

Much ado about not very much? On trans-misogyny, trolls and moral panics

You might think that racism and Islamophobia, Brexit, more pay cuts, sexual harassment scandals, ministerial sackings and resignations, and of course not forgetting the transphobic tripe being aired in parts of the right wing mainstream media, would spur anyone on the Left to prioritise getting our act together to build the mass resistance we need.

Certainly most of us have been doing our best. In the UK many thousands of us marched, and some of us helped organise, the historic women's protests against Trump's inauguration at the beginning of 2017, and then again against his Muslim immigration ban.

We celebrated the exciting emergence of a new Left in the Labour Party around Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and now want to help build on the successes of the Left in the general election, successes which confounded the Right and the political centre.

In recent months we've welcomed the growing willingness of women to confront sexual harassment and misogyny in politics, the media and generally in workplaces and society. We've been doing our best to deliver solidarity to sporadic pay and pensions disputes and prod our supine union leaderships into active resistance to declining pay and conditions in the knowledge that the more we can generalise resistance, and especially industrial action, the shorter will be Theresa May's and the Tories tenure in Number 10.

And we do badly need to get rid of them. May is on borrowed time but her government could stagger on for months or years unless open mass opposition is stepped up. Having lost three cabinet ministers to scandals in just a couple of months she is a shell who remains in office only because both wings of her party are too afraid to dump her at the moment and the opposition outside parliament is still too muted. Weak though they may be, the Tories are still capable of visiting yet more vicious misery on workers and the vulnerable – more pay cuts, the Universal Credit rollout, health cuts, attacks on student union and trade union autonomy.

But building opposition to this is not made easier by the stance taken by a minority on the Left who are trying to block proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act. Despite their claims to the contrary these Left critics have made common cause with the arguments of the transphobic right and some feminists and have made it easier for the Tories to at least temporarily back away from implementing the proposed amendments that they floated only last summer.

Just after Christmas The Sunday Times (which has been no friend of trans people) carried a report suggesting that the consultation on the Act which was due to happen in the autumn would not now begin until at least next Spring or summer, if then. The excuse being offered was the need to examine in more detail the review the government carried out last year. They are now suggesting that the issue is 'complex' and 'divisive', as if that was not apparent before. Transphobic Tory MP David Davies has called on Justine Greening to ditch the plans to amend the GRA as it would give rights to people who are 'effectively cross dressers' to enter women's spaces.

At best this is an unnecessary delay, at worst the key proposal for self-identification, long advocated for by most trans people, is being kicked into the long grass. The responsibility for this of course lies mainly with transphobes of various stripes who have fuelled the moral panic over trans rights in the right wing press and sections of social media. But those on the Left who have been complicit in this must also bear responsibility.

I sought to address the proposals and the opposition which was developing into a moral panic in some detail in a couple of previous blogs. I would also recommend people have a look at Sue Caldwell's excellent article on these issues in the latest *International Socialism*¹. That moral panic is reminiscent of the sort of attacks which were commonly aimed at gays and lesbians a couple of decades ago.

While trans critics on the Left pay lip service to the need for unity in the face of Tory attacks their actions undermine that potential. By re-packaging and weaponising various anti-trans arguments normally proposed by some radical feminists and right wing transphobes they now claim that extending the current limited transgender rights will undermine women's rights (a claim hypocritically proposed by some on the Right, too), threaten women's single-sex spaces and pose safeguarding dangers for children and young people (remember the tosh about gays and paedophilia?).

One trans critical activist recently suggested in a Facebook post that 'the left has abandoned the terrain of speaking up for women, for free speech, for democratic debate, for children's rights, for evidence based scientific rationality'. It will, apparently, be the Left's fault if a hard right backlash gains traction. Really? I'm surprised we on the genuine Left are not also to be held responsible for global warming or the shrinking of Mars bars.

Such comments are not just exaggeration – they are an inversion of reality and quite outrageous accusations which seek to shift responsibility for the actions of this minority of trans critical leftists.

In light of the Tory government's retreat the trans critics approach now risks fuelling the confidence of right wing transphobes and trans exclusionary feminists to further

¹ Sue Caldwell, *Marxism, Feminism and Transgender Politics*, *International Socialism* 157, <http://isj.org.uk/marxism-feminism-and-transgender-politics/>

attack trans rights. It is an inversion of reality which targets the very people currently resisting the distortions and fear-mongering about trans people, particularly about trans women.

It seems to me that the Left critics are disturbingly off course. In a number of cases they appear to have courted coverage in the right wing media and have been uncritically linking and circulating articles from right wing transphobic sites to support their arguments, which no self-respecting socialist should be offering any credence or legitimacy to.

Nevertheless this minority claims that 'thousands' of other feminists and socialists who disagree with the proposals in question are being intimidated into silence. This is virtually impossible to objectively assess, although if one were to judge from the numbers of signatories (individual and organisational) to various statements, open letters and votes at union meetings and conferences, the scale of their claims seems unlikely but characteristic of a minority who want to suggest they are really many more than they appear to be.

In my two earlier articles I described the regressive arguments that trans critics and transphobes mainly of the Right but also on the Left have been retailing. Those on the Right repeat the same nuclear family-defensive, gender normative and heteronormative positions that they roll out against gay rights, abortion and divorce.

Obviously Left critics don't endorse these openly reactionary positions but the arguments being employed by Left and feminist critics against the extensions of trans rights, however mediated they may be by pseudo-socialist or even pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, actually originate in liberal/bourgeois or radical feminist ideas.

They are being aired on social media and in the mainstream media to try and block what are, on the face of it, quite minor amendments, such as self-identification in the application for a gender recognition certificate, and the possibility of gender-neutral documentation. It bears repeating here that where self-identification has been included in legislation elsewhere (Ireland and several other countries) the social impact has been negligible, life has not yet ground to a halt and women's rights have not been undermined.

Let me reiterate here that I am not levelling a blanket accusation that Left critics are transphobes of the same ilk as some radical feminists and right wing bigots. I think that such criticism accusing all trans critics (or gender critics as some refer to themselves) of being transphobic is unhelpful and certainly doesn't win any arguments.

Nor does 'no platforming', even of those who are unequivocally transphobic, help to promote discussion. Their arguments need to be confronted wherever possible. Opening up another front over 'free speech' is generally diversionary, as is attempting to use organisational means such as censure or union disciplinary procedures against

them. In the SWP we have consistently opposed the use of such 'bureaucratic' tactics aimed at the wrong targets and have preferred focusing on the political issues themselves.

It is important, however, to defend the principle that autonomous student unions should be able to no platform where appropriate (ie where fascists and Nazis are concerned) given that this right is under direct attack by the Tories in the name of free speech. In practice Jo Johnson's recent proposals to fine universities for breaches of 'free speech' will be used mostly to ban anti-Zionists, supporters of Palestinian rights and Left critics of Prevent and smooth the way for fascists to gain the right to platforms in our colleges and universities.

While the acronym TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist) is not necessarily a slur and may accurately describe some radical feminists it is also unhelpful if it's applied to every feminist raising concerns or objections to the GRA amendments.

Nevertheless, regrettably, it seems that at root the arguments promoted by some Left trans critics and those of Right wing religious bigots or trans exclusionary radical feminists are difficult to disentangle.

Attempts to block the GRA proposals, whether from the Left or the Right, need to be strongly opposed by socialists. This assumes even greater importance in light of the apparent Tory retreat on the issue. The starting point for that opposition has to be the principle that socialists stand in solidarity with all the oppressed, and trans people are very clearly an oppressed group in capitalist society.

Solidarity does not mean speaking *for* trans people or treating them as victims: it means standing with them in general and in particular when they resist their oppression and campaign for more rights. Some Left trans critics say they accept this, even agreeing that the GRA is too medicalised and restrictive (which it certainly is), but then they go on to oppose the proposals which are actually on the table without proposing any viable alternatives.

Their opposition is mainly directed at trans women rather than trans men and hinges upon whether trans women should be regarded as women. Left trans critics coming from feminist positions say they are not and, incidentally, appear to have appointed themselves spokespeople for all women when they say this. Most others on the Left, and including most of today's feminists it seems, say that for all social and political intents and purposes, they are. I have tried to set out why I think this is right in my two previous blog articles.

Socialists should defend trans people's right to self-define, their right to make decisions about their own bodies rather than have others, whether trans critical socialists or feminists or religious organisations or the state, restrict or deny those decisions, just as we defend the right of all women (of whatever class) to make decisions about their

bodies in respect of abortion, contraception, sexual activity, how they dress and so on. Not to do so in the case of trans people is to collude in the notion they do not have the right to make decisions about their own lives. It is a denial of authenticity. It is to treat trans people as if they are not in fact oppressed and not a valid part of humanity.

And as Julia Serano has put in her recent book *Outspoken*², “Any person who does not understand how injurious these trans-invalidations are to us simply does not understand transgender people”. p 133

Damaging consequences

We need to recognise that these criticisms and how they are aired are not abstract matters. They have real consequences for real people. The often casual transphobia which suffuses such arguments can be deeply damaging in various ways to those on the receiving end of them.

We should also recognise that this is a class issue, as is all oppression in class societies. Consequently we need to address this discussion in our class organisations as well as more broadly in society – in our political parties, our trade unions and workplaces. It is therefore a good thing that the main far left organisations in the UK (the SWP and Socialist Party), and the Labour Party leadership as well as a good number of trade unions have already come out in favour of self-declaration and for non-binary documentation.

It is important to be concrete about this. The workplace is a major hazard and a contested arena for trans people. Assuming that transgender people can get and keep employment (a big assumption) surveys show that workplaces are where much of the discrimination, harassment and abuse of trans people takes place.

Socialists have a key role to play in politically challenging transphobia at work – yes, through personal support and casework, but better still through collective responses like solidarity petitions, walkouts, industrial action and protests. As well as supporting individuals we need to take appropriate steps to *promote* trans equality and trans friendly policies at work and in society generally.

Every socialist should promote trans rights in just the same way that every socialist should fight racism, sexism, discrimination against disabled people and so on. That means that all of us in trade unions should be aiming to win our national unions and branches to support the proposals to extend trans rights.

‘No one deserves this’

² Julia Serano, 2016, *Outspoken: A decade of transgender activism and trans feminism*, Switch Hitter Press

As is obvious to anyone who dips a toe into the often foetid swamp of the current 'trans debate' there is little actual debate between opposing positions but often a great deal of invective. This can become focused on individuals and can be very nasty.

Recently a young trans activist in the Labour Party, 19 year old Lily Madigan, tweeted:

"Please stop. I can't handle it anymore. I'm so mentally distressed I can't eat or sleep or go to school. No one deserves this. There's only so many times I can read lies or my deadname [previous name] or misgendering. I'm just a teenager. Please just stop. I don't want to do this anymore."

Lily became the women's officer for Rochester and Stroud Labour Party a few weeks ago. She was immediately accused of 'displacing a woman' by some and the women's officer of a neighbouring Labour constituency resigned in protest. The vitriol and misinformation escalated when she applied for a place on the Jo Cox Women in Leadership scheme for women Labour Party members. There have been five hostile articles in The Times as well as others in various right wing newspapers which have prompted hundreds of highly abusive and offensive online messages to or about Lily.

Her case highlights the emotional and psychological price trans people can pay for being in the public eye. Seeing Facebook discussions become very heated very quickly is warning enough for many trans people to think twice before engaging even when tempted by outrage at some of the misinformation posted and circulated as fact.

But it is not necessary to be in the public eye to be affected by the slings and arrows of outrageous transphobia and trans-misogyny. Various trans people have commented on their experiences in recent weeks and months.

In a Red Pepper³ article in December Roz Kaveney wrote:

"We trans people stand accused of being the narcissistic consequence of gender theory and post-modernism, of being violent sex abusers merely by existing, of being ugly or of having had too much plastic surgery, 'mad, stupid or evil'. We have too much power and influence; we are a fanatical lobby of activists; we are funded by big pharmaceutical companies, the sex trade and rich consumers of pornography, whom we are using our IT skills to blackmail. We are a danger to women and young girls simply by using toilets and gender neutral changing rooms – we don't have to do anything wrong there, but are a threat simply by existing."

A couple of months earlier Katelyn Burns described the abuse (with screenshot examples)⁴ that she had been subjected to:

"Transitioning," she wrote, "has been a life saver, but ... there's a price to pay for this life I'm living. I've been doxed, mocked, harassed, abused, raped and threatened."

³Roz Kaveney, <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/transphobia-is-the-latest-weapon-in-the-culture-war/>

⁴<https://medium.com/@katelynburns/im-a-trans-woman-and-i-don-t-know-how-to-do-this-6958817a29b7>

And; *“Life on Twitter for a trans woman with a verified account is a constant drumbeat of shittiness.”*

Losing the plot

So it is deeply frustrating for trans people to feel they have to constantly justify their very existence and struggle for respect and improved rights not only against the usual right wing bigots and trans exclusionary radical feminists⁵ but also against some on the Left who they would normally consider allies.

Socialist arguments against the positions advocated by transphobic bigots and some feminists are clear-cut: we oppose essentialist arguments which read gender (ie woman/man), via binary gender socialisation, from biological sex. We similarly reject the argument that trans women cannot be women because they have not been socialised as girls or women, and trans men cannot be men likewise.

For one thing socialisation acts on real individuals, and individuals can inhabit very different social circumstances whether in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity. Some feminists seem to assume that socialisation is a unidimensional social force acting in the same ways on all individuals in a particular ‘sex class’ (not a term I like at all) but plenty of reports and testimonies by trans people cast doubt on this. In fact, a trans person is very likely to interpret and mediate gender binary and heteronormative pressures and expectations in quite different ways to those who unequivocally self-identify with their assigned gender at birth, as most people do.

Marxists also reject related feminist claims that all men oppress all women, that men benefit from women’s oppression and that the solution to ‘male privilege’ and ‘the patriarchy’ is to empower individual women to challenge male power.

Instead we argue that the source of sexism, misogyny, women’s oppression **and** trans oppression lies in the exploitative social relations that derive from capitalism’s drive to accumulate surplus value, and the dominant ideology of the nuclear family. The family acts as a key element in commodity consumption and the reproduction of labour power.

The nuclear family model remains the standard and the norm even if its boundaries have been expanded recently to incorporate nominally monogamous gay and lesbian relationships legitimated through marriage or civil partnership. Some ‘gender binary’ trans people can meet these standards as well, although a high proportion of gender variant people do not and thus pose a greater threat to the nuclear family model.

Nevertheless, trans women are subject to all the same oppressions as ‘natal’⁶ women – objectification, sexism, gender inequity, sexual assault and rape - and in addition, if read

⁵ Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist or TERF was a term coined by other radical feminists decades ago, not recently by trans people as a slur as some have claimed

⁶ There are various possible terms which could be used here, all of which carry assumptions or have other drawbacks. ‘Natal’ or AFAB (assigned female at birth) are probably the least objectionable.

as transgender, can be subject to trans-misogyny as well This is a term arguably coined by Julia Serano to describe:

'... how the existence of societal misogyny/traditional sexism greatly informs how people perceive, interpret, or treat, gender variant people who seemingly "want to be female" or "want to be feminine" (regardless of their actual identity).⁷

Trans-misogyny understood in this way (rather than the generalised identity-based way that many people have come to use the term to refer to any and all forms of discrimination targeting trans women – which Serano rejects) focuses on the particular hostility directed at those born biologically male who are driven to deny malehood/masculinity.

Crucially, this hostility stems from the same roots as the general 'anti-women' misogyny (demeaned, denied, diminished, dehumanised in respect to men) that is involved in the maintenance of women's oppression. Trans men are generally not subject to this form of hostility. I prefer Serano's understanding of the term as it helps us to focus on the common roots of women's and trans people's oppression.

To repeat, trans women are women, trans men are men, and the solution to both women's and trans people's oppression lies not through an identity theory or queer theory-inspired individually-focused approach but in collective working class agency to fundamentally transform the social relations of the capitalist societies all people are currently trapped in. The way forward lies in recognising the potential for class struggle to liberate our collective and individual consciousness sufficiently for us to organise successfully to forcibly divest the ruling class, who promote oppression the better to exploit us, of their economic and political power.

So much is obvious to Marxists and many other socialists. Why then are Left trans critics hostile towards aspects of trans rights since this seems inconsistent with their record of support for workers and oppressed minorities?

The main reason, I suggest, is that most of them have de facto fallen into an essentialism that they apply to transgender people even though they may deride essentialism when discussing women's oppression. When it comes to trans people they invoke arguments that rely on essentialist distinctions between biology and gender and the impact of gender-differentiated socialisation. This differentiation becomes possible once one perceives the roots of trans oppression to be different to women's oppression.

So, while Identity Theory is to be rejected in respect of women's oppression because of its focus on the primacy of identity categories and its disavowal of class and class struggle, some critics have coined a new pejorative term, 'Gender Identity Theory', the collapse into which apparently accounts for why the rest of the Left mistakenly supports trans self-identification.

⁷ Serano, 2016, p 70

Gender Identity Theory is a *bad thing* because it is the bastard child of Identity Theory. Gender identity is 'non-material', a feeling, an illusion/delusion. I think part of the mistake being made here is the implicit acceptance that because something is invisible or intangible it is not real, although presumably they would not claim the same thing about sexuality or class consciousness.

'Gender Identity Theory', the claim seems to be, denotes a form of liberal acceptance of the reality of something intangible which therefore falls outside historical materialist analysis. Gender identity itself is 'idealist', has no place in Marxism, is not part of the material factors embodied in the social relations of capitalism. I believe these claims are contestable on every count.

It may also be that, in the cases of a number of those promoting opposition to the GRA proposals, the relationship between the positions some of them hold as officials and national reps in trade union bureaucracies and the current historically low level of industrial struggle has meant they have in practice developed a reliance on top-down approaches which can foster a pessimistic attitude towards defending the limited gains of past struggles, such as those achieved by women and other oppressed groups.

There is a direct relationship between the level of class struggle and people's confidence to resist oppression. Marxists appreciate that the highest levels of resistance and opposition - revolutionary upheavals - are fundamentally 'festivals of the oppressed', as Lenin put it.

When there's mass action people join unions and they have more confidence to take up issues other than just the 'bread and butter' ones.

In the context of the current low level of industrial action some see demands for more rights by trans people as potentially undermining the rights of women, which are indeed seriously under threat from a ruling class pushing vicious austerity and neo-liberal orthodoxy.

In addition some of the Left trans critics in certain unions are used to operating within quite compartmentalised ways of thinking about oppressed groups, for example in the ways that most trade union equality groups are organisationally structured along the lines of the various 'protected characteristics' in legislation like the Equality Act.

Whatever the reasons, while critics from both Left and Right have been pounding keyboards trans people have been mourning more murders, burying friends who have killed themselves and daily battling harassment and discrimination.

As trans activist Zoe O'Connell put it in a Guardian article in October 2017, "*Trans teens are being killed while we debate non-existent problems*"⁸;

⁸Zoe O'Connell, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/12/trans-teens-killed-gender-reassignment-surgery-salman-rushdie>

“The most significant dangers to trans youth are not mythical gangs of doctors lurking outside primary schools, snatching unsuspecting children. That is an imaginary threat concocted to create a moral panic in an age in which homophobia is no longer acceptable in polite society. The most significant dangers are ignorance, hate and lack of vital support.”

Trans advocacy groups published figures for the 2017 Transgender Day of Remembrance in November showing that the number of trans people murdered has not been declining. Worldwide there were 270 notified murders of trans or gender non-conforming people this year. Over 2000 have been killed since 2008. As monitoring organisations point out, this is certainly a considerable underestimate. Most of the 102 killed in the US since January 2013 were trans women, and almost all of them were Hispanic or women of colour.

When Donald Trump announced a ban on trans people in the military he helped legitimate anti-trans sentiments and encouraged hostile state administrations in the US and far more widely.

Increasingly trans people are organised and fighting back. Battles for trans rights are happening all around the world. They deserve support and solidarity. In Turkey the brutal murder of prominent trans activist Hande Kader remains unsolved but an international campaign demands answers. In Japan and other countries the campaign goes on to end laws which require trans people to be sterilised before they can transition. In Malaysia trans and LGB people are struggling even for the basic right to socialise and organise.

In Russia trans people fight to reverse the recent ban on holding driving licences because they are ‘mentally ill’ and they resist far-right vigilante gangs who hunt and assault LGBT+ people. In Chechnya LGBT+ activists organise safe houses and a ‘freedom road’ to get gay and trans people out of the country to avoid being incarcerated in a state concentration camp in which at least three have died.

‘Female applicants only’

We don’t yet know what the eventual outcome of the government’s consultation on the GRA proposals may be, or even the timetable for parliamentary discussion of these assuming they are not permanently kicked into the long grass. Meanwhile the moral panic goes on.

On 6th December the Morning Star (which has a disappointing record on this issue) published two letters, one by a group of people (including some from trans-critical organisations and websites) which clearly implied that trans women are not women and that changes to the GRA threaten women’s rights; the other by a long list of trade unionists expressing solidarity with trans people and support for the proposed changes. I was happy to be a signatory to the second letter.

The trans-critical letter complained that the Labour Party had not exercised its legal right to an exemption under the Equality Act to limit applications to its Jo Cox Women in Leadership scheme to natal (cisgender) women, or as they put it, “to female applicants only”.

People surely cannot expect to make such demands on essentialist grounds without noticing that these are in essence the same exclusionary justifications proposed by right wing bigots. Deploying them in the current circumstances is effectively to provide cover for the ‘real’ transphobes of the right.

I have yet to see Left trans critics genuinely seek to distance themselves from right wing arguments and they did not do so in the Morning Star letter. In a further unworthy and untrue comment the signatories to the trans critical letter in the Morning Star also tagged proposals to amend the GRA as “Conservative Party proposals” whereas in fact the proposals have been campaigned for over at least a decade by trans advocates.

The proposals might just as well have been put out to consultation under a Labour government. Indeed the Women and Equalities parliamentary committee which carried out the survey of trans rights and announced the proposals was an all-party committee.

The outraged protestations by some on the trans critical Left about being politically lumped together with transphobic bigots would hold more water if they did not, in an echo of right wing and exclusionary feminist positions, also justify their objections to self-declaration by suggesting that trans women are not women by virtue of their chromosomes and/or their lack of socialisation as girls/women.

The claim that they are merely seeking to protect women’s rights which are allegedly threatened by improving trans rights is not only factually unsound but also profoundly pessimistic and certainly not a socialist position. Many of them even seem to think that women (themselves, presumably) ought to have a veto over trans rights.

Fight for women’s rights and trans rights

All of us on the Left should be promoting both women’s and trans people’s rights because advancing one advances the other. Women will not benefit from any failure to improve trans rights. Quite the reverse. If these proposals are rejected trans people will suffer and it will be the Right and the bigots who will celebrate. They will feel more confident to attack women’s rights and the rights of other oppressed minorities.

Think about the way that trans people’s rights are intertwined with women’s reproductive rights, for example, or how the interests of both women and trans people coincide with demands for greater safety and access to refuges.

It is also disingenuous of Left trans critics to protest that ‘all we want is a debate on these issues’. What they really want is not *debate* but a more prominent platform for their opposition and a specific political outcome: to block the passage of the current

proposals. Right now no doubt they will be heartened by the May government's apparent cold feet on the issue.

The starting point for all this confusion and obfuscation on the part of such critics is this: Aside from an initial, perfunctory and insincere genuflection in the direction of trans oppression they do not start from a position of recognition, empathy and solidarity with trans people. Yet trans people are certainly perceived as a threat by defenders of the family and capitalism – and that is another key reason, in addition to the ones outlined above, why any socialist, radical or progressive should offer genuine solidarity and give no succour whatsoever to essentialist and exclusionary arguments.