

# And Once Again .... Self-identification Revisited, or How Some People Continue to Ignore Transphobia

---

This piece is an update and addendum to my previous blog article on the furore about the proposed amendment to introduce self-identification by trans people under the Gender Recognition Act (GRA).

One might hope that relative calm could descend on this debate. No chance. The level of sound and fury seems to have ratcheted up at least a couple more notches in the last few weeks. I keep away from most of the social media around this topic as even a mild intervention is likely to excite pithy and often vile responses ranging from trolling by knuckle dragging fascists who would consign all diversity to the ovens, via intimations of eternal damnation from militant theists, to transgender erasure and unacknowledged transphobia from some feminists and leftists who have sunk themselves into some very muddled thinking and dodgy political positions.

If not successfully challenged this will prove to be very damaging to trans people. It also threatens to undermine the left's prospects of building a united movement of resistance to Theresa May's Tory government, a government which wants to ram through a boss-friendly Brexit settlement and continue its attacks on pay, conditions and public services with all its impact on women and trans people alike.

That issues of gender and sex oppression have reignited now, albeit in a different form from thirty or forty years ago, is not unrelated to the low level of class struggle here in the UK and internationally. Given this basic general circumstance, issues of identity, and apparently competing identities, can eclipse class and class struggle as the defining characteristic of social relations within capitalism.

Back in 1978 Tony Cliff wrote an article in *Socialist Worker* ('Why Socialists Must Support Gays') at a time when too often calls to support gay rights were seen by sections of the left as at best a diversion from the economic class struggle and at worst a bourgeois deviation.

He wrote: *"A lot of socialists still have difficulty believing that gays will be taking part in the revolution at all. On the contrary we should look forward now to the first leader of the London workers' council being a 19-year-old black gay woman!"*

Cliff understood that Marxists must start from a position of support for all the oppressed. Some in the current debates have forgotten this with regards to trans people, or have mistakenly chosen to see the calls to extend trans rights as a cost or drain on women's rights.

So, far from welcoming the potential to make life a little easier for trans people or indeed recognising the exciting potential inherent in the growing confidence of significant numbers of generally young people to come out and challenge current gender norms and the gender binary, some feminists and socialists are effectively parroting the objections of bigots and the right and retailing a range of misconceptions and dog whistle positions about proposed extensions to trans rights.

Ironically, in a speech in October at the Pink News awards Teresa May reiterated her government's current intention to support a self-identification amendment to the GRA. As with same sex marriage, most liberal and bourgeois politicians see an opportunity to 'pink wash', or 'trans wash' their anti-working class policies. Their hypocrisy enables them to parade their (skin deep) social liberalism while simultaneously ramping up their economic liberalism as part of their neo-liberal agenda to force the working class to pay for capitalism's crises, drive up productivity and restore the rate of profit.

At this point it seems that the arguments and disagreements could even intensify as we await the formal outcome of the government's consultation process on proposals to amend the GRA.

What follows is a brief update and commentary on some of the trans-related issues over the past month or two.

In mid-September there was a verbal and physical altercation at Hyde Park Corner in London between some trans activists objecting to a planned radical feminist meeting to discuss gender and gender identity and some of the meeting's organisers. I am not going to comment on the ins and outs of the scuffle or who was primarily to blame; I will just say that violence and harassment between members of oppressed groups can never be acceptable.

Whatever exactly happened, a version of the events was quickly promoted by trans-critical feminists and others to the detriment of trans people in general. Articles appeared in the press (including the Daily Mail<sup>1</sup>) and hostile comments and posts subsequently peppered social media. A number of liberal and radical feminists published an open letter in the Guardian<sup>2</sup> on 24<sup>th</sup> September. The letter claimed, without offering any evidence, that politically motivated violence was being used to silence women and shut them out of political discussion about changes to legislation (ie the proposed changes to the GRA).

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4891484/Fists-fly-politically-correct-rally.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/24/violence-against-women-transgender-debate>

## *No-platforming?*

In early October articles in *The Guardian* and elsewhere<sup>3</sup> picked up on the fact that long-standing lesbian feminist Linda Bellos had an invitation to speak to students in The Beard Society at Oxford University withdrawn after she told them that she wanted to question some aspects of trans politics in her talk.

This was immediately characterised by commentators both on the right and the left as an example of unacceptable no-platforming. The right want to present this as an example of 'free speech' denied (there is currently a concerted campaign by right-wingers aimed at forcing universities and student unions to back down on no platform policies and the defence of 'safe spaces' for oppressed groups on campuses).

Some on the left perversely saw it as an example of the malign influence of the 'transgender lobby' in denying a platform to a well-known and respected feminist – a silencing or 'no platforming' operation.

In truth it was neither a denial of free speech nor an example of no-platforming. If The Beard Society decided, once she informed them of what she intended to speak on, that they did not want to provide an audience for Linda Bellos to talk critically about trans politics, that was completely up to them and wholly their choice. That is not 'no platforming'. There was no campaign to prevent her speaking and if some other student society were to invite her I doubt that The Beard Society would see that as an issue. Nevertheless, it was grist to the trans-critical mill.

Further alleged threats to women-only spaces were identified by some feminists in early October. Murray Edwards College at Oxford announced that it had decided to open its doors to trans women students, a decision predictably described by transphobe Germaine Greer as 'ridiculous'<sup>4</sup>. Greer has become more and more transphobic and gratuitously insulting to trans people the more she has gravitated into the UK establishment as its pet 'safe' commentator on gender issues, or at least those of forty years ago.

A more current feminist, Joanna Williams of Kent University, claimed in the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>5</sup> that the Murray Edwards decision marked the end of women-only spaces, implying, of course, that trans women are not women.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/06/feminist-linda-bellos-women-trans-male-violence>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/10/05/germaine-greer-women-only-cambridge-university-college-makes-historic-change-transgender-students/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/10/03/women-only-cambridge-college-allow-students-simply-identify/>

## *Safeguarding issues?*

Trans charities and the parents of trans or gender non-binary children have also come in for harsh criticism in recent weeks. On October 8<sup>th</sup> Andrew Gilligan in the Sunday Times sensationalised the issues around transgender children. His article attacked the trans children's charity Mermaids for its alleged involvement in a case which went to court in 2016 when a mother was accused of forcing her male child to dress and live as a girl.

Subsequently the charity was widely attacked on social media by transphobic bigots, some associated with transphobic websites like Transgender Trend. It felt forced to issue a statement<sup>6</sup> in its defence clarifying the situation and correcting mistakes in Gilligan's hostile article. Similar articles have picked up on the increased numbers of children and young people referring to the only children's gender identity clinic, the Tavistock in London.

Currently they are reporting up to 50 new referrals per week, no doubt reflecting the increased visibility of trans people in recent times and the ubiquity of social media. However, this is not a fad or a fashion: each referral is of a young person who is seeking advice, support and the right to be listened to.

Some practitioners feel that many of these referrals may in fact be a process of 'catching up', and that the rate of increase is now falling off. Only time will tell.

## *We've been here before*

In 1967, 50 years ago, male homosexuality was partially decriminalised in most of the UK, opponents used slurs claiming that homosexuality was linked to paedophilia. This vicious and fallacious trope raised its head again when the issue of gay adoption was being debated a couple of decades ago.

Today, fifty years after the legislation, 'child abuse and child protection' is the false flag under which trans people and trans organisations are being accused of malignly pushing gender fluid or gender questioning children and young people into irreversible decisions and medical intervention. We are told by some that these are crucial safeguarding issues in education and social care.

The truth is that, usually after long waiting times following referral, such young people may be prescribed puberty blockers which will give a breathing space until they are sure enough and emotionally mature enough to make an informed decision about their future. This is a class issue – working class trans people who have no access to private

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MermaidsGender/>

sources will generally be waiting the longest and have least access to systems of support.

It is interesting that many of those who oppose the availability of such support and intervention for trans children don't offer much protest at medical interventions on intersex infants and children carried out well before they are able to give any kind of informed consent.

In the case of trans children, the starting point for trans critics' political position seems *never* to be the distress and anguish of the children themselves or the bullying and transphobia that they may be facing. Instead, parents are attacked for indulging their children's 'whims' or 'fads'.

### *The 'threat' to women only spaces?*

The other transphobic trope being retailed is that of women's safety in toilets and other single-sex spaces and transwomen's alleged inherent inclinations to harass or attack natal women. I addressed this in my previous blog so I don't want to repeat the same arguments here. I would only add that I would not want to claim that there has *never* been *any* example of someone claiming to be transgender harassing or attacking women in single sex spaces, although examples of transwomen harassing or attacking cisgender women in *toilets* are vanishingly rare, or non-existent.

There have indeed been some rare and isolated cases of harassment or assaults in other situations by people who, as well as identifying as trans, also sometimes appear to have had serious mental health issues.

But there is no evidence at all to suggest that being trans is any more likely to predispose someone to attack or harass women than being cisgender. Transwomen are women, and as such are just as varied and potentially vulnerable as cisgender women. In fact, they are additionally vulnerable if read as transgender.

Women can, of course, be violent, but it is true that most violence against women is committed by men. The current #MeToo campaign has highlighted the extent of day to day harassment and objectification of women that goes on at work, in public and in institutions – witness the disgraceful sexist behaviour by some MPs at Westminster.

Compared to the preponderance of incidents of harassment, inappropriate behaviour, verbal attacks, sexual assaults and murders, domestically and in public, by men-identifying-as-men, the few examples of violence by trans women against other women cannot be used to justify the transphobes' unacceptable alternative for trans people – blocking access to single-sex spaces (public toilets, refuges, etc) thus leaving the trans person even more vulnerable and fearful.

There is no doubt that women in the UK have suffered disproportionately through the austerity of the last 8 or 9 years. And it is still the case that on average two women a week are murdered by their partners or ex-partners. Recent reports show that despite these figures funding for women's refuges and support workers has been slashed by almost a quarter in the past seven years.

The clock has been turned back decades for women facing domestic abuse, particularly working class women with minimal resources. That is a situation which demands a collective response from women's organisations and the trade union movement focused around concrete demands. Clearly this is a time for united resistance, not division between trans women and cisgender women who face the same source of cuts – the Tories - and the same enemies.

In this situation any untoward targeting of transgender people and their calls for better rights as being 'the problem' by feminists or some on the left is misguided and counter-productive.

Those promoting these views never seem to think through what their insistence on excluding trans women from 'women's spaces' would mean in practice. It would mean that someone like me, who uses women's toilets as a matter of course, should instead use the men's in accordance with my birth sex.

I have never been challenged using a women's toilet: I imagine I would be frequently challenged if I attempted to use the male toilets, with potentially dire consequences. I don't think trans people should use disabled toilets, but in the absence of unisex toilets it seems that those demanding we are banned from women's spaces like this simply do not care and cannot empathise with our situation. It also begs the question of how such 'banning' would be policed.

### *How safe is the UK for trans people?*

Life for many trans people in the UK is beyond difficult and so the current surge of transphobic reaction over self-identification and women's spaces can be seriously and unnecessarily damaging. This was illustrated by a Guardian story on 12<sup>th</sup> October<sup>7</sup>. The report pointed out that a British trans woman living in New Zealand had been granted residency there on the grounds that she would be safer remaining in her adopted country where she had experienced no abuse or discrimination in the past seven years, in marked contrast to her previous experiences in the UK.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/12/british-transgender-woman-given-residency-in-safer-new-zealand>

But let's not rely on one case or anecdote to make the point. A recent Stonewall survey found that attacks on LGBT people in the UK had risen by nearly 80% in the past four years. Over 20 percent of LGBT people had experienced a hate crime or incident in the past 12 months compared to 16 percent in 2013. Around half of trans children had attempted to take their own lives and around 80 percent had self-harmed.<sup>8</sup>

### *Transphobia on the left*

On 7<sup>th</sup> October the left-wing paper the *Morning Star*, which has uncritically published a series of articles by trans-critical feminists over the past few years, printed points of view from two pro- and two anti- trans self-identification writers<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast to the pro self-identification articles both the anti- articles fudged the concrete question of what to put in place of the current proposals for amending and simplifying the GRA.

One argued that trans people need protecting from themselves (!) and need external verification of gender rather than self-declaration, and both suggested that the GRA needs (unspecified) reforms but that the specific measure of self-identification would not do the job.

Unfortunately they both then offered quite vague or abstract suggestions ('we should stop defining people by their gender in the first place', or 'there has to be a process beyond merely filling out a form') without offering clear or specific alternatives.

One of the *Morning Star* writers, Kristina Harrison, a trans woman herself, also had a letter published in September's issue of the *Socialist Review* making similar points to her *Morning Star* piece<sup>10</sup>.

In her letter she seemed to suggest that 'women' (which women?) should be able to veto demands for transgender rights. Yet socialists and others wouldn't accept such vetoes over the rights and demands of any other oppressed group, so why trans people?

She also argued that 'self-identification' is "the Tories' cheap and easy option", implying that a genuine anti-Tory position would be to oppose self-identification. Self-identification already exists without any apparent problems, we should note, in Ireland, Malta, Denmark and India; and India, Pakistan, Nepal and New Zealand also allow third genders on passports and other documents.

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/27/half-of-trans-pupils-in-the-uk-tried-to-take-their-own-lives-survey-finds>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-27f4-The-gender-identity-debate-explored#.WdonVFtSziU>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-27f4-The-gender-identity-debate-explored/#.WfKALrpFyyJ>

Kristina's view here is deeply mistaken. The proposed changes, including self-identification, were advocated for by trans people themselves, not the Tories. And if we take the analogy of same-sex marriage, adopted into legislation under a Conservative government with widespread cross-party support, socialists and progressives didn't oppose this on the basis that David Cameron and most Tories were in favour, so why apply this argument to trans issues?

Some socialist feminists mainly associated with the (old) NUT (now the new merged NEU) including the Vice-President Kiri Tunks and the union employee heading up the union's equality work, Ruth Serwotka, have recently launched a new organisation called *A Woman's Place UK*. They are promoting it as a new organisation to defend women's rights.

Its founding statement does include a line or two claiming to acknowledge the transphobia which trans people face on a daily basis (although not to have done so would have completely blown any credibility) but in fact it seems to exist mainly to organise around blocking any amendments which would make life less dangerous and stressful for transgender people (at no cost at all to women, I would claim).

Their latest concern seems to be the bid by trans comedian and actor Eddie Izzard to win a place on the Labour Party NEC. It appears they think that Izzard is not even properly trans, is really just a bloke, and if he were elected this would signal the shouldering out of 'proper' women from leading positions in the Labour Party. Apparently diversity is alright along as it is not too diverse. This take on Eddie Izzard contains not a hint of a political critique of his views, whatever they are, but is basically thoroughgoing transphobia.

### *The Census question – smoke and mirrors*

*A Woman's Place UK's* first general campaign has been to petition against a tentative proposal that the Office for National Statistics might try to include a third option on asking people's sex for the 2021 national census.

Now, it is certainly not easy (though hardly impossible!) to think of an exact wording for an appropriate census question which would satisfy all or most transgender or gender non-binary people, but the preferred alternative for *A Woman's Place UK* seems to be to stick with the current invisibility or erasure of transgender people in the census.

We're told by those who do not want to include trans people in the census that if there were such an inclusive option it would distort and degrade the accuracy of the statistics about the population's sex distribution. We would have a new category or categories, not just the current (in reality *inaccurate*) two. These stats, they say, are important when it comes to looking at possible differential access to health and employment, comparative rates of pay and so on. I addressed, and dismissed as exaggerated, this

objection in my previous blog post. Predictably the dog whistlers make absolutely no mention of the positive potential for trans or non-binary monitoring that such a question might yield.

At the same time as decrying the potential of a third option on the sex question trans-critical feminists say that they do *not* accept transwomen as women or transmen as men. Yet, like perhaps most transwomen when it comes to answering the current census question, I would tick the 'female' box in accordance with my gender identity and my official documentation, and thus I would be counted as officially female (despite my personal preference which would be to tick an 'other' or 'transgender' option if there was one available).

So there is a bit of a contradiction here: trans men and trans women are currently effectively treated as their acquired gender (or supposed gender identity) by the Census but would arguably support a third option question, while those who deny and campaign against the reality of our transgender identity argue for our continued inclusion/submersion within the statistical sex binary. This is surely odd, and certainly hypocritical.

The reason for this contradiction, I think, lies in the fact that there is an implicit acceptance by liberal and radical feminists, and some socialist feminists too it seems, of an essentialist binary in sex *and* gender, neither of which (to different extents and in qualitatively different ways) is actually true.

### *Other feminist views*

Thankfully not all feminists take such trans-critical viewpoints. In an interview in 2014 with trans blogger Cirstan Williams, Judith Butler, one of the originators of Queer Theory, was asked about her attitude to trans-critical feminists like Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys. She responded:

*"I have never agreed with Sheila Jeffreys or Janice Raymond, and for many years have been on quite the contrasting side of feminist debates. She appoints herself to the position of judge, and she offers a kind of feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices. I oppose this kind of prescriptivism, which seems me to aspire to a kind of feminist tyranny.*

*... One problem with [Sheila Jeffreys'] view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself "constructed" and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police comes along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person's sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory."*

A friend recently shared an article by Lori Watson<sup>11</sup>, a radical feminist cisgender woman who identifies as a woman but is often read as trans or as a man. Her position is sympathetic to trans people. She makes it clear that she believes trans women are women and she rejects any feminism that excludes trans women.

Her article is interesting in that it discusses what it is like to deal, practically and emotionally, with being challenged for 'being a man' in women's spaces such as public toilets. Her experiences of being socially interpreted as male but identifying as female have enabled her to empathise with the material reality of what trans people and especially trans women face on an everyday basis. She criticises trans-critical feminists for their underlying essentialist notions of sex.

This essentialism, I would argue, leads such feminists to effectively insist that transwomen 'ought' to continue to live in our ascribed sex and gender because to do otherwise is to 'caricature' women or contribute to implicitly enforcing society's gender stereotypes. This is an example of political moralism founded in a failure to understand, or even to deny the existence of, gender identity.

Lori Watson writes:

*"The criticism of trans women failing to act in ways that are consistent with an ideal of liberation from sex and gender is a little like criticising any of us for making a decent living under capitalism, or investing our retirement funds in the stock market, if the aim of liberation is the destruction of capitalism as a social, political, and economic system. Even Karl Marx had to eat in the here and now."*

### *What is a woman?*

Consider what is going on when we meet or see someone. When people interact there is generally no opportunity to inspect their primary or secondary sexual characteristics for 'comparative gender authenticity'. People will either read them as the gender they are presenting through clothes, hair and other signifiers (in which case the person's early life experiences will be *assumed* and if the person is in fact a trans woman they will automatically be assigned to the oppressed group 'women') or they will read that person as transgender and will react in ways which can vary from supportive and respectful, via neutral, to very hostile.

In her seminal 1949 book *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" Consistent with the philosophy of existentialism developed by her, Jean-Paul Sartre and others, women's subordination and oppression in society renders her and her body as an object rather than the subject

---

<sup>11</sup> Lori Watson, 2016, *The Woman Question*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Vol 3, Numbers 1-2, May 2016.

of her own destiny. Because there is no essential or inherent meaning to the concepts of 'man' and 'woman', in a situation of male oppression of women the meaning of 'woman' is given by men.

Although de Beauvoir, as far as I know, did not address the issue of gender identity and transgender (not really much of a public issue in her time – even the term transsexual had not been coined at that time), her approach seems potentially trans-friendly and inclusive to me.

While her rejection of biological essentialism and the understanding of the role of social construction in gender oppression is welcome, Marxists recognise problems in this attribution of women's oppression to 'men' (the patriarchy) rather than it being rooted in the social relations of production and reproduction in class society.

De Beauvoir sees patriarchy as the problem rather than class society and capitalism per se, and in particular the role of the family in capitalist production and reproduction. But her claim that 'woman' (as distinct from 'female') is a socially mediated, socially constructed category seems sound to me.

Her quotation about becoming a woman surely touches on a truth. While human fetuses start off sexually undifferentiated (except chromosomally, for the most part) we are born nine months later roughly equally divided biologically into males and females, with a smaller proportion of intersex people. (Nobody knows the actual proportion of intersex people because some of the many conditions are not picked up unless they are obvious or become an issue, eg in sports, or as a result of reproductive problems).

But being biologically male or female does not of course automatically map onto the genders 'man' or 'woman'. Even less does it map onto such descriptors as 'masculine' or 'feminine', *unless* you accept the view that biology (sex) determines gender in an essentialist, rather than interactionist, way.

Some trans-critical feminists (particularly some radical and liberal feminists) explicitly promote an essentialist view in regard to gender while others will claim that they want to maintain the long-held feminist (and socialist) distinction between sex as biology and the social construction of gender.

But many of this latter group then fall back into an implicit essentialism when it comes to articulating their objections to trans women or trans men being accepted by them as women or men. This is what underlies their denial that transwomen are women when they argue that it is 'because they have not shared the same experiences as natal women' in terms of puberty and early life. In reality, trans women who have transitioned post-puberty or later in life simply become late-onset women.

And all this, we should bear in mind, is before such trans critics try to grapple with genderqueer, gender fluid and non-binary identities which subvert the 'woman/man' binary itself.

Non-trans people, cisgender people, probably never need to consider what their gender identity is or how gender identity forms. There is no mismatch between their sex and their ascribed gender, no debilitating tension or grinding lack of authenticity that needs to be masked and suppressed (if the person is not yet out) at considerable psychic cost.

Norman Tebbit, a perambulating homophobic, transphobic Tory relic from the Thatcher era, apparently thinks that trans people are 'caused' by pollution. Back in the real world a much more likely explanation is that *everyone's* gender identity is a deeply held sense of self which forms neither as an exclusive derivative of our biological sex nor merely as a response to the social norms and gender expectations that we encounter.

If it were, arguably there would be neither transgender nor non-binary people, either because our chromosomes would be all powerful in forming our gender identity or because capitalist society's very strong and potentially pervasive gender binary would lock us all into the gender binary. But, to repeat, trans people clearly exist and have become increasingly visible. By their very existence they subvert the veracity of simple binaries in class society.

Much evidence strongly suggests that trans and non-binary gender identities have certainly existed in all cultures and probably throughout human history as 'normal' aspects of human sexuality and gender expression.

### *Gender identity as choice*

One trans-critical argument sometimes aired by some people who consider themselves socialists is that gender identity is a form of false consciousness analogous to many people's inability to comprehend their true material class position.

Thus someone may consider themselves middle class because they own their own house or car or work in white collar employment when what is decisive is their position in the social relations of production.

The analogy claimed is that just because someone believes themselves to be a gender which is different to their biological sex (a material reality) does not mean this is anything more substantial than a form of false consciousness. In other words, gender identity has no material reality.

To paraphrase the arguments I have come across, a person's biological sex is a material reality, but a trans person *chooses* to transition to an acquired gender, or at least to present as another gender, and as such a choice is not a material reality.

This is a serious misreading of the nature of gender identity and what constitute elements of material reality, and the claimed analogy just referred to is false. The fallacy is around the suggestion of 'choice'.

For trans people their transition is about aligning their body and their gender presentation with their gender identity. Where surgery is involved it is regarded as 'gender affirmation'. It is not a lifestyle choice. To suggest that it is trivialises transphobia and denies the reality of gender identity. Would those who make this claim also want to claim that a person's sexual orientation is a choice? Being gay, or bisexual, is a choice? If not, what is fundamentally different between sexual orientation and gender identity?

This sort of claim is nowadays only made by the worst homophobes, the sort of people who tout gay cures, for instance.

### *Trans-critical feminists are a minority*

Thankfully many more enlightened feminists, particularly some socialist feminists and those who embrace Queer Theory (like Judith Butler), decisively reject essentialism and are inclusive with respect to trans women, trans men and gender non-binary people.

In an interview in 2014 with trans blogger Cirstan Williams, Judith Butler was asked about her attitude to trans-critical feminists like Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys. She responded:

*"I have never agreed with Sheila Jeffreys or Janice Raymond, and for many years have been on quite the contrasting side of feminist debates. She appoints herself to the position of judge, and she offers a kind of feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices. I oppose this kind of prescriptivism, which seems me to aspire to a kind of feminist tyranny.*

*... One problem with [Sheila Jeffreys'] view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself "constructed" and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police comes along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person's sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory."*

### *Change the individual or change society?*

Trans-critical feminists have also accused trans people, in perceiving a mismatch between their gender identity and the gender roles and expectations society presses on them, of copping out by opting to change themselves and their bodies in order to fit better into society as it exists rather than seeking to change society to accept them as they are.

Presumably they expect trans people to put on hold their efforts to feel more comfortable and authentic in their bodies and lives until capitalist society evolves or is forced to become more ideologically and politically accommodating to transgender people.

This is a completely abstract and idealistic position. While some trans people will want nothing more than to fit seamlessly into their acquired gender role after transition, others will want to change *both* themselves and the society which oppresses them. Either view is legitimate and should be supported by socialists. There is no contradiction in this.

It is by no means a universal or inevitable consequence but the very experience of being trans and of finding oneself pitted against societal and institutional transphobia and the gender binary can generate an awareness and understanding of the endemic shortcomings of capitalist class relations and the need to end oppression by ending class society and exploitation.

With a small update, perhaps, to substitute 'black trans woman' for 'black gay woman' Tony Cliff's optimism in his 1978 article about the revolutionary potential in uniting all the oppressed in a working class mass movement is as applicable today as it was then, or in 1917 when the Bolsheviks led the greatest 'festival of the oppressed' so far in the 1917 October Revolution, one which, we should recall, almost immediately decriminalised homosexuality and abortion among other socially progressive measures.

A final thought on self-identification: No other oppressed group or protected characteristic is denied the right to the self-identification that bigots, transphobes and trans-critical feminists want to deny to trans people. BME people, people with disabilities (other than for means-tested benefits), religious groups, lesbians, gays and bisexuals, do not have to be verified and accredited by others in order to be who they are. Trans people should not have to either.