

Falling Star: Countering Gender Essentialism with Sex Essentialism



Red and Black Leeds on the limitations of both gender essentialism and sex essentialism as a way to understand gender expression and identity.

The Morning Star recently published a couple of articles about the phenomenon that is “transgenderism”, claiming that it is at odds with feminism. As trans feminists we would like to express our fundamental disagreement with these articles, as we feel they are irresponsible and damaging. Not only are the articles misinformed and politically incoherent, they incite prejudice and animosity towards us.

The articles make trans people out to be inherently gender essentialist. To clarify this term, gender essentialism is the idea that there is a quality that makes someone a man, and a quality that makes someone a woman. It can also be non-binary inclusive, eg non-binary people, exceptionally, lack the innate gendered qualities that men or women possess, or they have a “real” gender too, but theirs is neutral or a mix. Sex essentialism, as espoused by the authors of these two articles, Jennifer Duncan and Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, is the belief that this defining quality is genitals. Gender essentialist statements are for example “The doctor assigned me female on the basis of my vagina, but it turns out that deep down I’m actually male”. Sex essentialist statements are for example “I have a vagina which is what makes me a woman”. Both are problematic. The latter because having a vagina doesn’t make someone a woman, taking the role on (or accepting it as default, as with most vagina owners) does. The former is wrong because genders are roles and you can’t deep down actually be a role, you can only act a role. Our doctors didn’t assign our genders incorrectly, they just shouldn’t have been assigning us roles in the first place.

The authors of The Morning Star articles are inevitably being accused of being gender essentialist, though sex essentialist would be a more accurate description. A lot of feminist transphobes like these, particularly those with some radical feminist influence, are quite critical of gender essentialism which is why they take such issue with the particular assimilationist trans discourse that leaves it intact. They’ve realised that it’s counter to feminist aims to gender clothing, activities, behaviours, personality traits, ones sense of self, etc but continue to insist on gendering bodies (ie assigning sex), though it’s only the existence of the social construct that is gender, that has fooled them into believing that sex isn’t also socially constructed.

We need to be wary of critiques that equate an oppressed group with the ideology being critiqued, as these articles do. This isn't a new problem. The conflation of Jews with Zionist nationalists, or Arabs with homophobic misogynists, amongst other examples, are unfortunately problems we do encounter amongst progressives and leftists, and it's important that we criticise these presumptions. Riley-Cooper pays lip service to the fact that trans people represent a wide variety of perspectives, before contradicting herself and coming to a categorical definition of "what it means to be trans", while the Duncan goes straight in with "politics of transgenderism" as if that's a thing. Even if we're to talk only about the politics espoused by trans people fighting for their rights, the trans movement, as opposed to all the views expressed by people who are trans, there would still be no unifying analysis of gender.

There are numerous explanations for why we make the choices we do (regarding our bodies, names, pronouns, wardrobe, etc) which go along with various arguments for why we should be permitted to do so (our personal favourite being "Because we feel like it" and "What the fuck has it got to do with you?") yet the authors at the Morning Star choose those arguments most palatable to a cissexist, misogynist society, and try to pin the blame for the sexism inherent in these arguments on us. We would hope that The Morning Star wouldn't publish an article that denounced feminism on the grounds of an anti-capitalist critique of liberal feminist arguments, so it's disappointing to see an article attacking trans people's rights on the basis of our most reactionary advocates. As trans people we experience prejudice and bigotry in our everyday lives. Articles such as those by Riley-Cooper and Duncan encourage a lack of sympathy on the left and sabotage our calls for solidarity, by holding us responsible for a sexist ideology we didn't create.

It's easy to see why some explanations of trans people's choices persist. The dominant narrative in society currently is that genders are a naturally occurring result of innate biological differences. It is assumed these probably came about through evolution, as sexist scientists retrospectively impose our current gender stereotypes on the past, in a Flintstones-style view of history, and conclude that male and female brains developed out of the "natural" roles that our reproductive organs are assumed to have landed us with. In fact gender is a far more recent human invention, but the oppression of women seemingly has to be justified somehow, whether by reference to God, science, or something else. This pop neuroscience can be used to give trans people legitimacy. If men and women really have man-brains and woman-brains, then it's plausible we could have landed the wrong brain to go with our genitals somehow (or the wrong genitals to go with our brains, depending on your perspective). It seems easier to get a society already invested in gender essentialism to accept that we've just been put in the wrong box, than to get people to question everything they thought they knew about men and women. Arguing that the entire system is bullshit and needs to be torn down is a massive task and not going to get us any joy any time soon. It's easy to see why some trans people prefer a narrative less threatening to the status quo, but this is not inherently part of being trans.

Still many ordinary trans people will talk about their transition in terms that recognise that gender is a role, not an innate quality, for example by talking about the time when they used to be a man or a woman. Exploring gender in the way that we do as trans people can often make its socially constructed nature more apparent to us, at the same time as living life as a trans person demonstrates the practical need to provide cis people with explanations for our choices which will get them off our backs.

A few parallels can be drawn to the gay rights movement. The claims to be "born this way" benefited the fight against homophobia within the existing narrative. Homosexuality was seen as a sin, which implicitly assumed a choice. Arguing that gay people can't help being gay, and reinforcing this with the claim that it is strictly nature, not nurture, is a simpler step towards tolerance than trying to remove the negative associations with homosexuality. If being gay and trans are afflictions that can't be helped, then it's easier to argue that society has a responsibility to accommodate us. Of course without the existence of homophobia, choosing to be gay wouldn't be a problem. It's only in such a homophobic society that we so

strongly associate the claim that it's a choice with the view that it's the wrong choice. Similarly arguing that trans people are born trans appears to be a more manageable path to acceptance, at the cost of supporting gender essentialist ideas.

The point of contention in arguments between gender essentialists trans advocates, and sex essentialist feminists, is often a supposed contradiction between the misogyny that people experience as a consequence of being a woman (or displaying qualities associated with being a woman, femininity) and the misogyny people experience as a consequence of being assigned female at birth. Jennifer Duncan claims "Women are not oppressed based on our identities, we are oppressed on the basis of our female biology – a fact that is being erased by transgender politics" But feminists have long been aware of the "double bind" that women face, otherwise known as "damned if you do, damned if you don't". It's the trap that patriarchy sets for women. We are punished for stepping outside of our allocated role, but also punished for conforming to it. If women conform to societies expectations of what a woman should be like we are considered to have invited the misogyny, yet we provoke anger when we dare to exhibit qualities considered masculine.

As trans people we experience specific forms of this, as well as the usual classic examples. Trans women (as well as other transfeminine people) are considered to be "asking for" women's oppression by lowering themselves to women's status (as she loses the status of "man" whether or not misogynists have the decency to recognise she's a woman) and people assigned female at birth (afab) who don't identify as women are considered to deserve it as their birthright (often taking the form of being "put back in their place" for having the cheek to seemingly try to escape women's status, and in the case of trans men dare claim the status of men). Under cissexist patriarchy only cis men are really men, the rest of us fall short of being considered fully human. We gain the biggest advantage when we are able to pass ourselves off as them. And if we can't then if we're lucky we can gain some lesser conditional advantages if, for example, we can display the right masculine qualities at the right time, or fit neatly into the role we've been assigned, or somehow demonstrate how unthreatening we are to the patriarchal status quo.

Feminist transphobes attempt to deny the reality of how patriarchy operates by dismissing misogyny experienced by trans women and transfeminine people as not actually misogyny, as they only define this oppression as misogyny when it's experienced by cis women. Seemingly irrespective of how similar the roles are that we inhabit, it is only a feminist issue when it's experienced by these feminists narrow definition of a "real" woman. Similarly, when some advocates of a certain trans politics put misogyny experienced by afab trans people under the heading of "misgendering" without noting the additional misogyny, this dismisses the patriarchy's inherent cissexism, and ignores the structures that build our identities in reality. To say that this is by definition not misogyny because it's not experienced by women ignores the lived experience of afab trans people. It is implicit in an analysis which dismisses some forms of gendered oppression as misdirected, that there are some people for whom it is appropriate. But it is not some sort of mistake when transfeminine or transmasculine people experience misogyny, it is a mistake that anybody experiences misogyny.

The authors of these transphobic feminist articles, and the people who agree with them, need to stop blaming trans people for the sexist ideology that oppresses all of us. We all suffer under the patriarchy, and trans people should not be singled out for the ways we try to cope. We all need an analysis that explains the messy, contradictory, lose-lose nature of patriarchal oppression, and we need to fight this oppression together.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Patriarchy: Patriarchy is a system of domination. Historical analysis suggests it came about with the advent of agriculture and private property some thousands of years ago, for the purpose of controlling the

means of reproduction. People who were able to give birth were given the role of “woman” and became dominated by “men” to ensure control over inheritance. The patriarchy also includes a division of labour to ensure women’s subservience. Under patriarchy various qualities are attributed to men and women (masculinity and femininity respectively) to justify and reinforce these roles.

Gender: Genders are the socially constructed categories “man” and “woman”, as well as the term for alternative categories created outside of this system. The gender system is built entirely out of sexism and cissexism. So currently in the man box is, for example, the colour blue, confidence, rationality, aggression, paid work, sports, penises, suits, a lack of sexual self-control, science, domestic incompetence, leadership qualities, superiority, attraction to women, beer. In the woman box is currently, to name a few, the colour pink, slyness, empathy, beauty, unpaid work, skirts, sexual self-control, domestic competence, submission, inferiority, attraction to men, chocolate. These associations are historically contingent, so in some cases it’s very obvious how they support the patriarchy, whereas other connections seem arbitrary. Due to the gendering of almost everything, particularly body parts, trans people who’ve chosen a category outside of the standard binary options are barely recognised by society and are consistently pushed back into one of the recognised genders, most often on the basis of biological qualities, whereas those who choose one of the standard boxes are expected to adhere to as many of the other qualities in that box to compensate for not possessing the original defining biological qualities.

Trans person: A person who has stepped outside of the gender they’ve been assigned.

Cis person: A person living within the gender they’ve been assigned.

Sexism: The associating of qualities in a gendered category with other things in that gendered category. Obvious examples are the assumption that women are inferior, or the assumption that men are naturally good at science. Possibly less obvious examples are the association between an attraction to men and an ability to apply make-up, or a lack of concern for one’s appearance and an aptitude for science.

Cissexism: Specifically the associating of gendered body parts with other qualities in the categories man/masculine and woman/feminine, eg the assumption that all women have vaginas.

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