

Transphobia is the feminism of fools

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So-called 'gender ideology' has become one of the major bogeymen of right-wing movements around the world. But there are also some on the left who oppose transgender rights, believing them to be fundamentally in conflict with women's rights - they're commonly known as 'gender critical feminists' or "'trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs)'. These two very different groups - conservatives and anti-trans feminists - have ended up working together much more closely than either would like.

Conservative opposition to transgender rights needs little introduction - transgender people don't fit into their conception of the so-called 'traditional' family, and we can safely generalise that conservatives are people who usually choose to suppress rather than integrate progressive movements. Actually describing how the oppression of transgender people works has been extensively theorised by authors like Leslie Feinberg [1] and Julia Serano [2], and more recently in the British Marxist-Leninist organisation Red Fightback's pamphlet on transgender rights[3] and Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's book *Transgender Marxism*. [4] For the purposes of this article, I will assume a passing familiarity with the beliefs of the trans rights movement (though not necessarily any specific texts - I would highly recommend looking into the authors and works mentioned if you don't already know them)

Radical feminism is a fringe subculture that developed out of 1970s second-wave feminism. The core belief was that men form a 'sex-class' which oppresses women, and that gender, not class, was society's core division. It increasingly became 'separatist', believing that women should essentially split off and form women-only societies. Anuradha Ghandy in *Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement* describes it as this: "women should relate only to women, they should build a women's culture and institutions." [5] In *On Lesbian Separatism*, Julie McCrossin detailed how radical feminists believe it is impossible to change men or make alliances with them - in one instance an Irish radical feminist cited by McCrossin says: "*the idea of killing and/or physically challenging male hatred of women is paralyzingly scary [...] I find it much easier to contemplate the idea of implanting all men with haemophilia or something [...] I think that having lived in Ireland, I'm very wary of traditional revolutionary tactics [...]*" [6]

Radical feminists also began to oppose the right of transgender people, particularly trans women, to transition, believing that this would undermine the ability of women to organise as a 'sex class' and allow men to infiltrate and subvert the feminist movement. In 1979, Janice Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which detailed radical feminist objections to trans rights: "*All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves.*" [7] Some also try to claim that transgender rights have now become part of the 'ruling class ideology'; this is neither true nor an argument against transgender rights. First, the ruling class ideology does not simply refer to ideas that are popular - it's all the stuff that liberals and conservatives *agree* on, that is so ingrained that they're not really considered political at all, things that you would have to go to more radical publications to see them even being questioned. For example, liberals and conservatives both believe that markets are the only viable way to organise the economy; the only difference is how much regulation they think is needed.

Second, something being superficially integrated into the ruling ideology does not mean that socialists should oppose it on some kind of contrarian basis. For example, after decades of anti-racist mass movements, anti-racist rhetoric has been partly integrated into the ruling ideology – nobody wants to actually call themselves a racist. This does not mean that racism is over; it means that the ruling class tries to paint themselves as anti-racist while in reality allowing structural racism to continue. It certainly doesn't mean that being racist is suddenly the socialist thing to do. The demands of successful mass movements being superficially integrated into the ruling ideology while in reality, structural oppression continues in a modified form is a pretty common course of development.

Though radical feminism has largely remained a fringe subculture, confined to niche cultural spaces like the Michigan Womyn's Festival, certain elements have entered into the mainstream. Seemingly against all odds, radical feminist groups like Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) have worked with conservatives to oppose what they see as trans rights going too far, with WoLF's co-founder Kara Dansky appearing on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* and WoLF filing a joint amicus brief with the conservative group Family Policy Alliance.[8]

The question is, why? On the face of it, radical feminists and conservatives seem like groups that would be diametrically opposed to one another, so why does it seem that radical feminists are so willing to work with the right? And how come anti-trans feminism is particularly prevalent in Britain?

The answer to these questions is actually pretty simple: second-wave-style radical feminism hasn't gotten any more popular. Even at its height, it was relatively niche, so it's not that it's had an explosion in popularity that's won over ordinary women. Rather, certain elements of so-called "gender critical feminism" have been mainstreamed because it's politically useful to mask ultimately conservative interests with feminist language. TERFs are unwittingly acting as a left-wing mudguard to defend right-wing policies. Take it from gender-critical feminist Jayne Egerton:

"The Christian right sees opposition to 'transgender ideology' as a wedge issue that can be leveraged to weaken and undermine lesbian and gay rights. The FRC [Family Research Council] have spelled out the ways in which their opposition to the 'transgender' movement is inseparable from their hostility to gay people and to feminism in a 2015 report: "In recent decades, there has been an assault on the sexes. That is, there has been an attack on the previously undisputed reality that human beings are created either male or female ... The first wave of this attack came from the modern feminist movement and the second from the homosexual movement. The third wave of this assault on the sexes has been an attack on a basic reality—that all people have a biological sex, identifiable at birth and immutable through life, which makes them either male or female. The third wave ideology is known as the 'transgender' movement.

[...]

We may think we are engaged on a single-issue basis with these groups, especially when they appropriate secular, even feminist language, but we are also in their crosshairs. The fact that they've shifted their attention, for the moment, to transwomen should fool nobody. Gender identity is a wedge issue against the whole package of what is known, in terms of international law, as 'SOGI'—sexual orientation and gender identity—and against everything represented by the left, including anti-racism and feminism."[9]

So there you have it - anti-trans feminists are being used by the right to divide the LGBTQ community 'from the left'. With this in mind, it's also now much clearer why the British left is comparatively transphobic: large sections are doing little more than painting conservative aims red, so why wouldn't they also be anti-trans? Under Keir Starmer, the Labour Party's right has promoted 'Blue Labour', which essentially attempts to out-patriot the Conservative Party and win over socially conservative voters, taking up essentially right-wing positions on immigration,[10] war,[11] and opposition to the BDS movement [12] (as an interesting side note, Corbyn is broadly supportive of trans rights)[13].

Groups like the LGB Alliance that claim to advocate for LGB people who they believe are negatively affected by trans rights have repeatedly made homophobic statements about 'predatory gay teachers'[14] and same-sex marriage.[15] An activist invited to speak (she eventually withdrew) at the founding conference of one Irish 'Gender Critical' group has speculated about "why so many of the men involved in the transgender/transhumanist agenda are Jewish." [16]

"Since the Gender Recognition Act passed in 2015, there's no evidence that it led to men pretending to be women to invade female spaces."

Anti-trans feminists will claim that they're providing much-needed left criticism of trans rights going 'too far', and that there's a wave of gender non-conforming (GNC) kids being forced to transition, men pretending to be trans to enter women's bathrooms and changing rooms, and trans women dominating women's sports. However, it's questionable at best that any of these things are actually true. An article in a previous issue of this magazine, *The Right to Transition* by Megan Dennis, highlighted that, far from the myth of people being forced to transition, the opposite is true - medically transitioning is unreasonably difficult.[17] Since the Gender Recognition Act passed in 2015, there's no evidence that it led to men pretending to be women to invade female spaces.[18]

The recent Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) decision to ban trans women from the women's league becomes truly absurd when you realise there are a grand total of two trans women in the IRFU.[19] There've been a few media storms around individual trans women athletes in women's sports - such as American swimmer Lia Thomas, who actually has swimming times on par with cis women,[20] and New Zealand Olympic weightlifter Laurel Hubbard, who failed to win a medal.[21] Where is the wave of trans women dominating women's sports? It seems like no such epidemics actually exist - they're never able to point to concrete data (dubiously anecdotal and isolated examples are not the same thing) that proves that this is happening because it isn't, and end up speaking mostly in hypotheticals.

The reality, then, is that they're providing left cover for conservative aims. Transphobia is inextricably tied in to the right-wing project to control people's bodies and suppress any self-expression outside the heteronormative standard; there's no way to make this "progressive".

The solicitor who represented Keira Bell in the *Bell v Tavistock* case, Paul Conrathe, has a long history of using the exact same argument against 'Gillick Competency' (a British legal precedent that allows minors to give informed consent) to prevent minors from getting abortions.[22] In fact, he's explicitly stated that he took the case to push Gillick Competency to its 'breaking point'. [23] The current anti-trans wave in America is connected to a general anti-LGBTQ+ wave and directly preceded the repeal of *Roe v Wade*. There's a host of absurd and draconian measures, such as genital inspections for schoolchildren [24] and a provision to alert *all* parents if a child who is "open about their gender identity" is in a field trip or sports team.[25]

As the above quote from Jayne Egerton shows, many gender-critical feminists are uncomfortably aware of how linked their movement is to the far right - but they naively think that somehow a specific agenda against trans people can be separated from the rest of the religious right's programme. Here's Julie Bindel, arguing that Viktor Orban's attack on trans rights is part of a broader attack against women and minorities in general:

"Orban moves to strip away trans rights as one of his very first acts after his pandemic power grab,' reads the headline in a report about a bill presented to parliament this week. It does not even contain a nod to the abuse, violence and discrimination faced by lesbians and gay men under Orban. It barely mentions that this is part of a wider pattern that goes far beyond discrimination towards transgender people".[26]

Julie Bindel is a 'gender critical' feminist. Here, though, she's absolutely right - attacks on trans people usually *are* part of a broader pattern of attacks against women and LGBT people in general. She goes on in that same article to call trans people wanting better healthcare 'narcissistic', which is missing the point to an incredible degree - if attacks on trans rights are always accompanied by attacks on women's rights and LGBT rights more generally, how can criticising trans rights 'from the left' be anything *but* providing cover to the right? The truth is that transgender rights are not mutually exclusive with women's rights or the rights of LGB people but intimately connected with them - claims that they are and that trans people are threatening women's rights are baseless fearmongering. Cis women, transgender people, and the LGBT community as a whole are all ultimately oppressed by the same patriarchal system, and have a shared interest in working together to dismantle it.

"The anti-gender ideology is one of the dominant strains of fascism in our times. So the Terfs will not be part of the contemporary struggle against fascism, one that requires a coalition guided by struggles against racism, nationalism, xenophobia and carceral violence, one that is mindful of the high rates of femicide throughout the world, which include high rates of attacks on trans and genderqueer people".[27]

Judith Butler caught a lot of flak for saying this, with *The Guardian* even removing it from the interview, but they were right.

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Footnotes

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P.S.

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