisely to open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. As we will see, the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations. As this book will show, trans* can be a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic [relating to the sense of touch] relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix. This terminology, trans*, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions.³⁸

I don't quote this passage merely to poke fun at the abstruse phrases that are common in postmodern academic writing. My concern is not stylistic but about the arguments being presented. After reading that passage a couple of times, I think I can sort of figure out what Halberstam is trying to say, though I can't see how any of it helps anyone understand anything. Should we not be concerned about an approach that "holds off the certainty of diagnosis" while accepting treatment that permanently changes a human body?

Beyond academia, the idea that people who identify as transgender need not define terms is also prevalent. As a transwoman (a male who identifies as a woman) put it in a newspaper interview: "We are who we are, and you don't need to understand it. It's not meant for you to understand. What you need to do is learn and just be quiet and listen."³⁹ But how are we to learn about something we aren't meant to understand?

³⁸ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 4–5.

³⁹ Patrick Healy and Adrian J. Rivera, "These 12 Transgender Americans Would Love You to Mind Your Own Business," *New York Times*, February 9, 2023, www.nytimes.com.

Listening is a good thing all around, but if people are confused and have questions, why is it disrespectful to ask questions?

That comment echoes what I've been told in person by trans advocates—it doesn't matter whether I can make sense of their claims.⁴⁰ That's apparently my problem, and my job is to accept the demands made by the movement, which has “the right to not be interrogated by the dominant structures of oppression,” as one critic explained to me.⁴¹ Is it acceptable for a political movement to make policy demands based on claims that they acknowledge many people will not be able to understand? I know of no other movement that would celebrate the fact that its argument is unintelligible to many ordinary people.

Nothing I have ever read or heard from those advocates has led me to abandon the longstanding feminist distinction between sex and gender.⁴² Gender is best understood as the social meaning (captured in the terms “masculinity” and “femininity”) ascribed to the biological sex differences rooted in reproduction (male and female). Sex is a function of the kind of animals that we humans are, and gender is how we human animals make sense of sex differences. Sex is biological, and gender is cultural. In patriarchal societies—which is to say, virtually all the contemporary world—gender is a weapon to control girls and women in the service of institutionalized male dominance. We can recognize the material realities of human biology and at the same time reject patriarchal gender norms.

TRANSGENDER PUBLIC POLICY: ANTI-FEMINIST

After years of good-faith efforts to read widely and engage the transgender movement's arguments, I have concluded that the ideology of the movement is incoherent. I don't mean simply that I disagree with the movement's policy proposals, but that I often do not understand the underlying claims being made, and that my inability to understand is not primarily because of any limitations of mine. I am not alone in this. A wide range of scholars and researchers—not only radical feminists⁴³ but also

⁴⁰ For a sensible and fair attempt to organize trans arguments and definitions, see William Vex, “Sexual and Gender Identity: Four Competing Paradigms,” Quillette, April 11, 2023, quillette.com. For a cogent critique, see Kajsa Ekis Ekman, *On the Meaning of Sex: Thoughts about the New Definition of Woman* (North Geelong, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2023).

⁴¹ Tane Ward, “Interrogation Techniques: An Open Letter to Robert Jensen,” n.d. (on file with author).

⁴² For an excellent review, see Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, “Sex and Gender: A Beginner's Guide,” 2015, sexandgenderintro.com.

⁴³ Janice G. Raymond, *Doublethink: A Feminist Challenge to Transgenderism* (North Geelong, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2021); Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014).

philosophers,⁴⁴ biologists,⁴⁵ and doctors and psychologists,⁴⁶ including some people who identify as transgender⁴⁷—question or reject those claims of the trans movement that are at odds with material realities.⁴⁸

Contrary to what trans activists assert, there is no consensus among people of good-will about defining and explaining transgenderism. Even many people who accept the policy demands of the transgender movement will, in private, acknowledge that they don't really understand what they are supporting. At times, this incoherence borders on self-parody, such as when a major university's Office of Diversity and Inclusion posted an "LGBTQ Glossary" that defined lesbian as:

A non-man attracted to non-men. While past definitions refer to "lesbian" as a woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to other women, this updated definition includes non-binary people who may also identify with the label.⁴⁹

Critics mocked the absurdity of scrubbing the word "woman" from a definition of lesbian and pointed out that the glossary defined a gay man as "A man who is emotionally, romantically, sexually, affectionately, or relationally attracted to other men," making the glossary not only silly but sexist.⁵⁰

I stress this incoherence because at least some of the objections to trans policy demands are inevitable given the lack of clarity in the transgender movement's underlying claims about the nature of human biology. It is disingenuous for a movement to offer an incomplete and/or incoherent account of the world and then make political demands as if these policies were selfevidently appropriate remedies, while labeling anyone who challenges the demands a bigot. When those policy demands so often are counter to the interests of women and girls, this incoherence is also anti-feminist.

⁴⁴ Alex Byrne, *Trouble with Gender: Sex Facts, Gender Fictions* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024); Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021).

⁴⁵ Carole K. Hooven, "Academic Freedom Is Social Justice: Sex, Gender, and Cancel Culture on Campus," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 52, no. 1 (2023): 35–41, link.springer.com.

⁴⁶ Azeen Ghorayshi, "Doctors Debate whether Trans Teens Need Therapy before Hormones," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022, www.nytimes.com; Frieda Klotz, "Pediatric Transgender Care and the Contentious Rise of SEGM," *Undark*, May 20, 2024, undark.org; Jennifer Block, "Gender Medicine in the US: How the Cass Review Failed to Land," *British Medical Journal*, May 23, 2024, www.bmj.com. See also, Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine, segm.org.

⁴⁷ For example, psychologist Erica Anderson, who identifies as a transwoman, is the former head of USPATH, the US branch of WPATH. Anderson resigned from the board over disagreements about care standards. Emily Bazelon, "The Battle over Gender Therapy," *New York Times Magazine*, June 15, 2022, www.nytimes.com.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive collection of these critiques, see Alice Sullivan and Selina Todd, eds., *Sex and Gender: A Contemporary Reader* (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁴⁹ Matt Laviertes, "Johns Hopkins Pulls 'Lesbian' Definition after Uproar over Use of 'Non-Men' Instead of 'Women,'" *NBC News*, June 14, 2023, www.nbcnews.com.

⁵⁰ Nick Logan, "How Do You Define Lesbian? Johns Hopkins University Criticized over 'Non-Man' Glossary Entry," *CBC*, June 15, 2023, www.cbc.ca.

This confused and confusing politics is captured best in the common phrase “transwomen are women,” which has become a mantra of the movement, often used as if it magically refutes any critique instead of merely begging the question. This assertion reduces complex questions about the etiology of the psychological condition of gender dysphoria to a simple truism offered without argument. A better rendering would be “transwomen are transwomen,” which is a way of saying “males who identify as women are males who identify as women.” But such slogans would not be of much use to trans activists, if their goal is to shut down legitimate questions about, for example, whether males who identify as women should be allowed to participate in women’s sports.

I’ll start with an examination of that public-policy debate, but first an explanation of why in this section I’m focusing on males who identify as women. Obviously, the transgender movement also includes females who identify as men. The experience of females in patriarchal societies who identify as men is no doubt different from that of males who identify as women, as are the public-policy implications. Here we should pay close attention to detransitioners— primarily females who once transitioned but later reasserted their identity as women. Feminist scholar Janice Raymond suggests we understand them as survivors of transgenderism who later “come to grips with the way they internalized misogyny, a consequence of the social pressure to transition in a society where becoming a self-declared man is often more accepted than being a natal woman, especially a lesbian.”⁵¹ As detransitioner Keira Bell put it, “As I matured, I recognized that gender dysphoria was a symptom of my overall misery, not its cause.”⁵²

A researcher who focuses on online trans communities reported that many adolescent and young adult females in trans forums are “seeking an explanation for the distress they feel over their changing bodies” and seem to be “responding to common developmental pressures and seeking to fulfill basic developmental tasks through trans identification.” She writes:

Simply put, it is hard to grow up female. It can be hard to accept the changes to one’s body—like menstruation and breast development—and the way society responds to those changes. There have always been girls and young women who sought a way out of the developmental challenges puberty posed. They took off-ramps like anorexia or cutting. Today, trans identity is a super highway promising an escape from the discomfort of female adolescence.⁵³

Whatever we eventually come to understand about the differences between men and women in the transgender movement, the presence of females who identify as men in

⁵¹ Raymond, *Doublethink*, 97. See also, Max Robinson, *Detransition: Beyond Before and After* ((North Geelong, Australia: Spinifex, 2021).

⁵² Keira Bell, “My Story,” Persuasion, April 7, 2021, www.persuasion.community.

⁵³ Eliza Mondegreen, “My Testimony for Quebec’s comité de sages sur l’identité de genre,” *gender:hacked*, June 5, 2024, elizamondegreen.substack.com.

all-male spaces does not create the threats that come with the presence of males who identify as women in all-female spaces. I'll focus on the latter.

Let's start with sports. If you ask people, "Should males be allowed to compete in athletic events for females," the answer would almost always be no. Women's sports are reserved for women because men on average have physiological advantages over women in strength, acceleration, and speed. On average, men can run faster, lift more weight, and throw harder and farther than women.⁵⁴ Serena Williams, perhaps the greatest female tennis player of all time, made this clear when asked about whether she would play a match against a leading male player:

Andy Murray, he's been joking about myself and him playing a match. I'm like, "Andy, seriously, are you kidding me?" For me, men's tennis and women's tennis are completely, almost, two separate sports. If I were to play Andy Murray, I would lose 6–0, 6–0 in five to six minutes, maybe ten minutes. No, it's true. It's a completely different sport. The men are a lot faster and they serve harder, they hit harder, it's just a different game.⁵⁵

Even after males who identify as women (that is, transwomen) have gone through hormone therapy, they still retain physiological advantages.⁵⁶ But if "transwomen are women" and no one is allowed to question that assertion—or even ask what it means—important challenges to transgender demands seem to be irrational. As a result, males who identify as women are being allowed to participate in some women's sports.

One of the most well-known cases in the United States involves Lia Thomas, a male swimmer who now identifies as a woman. After testosterone suppression and hormone replacement therapy, Thomas's times were slightly slower than when competing as a man, but those slower times were good enough to win a National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division 1 women's national championship.⁵⁷ The data makes

⁵⁴ Doriane Lambelet Coleman and Wickliffe Shreve, "Comparing Athletic Performances: The Best Elite Women to Boys and Men," Center for Sports Law and Policy, Duke Law School, n.d., law.duke.edu; Doriane Lambelet Coleman, *On Sex and Gender: A Commonsense Approach* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024).

⁵⁵ Chris Chase, "Serena Tells Letterman She'd Lose to Andy Murray in 'Five or Six' Minutes," *USA Today*, August 23, 2013, ftw.usatoday.com.

⁵⁶ Alison K. Heather, "Transwoman Elite Athletes: Their Extra Percentage Relative to Female Physiology," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 15 (2022): 9103, www.mdpi.com; Emma N. Hilton and Tommy R. Lundberg, "Transgender Women in the Female Category of Sport: Perspectives on Testosterone Suppression and Performance Advantage," *Sports Medicine* 51, no. 2 (2021): 199–214, link.springer.com; Joanna Harper et al., "How Does Hormone Transition in Transgender Women Change Body Composition, Muscle Strength and Haemoglobin? Systematic Review with a Focus on the Implications for Sport Participation," *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 55, no. 15 (2021), bjsm.bmj.com; Sports Councils' Equality Group, "International Research Literature Review: SCEG Project for Review and Redraft of Guidance for Transgender Inclusion in Domestic Sport 2020," equalityinsport.org.

⁵⁷ Alan Blinder, "Lia Thomas Wins an N.C.A.A. Swimming Title," *New York Times*, March 17, 2022, www.nytimes.com.

it clear that “minimal mitigation of her male-puberty advantage” gave Thomas an advantage when competing with women:

During the last season Thomas competed as a member of the Penn men’s team, which was 2018–19, she ranked[] 554th in the 200 freestyle, 65th in the 500 freestyle and[] 32nd in the 1650 freestyle. As her career at Penn wrapped, she moved to fifth, first and eighth in those respective events on the women’s deck.⁵⁸

In March 2024, a number of current and former female athletes sued the NCAA in federal district court, asserting that the association violated their Title IX rights by allowing Thomas to compete.⁵⁹

Another example is Laurel Hubbard, a male who identifies as a woman and was the first openly transwoman to compete in the Olympic Games, as a weightlifter on the New Zealand team in 2020. By being allowed to compete for a spot on the national team Hubbard displaced the next ranking female competitor who, if not for this policy, would have gone to the Summer Olympics.⁶⁰ As more female athletes resist these policies, some athletic associations are reconsidering the practice.⁶¹ For example, after Austin Killips, a male who identifies as a woman, won a women’s cycling race, the sport’s governing body announced a change in its rules.⁶² Lia Thomas was allowed in NCAA women’s meets but not in Olympic trials; World Aquatics, which sets rules for the Olympics and other elite swimming competitions, bars males who identify as women from competing in women’s divisions.⁶³

If more males who identify as women are allowed to compete against women, opportunities for female athletes to develop skills, enhance physical fitness, and build confidence through sports will be reduced. Girls and women competing against males

⁵⁸ John Lohn, “A Look at the Numbers and Times: No Denying the Advantages of Lia Thomas,” *Swimming World*, April 5, 2022, www.swimmingworldmagazine.com.

⁵⁹ “College Swimmers, Volleyball Players Sue NCAA over Transgender Policies,” Associated Press, March 15, 2024, apnews.com; “Female Athletes Sue the NCAA,” Independent Council on Women’s Sports, n.d., www.iconswomen.com. The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, in which mostly smaller colleges participate, effectively bans transgender athletes from competing in women’s sports. NAIA, “Transgender Participation Policy,” April 8, 2024, www.naia.org.

⁶⁰ Tariq Panja and Ken Belson, “Olympics’ First Openly Transgender Woman Stokes Debate on Fairness,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2021, www.nytimes.com. There is no single standard for the Olympics: “The International Olympic Committee has left eligibility rules for transgender female athletes up to the global federations that govern individual sports.” Jeré Longman, “New Study Bolsters Idea of Athletic Differences between Men and Trans Women,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2024, www.nytimes.com.

⁶¹ Sean Ingle, “World Athletics Council Excludes Transgender Women from Female Events,” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2023, www.theguardian.com.

⁶² Taneika Duhaney, “UCI Reverses Course, Bans Transgender Women from Racing in Women’s Category,” *Bicycling*, July 14, 2023, www.bicycling.com.

⁶³ Steve Almasy and Wayne Sterling, “Transgender Swimmer Lia Thomas Loses Challenge of Rules Barring Her from Elite Women’s Races,” CNN.com, June 12, 2024, www.cnn.com.

who identify as women will face greater risk of intimidation and injury during events.⁶⁴ As I understand feminism, these are anti-feminist results of trans activism. Such policies treat women's attempts to create space for themselves in a patriarchal culture as less important than the assertion by males who identify as women that they have a right to be treated as women. Yet those who advocate for a trans-compliant policy routinely wave away these concerns as being based on nothing more than "fears and prejudices."⁶⁵

Another contentious debate arises when a male who identifies as a woman asserts a claim to be allowed in a single-sex locker room for women. In testimony about a Scottish proposal to make it easier for anyone over the age of sixteen to get a "gender recognition certificate" for the opposite sex, Reem Alsalem, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, warned the law could endanger women because it "would potentially open the door for violent males who identify as men to abuse the process of acquiring a gender certificate and the rights that are associated with it."⁶⁶ Trans activists wave away this concern, despite the long history of violent men using whatever tactics are available to get access to girls and women, such as men who game the system to seek entry into female single-sex toilets.⁶⁷

But the issue of violence is only part of the problem. Consider this situation, which will become more common as transgender demands become public policy.

A high school boy who identifies as a girl asserts the right to shower and change in the girls' locker room after a physical education class. The request is based on that boy's internal subjective experience, his belief that he either is a girl or should be treated as a girl. In the name of inclusion and tolerance, many liberals/progressives/leftists support this policy, even if the presence of that boy who identifies as a girl causes anxiety and fear in one or more of the girls in the class. The girls' internal subjective experience is trivialized and discounted, in the name of inclusion and tolerance. But it's even more disturbing because many girls have experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Such trauma comes not from a purely internal and subjective experience but from experiences they have lived through, experiences that are so common that in any high school class we should assume there are a number of such girls present.

Whom do we care about if we treat the internal subjective experience of one boy who identifies as a girl as more important than the emotional consequences of the routine

⁶⁴ Jonathan Kay, "The Damage Caused by Trans 'Inclusion' in Female Athletics: A Massachusetts Case Study," Quillette, April 2, 2024, quillette.com.

⁶⁵ Jerry Brewer, "The Fiercest Political Clash in Sports," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2024, www.washingtonpost.com.

⁶⁶ "Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Its Causes and Consequences," United Nations, November 29, 2022, spcommreports.ohchr.org. Alsalem insists on maintaining the longstanding feminist distinction between sex and gender, but rejects the accusation that she is anti-trans. Hannah Barnes, "Reem Alsalem on the Biggest Obstacles to Ending Violence against Women," *New Statesman*, February 24, 2024, www.newstatesman.com

⁶⁷ "Man Who Said He Identified as Female Sexually Assaulted Woman in Birmingham New Street Toilet," ITV News, February 21, 2023, www.itv.com.

abuse experienced by girls?⁶⁸ The boy who identifies as a girl could be accommodated in a separate facility (such as a teacher's shower, temporarily made available to a student) without imposing costs on the girls, if we care enough about the girls. To prioritize the interests of the boy is antifeminist, as I understand feminism.

Should males who identify as women be housed in women's prisons,⁶⁹ even if they have histories of sexual offenses and violence?⁷⁰ When feminists first raised the possibility of this more than a decade ago, it also was dismissed by the trans movement as a scare tactic. One trans activist told me, "That will never happen." But it has happened,⁷¹ and continues to happen,⁷² and the problems such a policy creates are predictable.

No doubt there are inmates who are honest in their declaration of gender dysphoria, but two objections are obvious. First, women should not have to accept heightened risk. If prison officials decide to accommodate a male who identifies as a woman, separate housing arrangements could be made that don't impose on female prisoners. Second, because people take advantage of opportunities to improve their situations, inevitably there will be men who opportunistically assert a trans identity, either to give them access to women or simply to avoid serving time in a men's prison that likely is more dangerous. Prison conditions everywhere should be raised to humane levels that currently are not the norm in the United States. But prioritizing men's demands over women's interests is anti-feminist.

One last exploration of the implications of transgender ideology, concerning pronoun protocols. Should we compel people, either through institutional rules (such as a school policy) or informal coercion (peer pressure and the threat of shunning), to refer to a male who identifies as a woman as "she" (and vice versa, to a female who identifies as a man as "he")?

We generally accept that people should be able to choose their own names, unless using an alias is part of deception or fraud. Pronouns, however, are not a name but a marker of sex, and one's sex is not something that one chooses. Again, there are a very small number of intersex people for whom there is ambiguity about sex category, but in the vast majority of cases, male and female are clear. Even if a male identifies

⁶⁸ For a real-world accounts, see Elizabeth Troutman, "'Really Uncomfortable': 16-Year-Old Girl Speaks Out about Having to Share School Restrooms, Locker Rooms with Males," *Daily Signal*, June 13, 2024, www.dailysignal.com; Anonymous, "What It's Really Like to Be a Pupil Today as Trans Hysteria Grips Our Schools," *Daily Mail*, February 8, 2023, www.dailymail.co.uk; Kelsey Bolar, "Why These High School Girls Don't Want a Transgender Student in Their Locker Room," *Daily Signal*, December 21, 2015, www.dailysignal.com.

⁶⁹ "Transgender Women Exhibit a Male-Type Pattern of Criminality: Implications for Legislators and Policy Makers," *Fair Play for Women*, December 12, 2020, fairplayforwomen.com.

⁷⁰ "Women in Prison," *Fair Play for Women*, n.d., fairplayforwomen.com.

⁷¹ Genevieve Gluck, "No Men in Women's Prisons, Regardless of Surgeries or Hormones," *Women's Voices*, February 27, 2023, genevievegluck.substack.com.

⁷² "Transgender Rapist Isla Bryson Moved to Men's Prison," *BBC*, January 26, 2023, www.bbc.com; "Trans Inmate Jailed for Wakefield Prison Sex Offences," *BBC*, October 11, 2018, www.bbc.com.

as a woman, it is accurate to refer to the person as “he” because the person is still male. But many males who identify as women would prefer to be “she.” Transgender advocates endorse—and sometimes demand—that everyone use a person’s “preferred pronouns.”

Feminist critics are not of one mind on the question, and reasonable people can disagree. It’s not hard to understand why some people, out of respect for the generally accepted right of people to name themselves, will use preferred pronouns even though they reject the ideology of the transgender movement. It’s also not hard to understand why some won’t, based on the concern that this pronoun protocol confuses sex and gender, and is an implicit endorsement of transgender ideology.

What do I do? My first position was to accept preferred pronouns. But the more the transgender movement has demanded everyone use them, the greater my concern about the implicit endorsement of an ideology that I reject. I retired from my teaching position in 2018, just about the time pronoun protocols were becoming entrenched in institutions such as universities, and so I haven’t had to confront the question very often. I now live in a rural area where the question has never come up in interactions with my neighbors. I continue to ponder what I should do, aware that in different situations I might make different choices.

When it comes to announcing one’s own pronouns, I don’t. My Zoom name and email signature do not include pronouns. If anyone were to ask me, I would simply say that I don’t participate in the pronoun protocol of liberal/progressive/left institutions. If someone were to press me, I would say that I do not endorse the ideology of the transgender movement and that pronoun-announcement demands are a form of compelled speech. The US Supreme Court has ruled that the First Amendment generally bars the government from compelling people to express things they do not want to say.⁷³ In this case, a principle constraining government is also appropriate in private settings. There is no reason to compel people to accept the practice.

But let’s explore another scenario that, again, illustrates the incoherence of transgender ideology. If a man rapes a woman and the rapist later identifies as a woman, should the rape victim be expected to refer to the rapist as “she”? While testifying in court, should the victim be expected to utter the sentence, “She forced her penis into me”? If a male identifies as a woman but has not chosen surgical intervention, do we want to pretend that “her penis” makes sense? Such a conundrum doesn’t happen every day, of course, but it does happen,⁷⁴ and it will happen more often if trans ideology becomes normalized. To many, such an outcome seems absurd, but as one trans blogger and podcaster puts it, “Some women have penises, and frankly, it’s time that

⁷³ *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Wooley v. Maynard*, 430 U.S. 705 (1977).

⁷⁴ Julie Bindel, “How Dare He?” *The Sun*, May 8, 2024, www.thesun.co.uk.

people get over it.”⁷⁵ Again, people who can’t “get over it” can expect to be accused of being insensitive, even bigoted.

This example reveals that at the heart of transgender ideology is a problem that can’t be wished away: A male human cannot become a female human (and vice versa), and to label a male as female distorts reality. This isn’t an unpredictable problem but is instead created by the incoherence of transgender assertions. Something as allegedly simple as pronoun choices cannot be resolved simply by being polite to people who identify as transgender. That’s not because feminist critics are mean-spirited but because transgender ideology demands that people deny material reality. In computing terms, it’s a feature not a bug of the system.

No matter how often trans activists assert their claim that allowing males who identify as women into all-female spaces has no downside, women’s concerns about fairness, privacy, and safety are justified and sensible. In patriarchy, women and girls face threats from men and boys, including sexual assault and harassment that are so common as to be, sadly, a routine part of life. Females face threats from males on a regular basis. Females have a right to protect themselves and to demand that social institutions offer protection.

A final comment on policy: While my focus has been on a feminist analysis, conservatives also have a critique of transgenderism. But even when feminists and conservatives support the same policy—for example, not allowing males who identify as women to compete in women’s athletics—the underlying philosophy and motivation typically are quite different. Many conservatives endorse a patriarchal worldview that supports male dominance, while some have less regressive ideas about sex/gender. But it can be difficult to engage these differences when right-wing politicians and pundits routinely choose inflammatory language to express their disagreements with the trans movement,⁷⁶ leading many people to assume they must choose between accepting trans ideology or being lumped in with reactionaries. Such conservative political grandstanding is not helpful, but feminists aren’t responsible for right-wing provocations.

Feminists don’t support every legislative proposal generated by conservatives.⁷⁷ For example, I do not endorse charging parents with child abuse if they allow their children to take puberty blockers.⁷⁸ But in news media coverage, the distinction between

⁷⁵ Arielle Rebekah, “Some Women Have Penises. Get Over It,” *Trans and Caffeinated*, n.d., transandcaffeinated.com.

⁷⁶ For example, conservative commentator Matt Walsh called the gender-ideology movement the “most hateful and violent movement in America,” an absurd claim, especially in a country with a rising neo-Nazi/white supremacist movement. Fenit Nirappil, “Nashville Shooting Exploited by Right to Escalate Anti-Trans Rhetoric,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com.

⁷⁷ Maggie Astor, “G.O.P. State Lawmakers Push a Growing Wave of Anti-Transgender Bills,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2023, www.nytimes.com.

⁷⁸ Annette Choi and Will Mullery, “19 States Have Laws Restricting Gender-Affirming Care, Some with the Possibility of a Felony Charge,” *CNN.com*, June 6, 2023, www.cnn.com.

feminist and right-wing analysis is rarely made, and too often the feminist critique drops out altogether.⁷⁹

AN ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW: UNDERSTANDING LIMITS

In addition to the intellectual incoherence and anti-feminist consequences of transgender ideology, we should consider the conflict between the transgender conception of the body and an ecological worldview. My concern is not just whether a medicalized approach to transgenerism is safe, but that is a crucial issue and an appropriate place to start this discussion.

Trans activists assert that treatments such as puberty blockers for children do not raise medical and ethical issues. Some medical groups endorse such treatments, including the American Academy of Pediatrics,⁸⁰ although that organization has acknowledged that a systematic review of the evidence is necessary.⁸¹ Around the world, medical professionals are stepping back from these risky treatments to review the evidence on “gender-affirming care.”⁸² In recent years that has included major clinics and programs in England,⁸³ Scotland,⁸⁴ Sweden,⁸⁵ Norway,⁸⁶ Denmark,⁸⁷ and Finland.⁸⁸

The most extensive evaluations of trans medicine have been in the UK. A BBC journalist documented that the Tavistock Clinic—which had once pursued a careful ap-

⁷⁹ For an example see David Weigel, “‘At Any Age’: Donald Trump Pushes the GOP towards Targeting Transgender Adults,” *Semafor*, February 3, 2023, www.semafor.com.

⁸⁰ Jason Rafferty, “Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 142, no. 4 (2018), publications.aap.org.

⁸¹ Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff, “AAP Reaffirms Gender-Affirming Care Policy, Authorizes Systematic Review of Evidence to Guide Update,” *AAP News*, August 4, 2023, publications.aap.org; Azeen Ghorayshi, “Medical Group Backs Youth Gender Treatments, but Calls for Research Review,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2023, www.nytimes.com.

⁸² Stephen B. Levine and E. Abbruzzese, “Current Concerns About Gender-Affirming Therapy in Adolescents,” *Current Sexual Health Reports* 15, no. 2 (2023): 113–123, link.springer.com; Moti Gorin, “The Cure for Politicized Pediatric Gender Care,” *The Hastings Center*, November 17, 2022, www.thehastingscenter.org.

⁸³ Azeen Ghorayshi, “England Limits Youth Gender Medications, Part of Big Shift in Europe,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2024, www.nytimes.com; “NHS Services in England Are Told to Stop Routine Prescribing of Puberty Blockers,” *British Medical Journal*, March 14, 2024, www.bmj.com.

⁸⁴ Azeen Ghorayshi, “Scotland Pauses Gender Medications for Minors,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2024, www.nytimes.com.

⁸⁵ “Updated Recommendations for Hormone Therapy for Gender Dysphoria in Young People,” Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, February 2, 2022, www.socialstyrelsen.se.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Block, “Norway’s Guidance on Paediatric Gender Treatment Is Unsafe, Says Review,” *British Medical Journal*, March 23, 2023, www.bmj.com.

⁸⁷ “Denmark Joins the List of Countries that Have Sharply Restricted Youth Gender Transitions,” Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine, August 17, 2023, segm.org.

⁸⁸ Michael Cook, “Policy Shift in Finland for Gender Dysphoria Treatment,” *BioEdge*, July 25, 2021, bioedge.org.

proach to teenagers suffering from gender dysphoria, relying heavily on talk therapy—had moved to irresponsibly prescribing puberty blockers. Those drugs routinely led to cross-sex hormones and surgery, which failed many patients who consequently suffered from depression, sexual dysfunction, osteoporosis, and stunted growth.⁸⁹

The most thorough recent review of the evidence, headed by a leading UK pediatrician, described trans medicine as being based on “remarkably weak evidence,” concluding “we have no good evidence on the long-term outcomes of interventions to manage gender-related distress.”⁹⁰ That doctor, Hilary Cass, described gender medicine as being built on “shaky foundations.”⁹¹

Researchers reviewing Dutch studies that claim to support such protocols for children point to methodological biases that lead to “the tendency to present weak or negative results as certain and positive,” problems that “continue to plague reports that originate from clinics that are actively administering hormonal and surgical interventions to youth.” Those researchers remind the medical community that:

The burden of proof—demonstrating that a treatment does more good than harm—is on those promoting the intervention, not on those concerned about the harms. Until gender medicine commits to conducting high-quality research capable of reliably demonstrating the preponderance of benefits over harms of these invasive interventions, we must be skeptical of the enthusiasm generated by headlines claiming that yet another “gender study” proved benefits of transitioning youth.⁹²

Concerns continue to mount. For example, a professor of clinical neuropsychology who reviewed the research literature concluded, “Critical questions remain unanswered regarding the nature, extent and permanence of any arrested development of cognitive function associated with puberty blockers.”⁹³ A statement from the French National Academy of Medicine summed up a growing sentiment: “[G]reat medical caution must be taken in children and adolescents, given the vulnerability, particularly psychological,

⁸⁹ Hannah Barnes, *Time to Think: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Tavistock’s Gender Service for Children* (London: Swift Press, 2023); “The Medical Scandal at Tavistock GIDS: Evidence from Parents,” *Transgender Trend*, 2023, www.transgendertrend.com.

⁹⁰ Cass Review, “Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People,” April 2024, 13, cass.independent-review.uk.

⁹¹ Hilary Cass, “Gender Medicine for Children and Young People Is Built on Shaky Foundations,” *British Medical Journal*, April 9, 2024, www.bmj.com. After the final report was published, Cass was the target of online abuse and the report’s finding were distorted. Sammy Gecsoyler, “Hilary Cass Warned of Threats to Safety after ‘Vile’ Abuse over NHS Gender Services Review,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2024, www.theguardian.com.

⁹² E. Abbruzzesea, Stephen B. Levine, and Julia W. Mason, “The Myth of ‘Reliable Research’ in Pediatric Gender Medicine: A Critical Evaluation of the Dutch Studies—and Research That Has Followed,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 49, no. 6 (2023): 673–699, www.tandfonline.com.

⁹³ Sallie Baxendale, “The Impact of Suppressing Puberty on Neuropsychological Function: A Review,” *Acta Paediatrica* 113, no. 6 (2024): 1164, onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

of this population and the many undesirable effects, and even serious complications, that some of the available therapies can cause.”⁹⁴ This call for caution was echoed by the European Academy of Pediatrics: “The fundamental question of whether biomedical treatments (including hormone therapy) for gender dysphoria are effective remains contested,” with no robust empirical evidence that puberty blockers reduce suicidality or suicide rates.⁹⁵

The editor of the *British Medical Journal*, evaluating the Cass Review, put it bluntly:

[S]tudies in gender medicine fall woefully short in terms of methodological rigour; the methodological bar for gender medicine studies was set too low, generating research findings that are therefore hard to interpret. The methodological quality of research matters because a drug efficacy study in humans with an inappropriate or no control group is a potential breach of research ethics. Offering treatments without an adequate understanding of benefits and harms is unethical. All of this matters even more when the treatments are not trivial; puberty blockers and hormone therapies are major, life altering interventions. Yet this inconclusive and unacceptable evidence base was used to inform influential clinical guidelines, such as those of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), which themselves were cascaded into the development of subsequent guidelines internationally.⁹⁶

Increasingly, medical experts acknowledge that gender-affirming care is not “evidence-based” in any meaningful way: “Large-scale, long-term research is lacking, and researchers disagree about how to measure the phenomenon.”⁹⁷ Despite these warnings from medical professionals, trans activists demand that critics “stop ques-

⁹⁴ “Medicine and Gender Transidentity in Children and Adolescents,” Académie nationale de médecine (National Academy of Medicine), February 25, 2022, www.academie-medecine.fr.

⁹⁵ Joe Brierley et al., “European Academy of Paediatrics Statement on the Clinical Management of Children and Adolescents with Gender Dysphoria,” *Frontiers in Pediatrics*, February 5, 2024, www.frontiersin.org. Similarly, a recent US review of existing research “showed inconsistent demonstration of benefit with respect to depression and suicidality” and concluded that “contrary to assertions of some experts and North American professional medical organisations, the impact of hormonal interventions on depression and suicidality in this population is unknown.” Kathleen McDeavitt, “Paediatric Gender Medicine: Longitudinal Studies Have Not Consistently Shown Improvement in Depression or Suicidality,” *Acta Paediatrica* 113, no. 8 (2024): 1757–1771, onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

⁹⁶ Kamran Abbasi, “The Cass Review: An Opportunity to Unite behind Evidence-Informed Care in Gender Medicine,” *British Medical Journal*, April 11, 2024, www.bmj.com.

⁹⁷ Jennifer Block, “Gender Dysphoria in Young People Is Rising—and So Is Professional Disagreement,” *British Medical Journal*, February 23, 2023, www.bmj.com.

tioning science that is SETTLED,”⁹⁸ even though it’s clear that the science is anything but settled.⁹⁹

Beyond the question of safety lies a more fundamental issue: Is interfering in the physiological development of a child through chemicals and hormones consistent with an ecological worldview? Is the surgical destruction of healthy tissue to deal with psychological distress, whether in children or adults, consistent with an ecological worldview?

An industrial worldview assumes that we can engineer the ecosystems in which we live to satisfy human desires with few limits, treating the planet as a machine to tinker with. But the world is not a machine, nor are our bodies. An ecological worldview understands that we are organisms living within parameters set by the larger forces that created the planet and life, and alerts us to be aware of the potentially destructive consequences of high-energy/high-technology “solutions.”

The trans movement rejects that ecological standard, sometimes asserting that the human body can be remade in whatever fashion we choose. For example, a team of doctors was hopeful that “the first uterus transplant in a TG (transgender) woman is very likely in the near future,” though they acknowledge that such a procedure would be “best performed by well-established teams at experienced centers, prioritizing multidisciplinary and long-term collaborations between ethicists, medical, and surgical team members.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, doctors should have the power to reshape bodies in any way possible, including at the most basic level of reproduction, so long as certain standards are met. It is jarring to see this vision of the body-as-machine presented as a sign of progress in a leading scholarly journal.

I’ll start with a statement that may not seem controversial: We are biological creatures, part of the ecosphere, and like any other organism, our genetic code sets parameters within which we live. Stated that generally, few people would disagree. Yet in practice, people routinely endorse practices that ignore the biophysical limits that an ecological worldview helps us understand. There are compelling reasons to limit how we try to remake the world, as we see the catastrophic effects of high-energy/high-technology living arrangements on the health of ecosystems around the world (more on that in Chapter 6). The success of the trans movement is in part a manifestation of the dominant industrial worldview in advanced technological societies, the refusal to

⁹⁸ “*New York Times* Sign On Letter,” Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2023, glaad.org. See also “No Place For Transphobia in Anthropology: Session Pulled from Annual Meeting Program,” American Anthropological Association, September 28, 2023, americananthro.org. This statement includes the odd assertion that pointing out basic facts of biology is “contrary to the settled science in our discipline.”

⁹⁹ “The Evidence to Support Medicalised Gender Transitions in Adolescents Is Worryingly Weak,” *The Economist*, April 5, 2023, www.economist.com; Kellan E. Baker, “Hormone Therapy, Mental Health, and Quality of Life Among Transgender People: A Systematic Review,” *Journal of the Endocrine Society* 5, no. 4 (2021): 1–16, academic.oup.com.

¹⁰⁰ Elliott G. Richards et al., “A ‘First’ on the Horizon: The Expansion of Uterus Transplantation to Transgender Women,” *Fertility and Sterility* 119, no. 3 (2023): 390–391, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

accept limits on how we intervene in the larger living world, including limits on how we remake the body.

Not all people who identify as transgender seek such treatment, but the transgender movement and its supporters endorse the use of advanced medical technology to resolve a condition about which we have little understanding, including of the most basic etiology. This embrace of drugs, cross-sex hormones, and cosmetic surgery is an example of “technological fundamentalism,”¹⁰¹ the belief that high-energy/high-technology solutions are always appropriate, even when we know little about the underlying problem and cannot predict longterm consequences. This approach to alleviating people’s psychological distress and social dislocation assumes that the ability to chemically and surgically change a body means that we should use that ability, ignoring the ecological reality of limits.

A male body is a male body, and a female body is a female body. No deployment of human technology can change that, and attempts to alter that reality are a recent phenomenon in human history, an outgrowth of a glorification of technology that has become reflexive in the dominant culture. Trans activists point to many cultures that have long had “third genders,” such as muxe in parts of Mexico, hijra in South Asia, and joya in Chumash society in what is now California. Whatever one thinks of these traditions, none involved the use of modern drugs, hormones, or surgery. Such treatments are possible only in affluent societies that prioritize technological “solutions” to complex human struggles.

I’m often told that my inability to understand trans claims and the importance of medical intervention is a failure of my imagination, perhaps a byproduct of unwitting acceptance of “biological essentialism,” which is widely understood on the left to be a bad thing. But to understand biology is not to reduce all human choices to a simplistic account of biology, and my imagination works just fine. I can imagine a world without patriarchy in which people develop their capacities unconstrained by the rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms that are a product of patriarchal culture not biology. I try not to imagine away complex intellectual questions and difficult political problems. When a claim does not make sense to me, I seek clarification, and when others tell me they have similar problems making sense of a claim, I assume there’s something important to work out.

Here’s an example of how the transgender movement avoids these questions. In my 2017 book *The End of Patriarchy*, I quoted a scholar and trans advocate, who, after recounting an exhaustive list of procedures to reshape the body that come with sex-reassignment/genderconfirmation surgery, noted:

It can seem and feel as if one is *at war with one’s body* (emphasis added), reviewing this list of interventions. To make the experience more tolerable,

¹⁰¹ The term comes from David Orr, “Technological Fundamentalism,” *Conservation Biology* 8, no. 2 (June 1994): 335–37. See also Robert Jensen, *The Restless and Relentless Mind of Wes Jackson: Searching for Sustainability* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021), 80–82.

it is imperative to help reframe this process, not with a warfare mentality and vernacular but as a more positive process.¹⁰²

That passage has stayed with me since I first read it. Simply reading the description of those surgical procedures in that article left me with a sense of despair. The author, a psychotherapist and WPATH member, acknowledges the feeling of being at war with the body, but then suggests that the solution is not to rethink the surgical destruction of healthy tissue but to make it more tolerable by finding a new metaphor. That left me deeper in despair.

War metaphors, such as the “war on drugs,” usually lead to distorted understandings of problems and responses. But sadly, the measures required to remake the body in such surgeries make the term applicable. Here are brief descriptions.

One option for “male-to-female sex reassignment surgery” is “a penile inversion vaginoplasty with a neurovascular neoclitoris”:

During this procedure, a surgeon makes “like become like,” using parts of the original penis to create a sensate neo-vagina. The testicles are removed, a procedure called orchiectomy. The skin from the scrotum is used to make the labia. The erectile tissue of the penis is used to make the neoclitoris. The urethra is preserved and functional.

“Female-to-male sex reassignment surgery” typically involves the surgical removal of both breasts with the option of “a phalloplasty, generally using the radial forearm flap method”:

This procedure, which can be done at the same time as a hysterectomy/vaginectomy, creates an aesthetically appropriate phallus and creates a urethra for standing urination. Construction of a scrotum with testicular implants is done as a second stage.¹⁰³

When surgeons destroy healthy tissue in these procedures, they are modifying bodies in irreversible ways and creating life-long medical dependency. Administering puberty blockers to children “recasts a normal physiological process as a disease and can trigger a cascade of increasingly invasive medical interventions.”¹⁰⁴ Many of us wonder how procedures that destroy healthy tissue or interfere in human development have become defined as “medically necessary.”

¹⁰² SJ Langer, “Our Body Project: From Mourning to Creating the Transgender Body,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 15, no. 2 (2014): 74, www.tandfonline.com.

¹⁰³ “Gender Confirmation Surgery,” Michigan Medicine, University of Michigan Health, n.d., www.uofmhealth.org.

¹⁰⁴ Sarah C. J. Jorgensen, Nicole Athéa, and Céline Masson, “Puberty Suppression for Pediatric Gender Dysphoria and the Child’s Right to an Open Future,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 53, no. 5 (2024): 1941–1956, link.springer.com.

In other medical arenas, wariness about solving complex problems with drugs and surgery is common, such as when the American Academy of Pediatrics released guidelines on childhood obesity that advocated intensive therapy for children as young as six, weight loss drugs for those as young as twelve, and surgery for teens as young as thirteen. A journalist reported that professionals on both sides of the debate “express uneasiness about the potential long-term consequences of putting millions of children on drugs or under the knife, instead of doing more to prevent the condition in the first place” and quoted a leading medical ethicist:

“Turning to surgery and pills is quintessentially American,” said Arthur Caplan, a bioethicist at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine who said he struggles with weight himself. Caplan called obesity “one of the biggest moral challenges” our society faces but described medication and surgery as just “Band-Aids in a society that can’t figure out what to really do to protect the interests of its kids.”¹⁰⁵

Those comments reflect a concern for the health of children and a wariness about rushing to industrial solutions. A parallel analysis of gender-affirming health care is appropriate but would generate accusations of transphobia.

Trans-surgery only makes sense if we take literally the idea that people with gender dysphoria are “born in the wrong body.” That phrase, once common in the transgender movement, has fallen out of favor, at least in part because to most people it makes no sense. What does it mean to suggest that any organism can be born in the wrong body?¹⁰⁶ The position of the UK nonprofit Mermaids, which supports “transgender, nonbinary and gender-diverse children, young people, and their families,” reflects the confusion:

We recently posted that ‘no child is born in the wrong body’, which is our broad position as a charity. Why? Because we believe that transgender people shouldn’t be expected or encouraged to reject their entire amazing, intelligent, beautiful, creative bodies, simply because of gender incongruity. Still, we also know some people—including some of our amazing patrons—do use that phrase to express who they are. It is your right to use whatever words you choose to describe yourself. As a charity representing lots of different people, however, we have to make sure our language is as inclusive as possible, especially for people who might be struggling with their gender.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ariana Eunjung Cha, “Aggressive Treatment Guidelines for Childhood Obesity Getting Backlash,” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com.

¹⁰⁶ Miguel Missé, *The Myth of the Wrong Body*, trans. Frances Riddle (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022).

¹⁰⁷ “Do You Use the Phrase: ‘Born in the Wrong Body’?” Mermaids News, September 25, 2020, mermaidsuk.org.uk.

Once again, “inclusive” is invoked to avoid asking crucial questions. It’s difficult not to ask, as we should with all cosmetic surgery,¹⁰⁸ whether this medical intervention is a healthy way for society to address people’s discomfort with their appearance or their distress about not conforming to social norms. That seems like an obvious question, yet in polite liberal company where support for transgenderism is common, I have watched some people scramble to avoid it while others label the question to be evidence of transphobia.

THE PROBLEM WITH LGBTQIA+

This is a good place to explain why linking transgenderism to the movement for lesbian and gay male liberation is misguided. Lesbians and gay men have long argued that their sexual orientation is not pathological¹⁰⁹ and that they do not need treatment but simply need to be left alone, free from violence and discrimination. That’s why the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) label is confusing—the L, G, and B have little in common with the T. Adding more letters, such as QIA+ (queer, intersex, asexual, and many other terms) confuses more than clarifies. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals—along with everyone else—can support the transgender movement’s goal of ending violence and discrimination in such things as policing, employment, and housing without endorsing the ideology of the trans movement. Progressive politics do not require that anyone support risky medical treatment or claims by males (no matter how they identify) to have a right to be in single-sex female spaces.

Here’s another way to make this point, in the form of questions to liberal/progressive/left people: If you learned that a child you loved was gay or lesbian, how would you react? Is that different than how you would react if you learned that child had gender dysphoria and wanted medical intervention? Even strong supporters of the transgender movement’s policy demands are hesitant to equate the two.

Depending on where one lives and works, children coming out as lesbian or gay might face harassment. Lesbian and gay kids often get bullied, no matter where they live. But the challenges of being lesbian or gay are social. Lesbians and gay men may seek psychotherapy, not (except in rare cases) to change their sexuality but to deal with the pain of being stigmatized and/or the emotional problems that so many people experience. Lesbians and gay men don’t need medical treatment because same-sex attraction is not pathological, not the result of disease.

Medical treatment is appropriate to treat disease and injuries that pose a threat to a person’s health. If trans activists argue that in some cases, drugs, cross-sex hormones, and surgery are medically necessary, that is a recognition that at least in some cases, transgenderism is a pathological condition. Yet the transgender movement also argues

¹⁰⁸ Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ Ray Levy Uyeda, “How LGBTQ+ Activists Got ‘Homosexuality’ out of the DSM,” JSTOR Daily, May 26, 2021, [daily.jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org/daily).

that transgenderism should not be pathologized.¹¹⁰ Proposals for a WPATH language policy include:

Avoid language which has the intention (or likely effect) of stigmatizing or pathologizing gender and bodily diversity (including a diversity of gender expressions and identities, as well as bodily characteristics). Stigmatizing and pathologizing language (e.g., “disordered” or “abnormal” or “malformation”) should be avoided altogether.¹¹¹

When Spain passed a law allowing anyone over sixteen to change their gender on legal documents without undergoing psychological and medical evaluations to show gender dysphoria, the minister of equality stated: “Trans people are not ill people. They are people, full stop.”¹¹² The statement is hard to understand. In the context of other medical conditions, no one suggests that people who are ill are somehow lesser people. These two claims—that trans is merely one aspect of human diversity but yet also is a condition requiring treatment—are contradictory.

Even when acknowledging that, trans activists try to deny it. Masha Gessen, a female journalist who identifies as trans and nonbinary, found it difficult to explain this contradiction in an interview:

Being trans is not a medical condition, but it marries you for life to the medical system. It almost always—not always—involves some kind of medical intervention. ... I hate using the word “treatment.” I’m always stumbling over it because it’s not actually treatment, but it is treatment. But it’s not a medical condition.¹¹³

Again, given how little we know about the etiology of the condition, there’s not much we can say about what transgenderism actually is in definitive terms. But whatever one believes transgenderism is, it can’t be both a routine part of healthy human diversity and a condition requiring medical treatment. If one isn’t ill in some way, why would one need such treatment? Simply saying there are lots of different types of trans people doesn’t get us any closer to understanding what the terms mean.

This issue arose when the APA revised the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to eliminate “gender identity disorder” in favor of “gender dysphoria.” One medical news website pointed out the tension:

¹¹⁰ Amets Suess Schwend, “Trans Health Care from a Depathologization and Human Rights Perspective,” *Public Health Reviews* 41, no. 3 (2020), publichealthreviews.biomedcentral.com; Maria Elisa Castro-Peraza et al., “Gender Identity: The Human Right of Depathologization,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 6 (2019): 978, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

¹¹¹ Walter Pierre Bouman et al., “Language and Trans Health,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 18, no. 1 (2016): 1–6, www.tandfonline.com.

¹¹² Emma Bubola and José Bautista, “Spain Allows Legal Gender Change without a Medical Evaluation,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2023, www.nytimes.com.

¹¹³ David Remnick, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Trans Rights,” *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2023, www.newyorker.com.

[W]hile the move is seen as a win by some, others worry about what it could mean. Currently, insurance carriers may pay for sexual reassignment surgery because the procedure is for a medical problem, not for plastic surgery. Having the condition reclassified may cause problems with surgery for an already marginalized group.¹¹⁴ A trans scholar who states that “gender identity and gender assigned at birth is increasingly understood as a matter of human diversity rather than as pathology” notes that the DSM and WPATH definitions of gender dysphoria are different, and therefore:

[C]linicians should not routinely diagnose patients who wish to access transition-related interventions with gender dysphoria. A diagnosis of gender dysphoria should be limited to situations in which it is genuinely necessary (such as for insurance coverage) or is done at the express request of the patient.¹¹⁵

What responsible physician would consider a diagnosis “genuinely necessary” based on insurance or when the patient requests it? It’s an understatement to conclude, as did one research team, “All physicians included in gender dysphoria treatment are facing great bioethical challenges and dilemmas.”¹¹⁶

I believe that we should reject an industrial worldview that says people can remake the world, and our bodies, in any way it’s technologically possible to do so. An ecological worldview starts with a recognition of what it means to be an organism living in ecosystems, and helps us accept the biophysical limits of organisms (including humans) and of the ecosphere. The industrial worldview asks only how to keep the high-energy/high-technology game going as long as we can, ignoring the obvious need for limits on the expansion of the human enterprise. (More on that in Chapter 6.) Applying a feminist analysis and ecological worldview to transgenderism would lead us to more effective and humane ways to deal with gender dysphoria in patriarchy.

FEARS OF PATRIARCHY: WHY TRANS IDEOLOGY IS ATTRACTIVE

In this chapter, I have argued that we should not be afraid to point out that transgender ideology is intellectually incoherent and inconsistent with an ecological worldview, and that radical feminism offers a more accurate account of history and a more useful framework for dealing with sex/gender issues. Whether or not readers agree with this

¹¹⁴ Makini Brice, “DSM Revision Removes Asperger Syndrome, No Longer Classifies Transgender as Disorder,” *Medical Daily*, December 4, 2012, www.medicaldaily.com.

¹¹⁵ Florence Ashley, “The Misuse of Gender Dysphoria: Toward Greater Conceptual Clarity in Transgender Health,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2021): 1159, journals.sagepub.com.

¹¹⁶ Marta R. Bizic et al., “Gender Dysphoria: Bioethical Aspects of Medical Treatment,” *BioMed Research International* 2018 (June): 5, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

analysis, it shouldn't be hard to understand the arguments, which certainly are plausible. But in some circles, feminist critics are deemed to be on the "fringe," at least according to one mainstream journalist:

The Women's Liberation Front is part of a long-running strain of feminism that rejects the existence of transgender identity. These fringe activists argue that advancements in transgender rights will come at the expense of women's rights and threaten the safety and sanctity of women-only spaces. They say women are defined not by their gender identity, but by their biology and by having "survived girlhood."¹¹⁷

I am not a member of that group, but I know of no one who "rejects" the existence of people who identify as transgender. Since the transgender movement has no clear and coherent explanation of transgender identity, it's hard to imagine how anyone can be accused of denying their existence. And it is unclear why the positions ascribed to the group are fringe when so many feminists, not to mention many women and men who may not think of themselves as feminist, share those concerns. That reporter also writes that "radical feminists are helping to bolster [Republicans'] message, creating the perception of bipartisan support in a polarizing social debate." Based on my experience, the bipartisan nature of many women's rejection of transgender policy demands is not a "perception" but a reality.

I've been involved with feminism for more than three decades, and some of the most courageous and dedicated people doing battle with patriarchal gender norms and male domination I have known have been radical feminists—the very people the trans movement seeks to marginalize. At the risk of sounding glib, radical feminists were nonbinary before nonbinary was cool, challenging social norms that demand men and women fit into patriarchal boxes¹¹⁸ but acknowledging the reality of biological sex. That raises an obvious question: Why have so many liberal and postmodern feminists—along with so many people with liberal/progressive/left political leanings who are usually supportive of feminist politics—embraced transgender politics and ignored or demonized radical feminists? Why do these left-of-center folks ignore material realities in favor of a transgender ideology that even they will sometimes admit is hard to understand?¹¹⁹

Many people tell me that they don't challenge trans ideology because they want to be compassionate toward people in distress. That's understandable, but it doesn't answer the question of why trans ideology has become the dominant position on the left. Here's my best explanation.

¹¹⁷ Samantha Schmidt, "Conservatives Find Unlikely Ally in Fighting Transgender Rights: Radical Feminists," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com.

¹¹⁸ Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne, eds., *Not Dead Yet: Feminism, Passion and Women's Liberation* (North Geelong, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2021).

¹¹⁹ Robert Jensen, "Making Sense of Sex and Gender—Review of *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*," *Dissident Voice*, July 5, 2021, dissidentvoice.org.

If the rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms that many of us want to resist are a product of patriarchy, then the obvious target for political organizing should be the practices of patriarchy, used here as a term for varied systems of male dominance in the family, economy, politics, and culture. If patriarchy forces us into rigid boxes, represses our ability to experience our full humanity, and generates a reactionary politics, then let's go after patriarchy, right?

The problem is that fighting patriarchy is hard. It is the oldest of the oppressive social systems, going back several thousand years in human history,¹²⁰ compared with several hundred for white supremacy and capitalism. Patriarchal ideas and modes of behavior are so woven into the fabric of everyday life that they can be hard to identify, let alone eliminate. Feminist organizing has forced some changes, such as improved laws against rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. But striking at the core of male dominance, especially at men's sexual exploitation of women, produces intense backlash.

I learned this working on the feminist critique of pornography. The most hostile reactions to an analysis of the sexist and racist patterns in pornography came from liberal/progressive/left folks, especially men. I found that confusing at first, until my friend Jim Koplin (the same JK from whom I borrowed the phrase "multiple cascading ecological crises") made a point that now seems obvious to me: When we critique pornography, people know it's not just a critique of movies and magazines (this was years ago, before the internet ended the market for pornographic magazines) but of men's assumption that they should be in control, as well as of the ways we learn to be sexual in a patriarchal culture. People are nervous about surrendering control and giving up methods for finding sexual pleasure, which I know because when I first encountered the critique it scared me, and I still struggle with all the ways I was socialized into patriarchal masculinity.

Why has the trans movement made such deep inroads on the left, to the point where a feminist challenge to trans ideology can get one banished from progressive spaces? My working hypothesis is that embracing transgender politics gives the appearance of challenging patriarchy without actually fighting male dominance. Instead of confronting male power, trans activists most often embrace patriarchal gender norms, implicitly or explicitly, or refuse to challenge those in the trans movement who do embrace those norms. Supporting the trans movement gives the appearance of feminist politics without facing the most vexing issues.

In some circles, these arguments cannot be articulated because people like me are dismissed as being a TERF (pronounced "turf"), trans exclusionary radical feminist, a term I reject.¹²¹ Radical feminists' goal is not exclusion but expansion of understand-

¹²⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹²¹ Ironically, a prominent liberal/left feminist journalist agreed that the term TERF is inaccurate, but for a very different reason. "I don't think that they actually are feminists," Lydia Polgreen said, asserting that a position held by many feminists transforms them into non-feminists because she disagrees.

ing; they have for decades offered an alternative to transgenderism's approach to the problem of patriarchy's rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms.

Radical feminists aren't ignoring the suffering of people who identify as transgender but rather are offering a different way to think about that suffering. Nothing in radical feminism denies the emotional struggles of people who identify as transgender. Radical feminists seek to include those who experience gender dysphoria in a movement that challenges patriarchy and opens up new possibilities without yoking people to irreversible procedures and lifelong drug/hormone treatment.

Let's go back to the etiology of gender dysphoria and transgenderism, with a reminder of how little we know. No single theory is likely to explain such complex phenomena, but one reasonable place to look carefully is childhood trauma, what are sometimes called adverse childhood experiences, especially sexual abuse in childhood. For decades, radical feminists have asked the culture to face the high levels of sexual violence against not only women but also children.¹²² The consequences of such abuse are well known in psychology: "A history of sexual abuse is associated with an increased risk of a lifetime diagnosis of multiple psychiatric disorders."¹²³

Is there a link between trauma and gender dysphoria? As early as 1994, one researcher suggested "that in some cases transsexualism may be an extreme adaptive dissociative response to severe child abuse."¹²⁴ Practitioners and researchers are aware of the relevance of trauma, but there is surprisingly little discussion of it in the public debate. But as one recent study observed:

TGAs [transgender adolescents] are more likely to report psychological, physical, and sexual abuse during childhood compared with heterosexual CGAs [cisgender adolescents]. Our findings align with those of previous studies finding high rates of childhood abuse among transgender individuals. Growing evidence indicates TGAs experience mental health problems at higher rates than CGAs, and childhood abuse likely contributes to the onset of mental health problems among TGAs. In the future, researchers should examine the role of childhood abuse in the etiology of mental health problems among TGAs.¹²⁵

"The Ezra Klein Show: Lydia Polgreen Interviews Masha Gessen," *New York Times*, October 10, 2023, www.nytimes.com.

¹²² A key book in my education was Diana E. H. Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1984).

¹²³ Laura P. Chen et al., "Sexual Abuse and Lifetime Diagnosis of Psychiatric Disorders: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 85, no. 7 (2010): 618–629, www.mayoclinicproceedings.org.

¹²⁴ Holly Devor, "Transsexualism, Dissociation, and Child Abuse: An Initial Discussion Based on Nonclinical Data," *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (1994): 66, www.tandfonline.com.

¹²⁵ Brian C. Thoma et al., "Disparities in Childhood Abuse between Transgender and Cisgender Adolescents," *Pediatrics* 148, no. 2 (August 2021), publications.aap.org.

That study does not assert a causal link but calls for more research on the topic. Another study concludes:

Given these associations as well as the high prevalence of physical and/or sexual abuse among transgender women, mental health professionals and social service providers working with this population should be sensitive to the abuse history and mental health needs of the transgender women with whom they work.¹²⁶

Another study focusing on gender dysphoria in girls and the effects of pornography points out that those adolescents are more likely to have experienced adverse childhood experiences such as sexual traumas and also show a higher prevalence of autism.¹²⁷ These studies do not prove that childhood sexual assault is a cause, let alone *the* cause, of gender dysphoria and transgenderism. But these correlations certainly support the case for extended, open-ended psychotherapy.¹²⁸ Yet when radical feminists raise these issues, too often the accusation of transphobia shuts down conversation. Journalists can expect the same treatment.¹²⁹ Is it in the interests of people struggling with gender dysphoria to downplay this concern?

The increasing number of detransitioners suggests that exploration of these factors is crucial. One medical researcher is more forceful, arguing that we should recognize detransitioners as “survivors of iatrogenic harm” (the harm to patients that is the result of medical practices).¹³⁰

Until there is more research, we should pay attention to the increasingly common reports of detransitioners:

I am a 26-year-old trauma survivor. I transitioned with testosterone at 19, a double mastectomy at 20, and de-transitioned at 22 when I was diagnosed with CPTSD [complex post-traumatic stress disorder] from childhood abuse, abandonment, and the medicalization and identity crisis. De-transitioning and understanding how gender dysphoria was created from

¹²⁶ Alexandra L. Kussin-Shoptaw, Jesse B. Fletcher, and Cathy J. Reback, “Increased Psychological and Emotional Distress Among Transgender Women,” *LGBT Health* 4, no. 4 (2017): 268, www.liebertpub.com.

¹²⁷ Karin Nadrowski, “A New Flight from Womanhood? The Importance of Working through Experiences Related to Exposure to Pornographic Content in Girls Affected by Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 50, no. 3 (2024): 293–302, www.tandfonline.com.

¹²⁸ Anna Churcher Clarke and Anastassis Spiliadis, “‘Taking the Lid Off the Box’: The Value of Extended Clinical Assessment for Adolescents Presenting with Gender Identity Difficulties,” *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 24, no. 2 (2019): 338–352, journals.sagepub.com. For a compelling argument for “therapy first,” see “Therapy First Membership Statement,” n.d., www.therapyfirst.org.

¹²⁹ Jesse Singal, “Gender Dysphoria, Trauma, and Online Misinformation,” Medium, November 21, 2018, medium.com.

¹³⁰ Sarah C. J. Jorgensen, “Iatrogenic Harm in Gender Medicine,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 49, no. 8 (2023), www.tandfonline.com.

complex variables of hormonal conditions, autism, insecurity, shame, and magical thinking was crucial to the start of my healing process. I cured my gender dysphoria with psychotherapy, DBT [dialectical behavior therapy], and mindfulness.¹³¹

I end with this account from a social media platform not to suggest that a tweet can resolve complex questions, but to point out that people struggling with sex/gender crises cope with their psychological distress in varied ways. The choice is not between either a liberal embrace or a conservative rejection of transgender ideology, not between either “gender-affirming care” or relentless suffering. A radical feminist analysis, rooted in an ecological worldview, offers a path to a deeper analysis and potentially more effective responses.

“Dangerous” Academics ... Right-wing Distortions About Leftist Professors

Author: Robert Jensen

Date: February 7, 2006

Source: History News Network, Common Dreams. Roundup: Talking About History. <www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/robert-jensen-dangerous-academics-right-wing-disto>

In an “urgent” email last week, right-wing activist David Horowitz hyped his latest book about threats to America’s youth from leftist professors.

The ad for “The Professors — The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America” describes me as: “Texas Journalism Professor Robert Jensen, who rabidly hates the United States, and recently told his students, ‘The United States has lost the war in Iraq and that’s a good thing.’”

I’m glad Horowitz got my name right (people often misspell it “Jenson”). But everything else is distortion, and that one sentence teaches much about the reactionary right’s disingenuous rhetorical strategy.

First, I’m not rabid, in personal or political style. I’m a sedate, non-descript middle-aged academic who tries to approach political and moral questions rationally. I articulate principles, provide evidence about how those principles are often undermined by powerful institutions, and offer logical conclusions about how citizens should respond. I encourage people to disagree with my principles, contest my evidence, and question my logic — all appropriate activities in a university where students are being trained

¹³¹ Laura Becker (@FunkGodArtist), “I am a 26 year old trauma survivor,” Twitter, March 12, 2023, twitter.com.

to think for themselves, and in a nominally democratic society where citizens should to do the same.

Second, I offer such critiques without hate. Sometimes my assessments are harsh, such as in evaluating George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq and concluding the attack was unlawful and, therefore, our president is guilty of crimes against peace and should be prosecuted. Similarly harsh was the judgment that Bill Clinton's insistence on maintaining the harsh economic embargo on Iraq in the 1990s resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents and, therefore, Clinton was a moral monster who was unfit to govern. None of this has to do with hating either man, but instead with assessments and judgments we should be making.

Third, these critiques are not of the United States, but of specific policies and policymakers. No nation is a monolith with a single set of interests or political positions, and it's nonsensical to claim that harsh critique constitutes rejection of an entire nation.

Why would anyone suggest that I rabidly hate the United States? It's easier to defame opponents using emotionally charged language than engage on real issues. Accuse them of being irrational and hateful. Ignore the substance of the claims and just sling mud. By even minimal standards of intellectual or political discourse it's not terribly honorable, but it often works.

Beyond these junkyard dog tactics, Horowitz's email also makes one crucial factual error. I did write that the U.S. losing the Iraq war was a good thing — not in celebration of death and destruction, of course, but because the defeat temporarily restrains policymakers in their dangerous attempts to extend the U.S. empire. But that was the first sentence of an opinion piece I published in various newspapers in 2004, not a statement to students. The distinction is important.

Horowitz and similar critics argue that professors like me inappropriately politicize the classroom, forcing captive student audiences to listen to radical rants. No doubt there are professors who rant — from the left, right and center; there's a lot of bad teaching in universities.

But I'm constantly attacked by people who have no knowledge of — and as far as I can tell, no interest in learning about — how I teach. Because they hear me express strong opinions at political rallies or read my newspaper opinion pieces, they assume I treat my classroom like a pulpit and students as targets for conversion.

I teach journalism, and in the course of that teaching I regularly discuss how journalists cover controversial topics; it's hard to imagine teaching responsibly without doing that. When appropriate, I have talked in class about how journalists cover war — explaining that many people around the world believe the U.S. invasion of Iraq violated international law, observing that U.S. journalists in the corporate commercial media rarely write about that, and suggesting reasons for the omission.

There's always a politics to teaching; the choices professors make about what readings to assign and how to approach a subject are influenced by their politics — left, right, or center. But that does not mean teaching is nothing but politics.

No one knows that better than professors who hold views challenging the conventional wisdom, those of us who don't rabidly hate the United States but do passionately love learning and the promise of an open, independent university.

Some Basic Propositions about Sex, Gender, and Patriarchy

Subtitle: New Books Highlight the Debate between Radical Feminism and Transgender Movement

Source: <http://dissidentvoice.org/2014/06/some-basic-propositions-about-sex-gender-and-patriarchy/>

Date: June 13th, 2014

Within feminism there has been for decades an often divisive debate about transgenderism. With increasing mainstream news media and pop culture attention focused on the issue, understanding that feminist debate is more important than ever.

Two new feminist books that analyze transgenderism (Sheila Jeffreys' *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* and Michael Schwalbe's *Manhood Acts: Gender and the Practices of Domination*, which includes a chapter on "The Limits of Trans Liberalism") are helpful for those who are concerned about the harms that result from the imposition of traditional gender roles but do not embrace the ideological assumptions and assertions of the transgender movement.

The propositions below are not taken directly from those books, whose authors may not agree with my phrasings. I am not trying to summarize their arguments but instead hope to bring greater clarity to the debate with a concise account of my position, which is rooted in a radical feminist analysis of sex and gender. I present these ideas as a series of propositions to make it easier for readers to identify where they may agree or disagree.

Biological and Cultural

We are a sexually dimorphic species, male and female. Although there is variation, the vast majority of humans are born with distinctly male or female reproductive systems, sexual characteristics, and/or chromosomal structure. Intersex people are born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the definitions of female or male; the number of people in this category depends on the degree of ambiguity used to mark the category. Intersex conditions are distinct from transgenderism.

The biological differences between males and females that are tied to reproduction are not trivial; no species can ignore reproductive realities. Not all females have

children, but only females can bear and breastfeed children, which no male can do. Therefore, human communities have always, and will always, recognize two distinct sex categories, male and female. There has always been, and always will be, some sex-role differentiation in human communities.

Other observable or measureable physical differences (average height, muscle mass, etc.) between males and females may be socially relevant depending on circumstances. Sex-role differentiation based on those differences may be appropriate if it can be shown to be necessary in the interests of everyone in a society. This claim is asserted far more often than that is demonstrated.

People from varying ideological positions also claim that these biological differences give rise to significant differences in moral, intellectual, or emotional characteristics between males and females. While it is plausible that differences in reproductive organs and hormones could result in these kinds of differences, there is no clear evidence for these claims. Given the complexity of the human organism and the limits of contemporary research, it's unlikely we will gain definitive understanding of these questions in the foreseeable future. In the absence of evidence of the biological bases for moral, intellectual, or emotional differences, we should assume that all or part of any differences in observed behavior between males and females in these matters are a product of cultural training, while remaining open to alternative explanations.

In short: males and females are far more similar than different.

Patriarchy

Today's existing sex-role differentiation is the product of a patriarchal society based on male dominance. In that system, males are socialized into patriarchal masculinity to become men, and females are socialized into patriarchal femininity to become women.

In patriarchy, sex-role differentiation supports male power and helps make the system's domination/subordination dynamic seem natural and normal. Moral, intellectual, and emotional traits are assigned differentially to each sex, creating what we today typically call gender roles. This patriarchal system of control—which is complex, adapting to changing conditions and to resistance—is designed to justify and perpetuate male dominance.

The gender roles in patriarchy are rigid, repressive, and reactionary. These roles constrain the healthy flourishing of both males and females, but females experience by far the most significant psychological and physical injuries from the system.

In patriarchy, gender is a category that functions to establish and reinforce inequality.

Radical Feminism

In contemporary culture, “radical” is often used dismissively as a synonym for “crazy” or “extreme.” In this context, it describes an analysis that seeks to understand, address, and eventually eliminate the root causes of inequality.

Radical feminism opposes patriarchy and male dominance. Radical feminism, which challenges the naturalizing of the process by which patriarchal societies turn male/female into man/woman, rejects patriarchy’s rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender roles.

Radical feminist politics addresses a wide range of issues, including men’s violence and sexual exploitation of women and children. Many radical feminists critique the gendered dress/grooming/presentation norms imposed on females in patriarchy, such as hyper-sexualized clothing, make-up, and ritualized behaviors of subordination, arguing for the elimination of these practices, not for males to adopt them as well.

The goal of radical feminism is a world without hierarchy, in which males and females would be free to explore the range of human experiences—especially experiences of love, whether sexual or not—in an egalitarian context.

Transgender

Transgender is defined as “A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth.” The transgender movement rejects the automatic sorting of males and females into the categories of man and woman, but does not necessarily reject gender roles. Some in the transgender movement embrace patriarchal gender roles typically attached to the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity.

While not all people who identify as transgender have sex-reassignment surgery or use hormones or other treatments to modify their bodies, the transgender movement as a whole accepts and/or embraces these practices.

Most radical feminists, who seek to eliminate patriarchy and patriarchal gender ideology, disagree with this transgender approach. Most radical feminists believe liberation is achieved through a political project that transcends patriarchal gender, rather than accepting those gender roles and merely seeking to allow people to move between the categories. Radical feminist politics focuses on challenging the patriarchal gender ideology that restricts the freedom of most individuals, especially women and others who lack power, to explore the fullest range of human experiences.

Nothing in a radical feminist analysis minimizes the social and/or psychological struggles of—nor provides support for violence against—people who identify as transgender or people who do not conform to patriarchal gender norms but do not identify as transgender. Radical feminism is not the cause of those struggles or the source of that violence but rather advocates for an egalitarian society with maximal freedom without violence.

Ecology

Many people, whether radical feminist or not, are critical of high-tech medicine's manipulation of the body through the reckless use of hormones and chemicals (which rarely have been proved to be safe) or the destruction of healthy tissue to conform to arbitrary beauty standards (cosmetic surgery such as breast augmentation, nose jobs, etc.).

From this ecological approach, such medical practices are part of a deeper problem in the industrial era of our failing to understand ourselves as organisms, shaped by an evolutionary history, and part of ecosystems that impose limits on all organisms.

People are not machines, and treating the human body like a machine is inconsistent with an ecological understanding of ourselves as living beings who are part of a larger living world.

Public Policy

The state should not limit people's freedom to choose, when those choices do not harm others. Disagreements can, and do, arise over identifying and assessing harms.

Transgender claims have led to a variety of policy debates, especially concerning the integrity of female-only spaces that are designed to foster a sense of safety and expressive freedom for females generally (such as cultural institutions) and particularly to create safety for females who have been victims of male violence (such as rape crisis and domestic violence centers). Forcing female-only spaces to accommodate people who identify as transgender reinforces patriarchy as a system and harms individual females.

Public funding for sex-reassignment surgery (such as through Medicare) raises serious public health questions that cannot be resolved by simplistic freedom-to-choose arguments.

Transgender practices involving children that are questionable on public health grounds (such as the use of puberty blockers) raise serious moral questions about our collective obligation for children's welfare.

Intellectual Practice and Rhetoric

As in any contentious political debate, angry and uncivil words have been exchanged. People on all sides should be respectful and careful in choices of language.

Labeling a radical feminist position on these public policy issues as inherently "transphobic" or describing radical feminist arguments on the issues as "hate speech" are diversionary tactics that undermine productive intellectual and political discussion. A critique of an idea is not a personal attack on any individual who holds the idea.

This critical analysis does not demand that people accept these principles in constructing an individual sense of self. These propositions are relevant to such individual

decisions, but are presented in the context of collective decision-making about public policy.

Conclusion

Transgenderism is a liberal, individualist, medicalized response to the problem of patriarchy's rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms. Radical feminism is a radical, structural, politicized response. On the surface, transgenderism may seem to be a more revolutionary approach, but radical feminism offers a deeper critique of the domination/subordination dynamic at the heart of patriarchy and a more promising path to liberation.

Robert Jensen, an Emeritus Professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics* from Olive Branch Press. His previous book, co-written with Wes Jackson, was *An Inconvenient Apocalypse: Environmental Collapse, Climate Crisis, and the Fate of Humanity*. To subscribe to his mailing list, go to <http://www.thirdcoastactivist.org/jensenupdates-info.html>. Read other articles by Robert.

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