

## **Lecture on Trans Feminism** **first delivered Spring 2023 to the Feminism module**

The first, and perhaps most important, point that I want to make in this lecture is that **trans people are real people**. They are not a metaphor for gender disruption; they are not a symbol of ‘wokeism’; they are not an interesting ‘issue’ to ‘debate’, and they are not a political football. Unfortunately, at this particular historical conjuncture, they have often been treated as all these things, not just by transphobes, prospective Conservative Party leaders and newspaper columnists, but also by some feminists and even some queer theorists. In the seminar this week we are going to be analysing and historicising why this has been the case. But we must never lose sight of the fact that trans people are real people with lives to live, challenges to overcome and – let us not forget - feelings.

Shon Faye’s book *The Transgender Issue* (one of your core readings this week) makes this point very effectively and provides an excellent overview of the material issues – access to healthcare, employment rights, housing – that are fundamental to trans lives and trans rights. Although in this lecture we are going to be focusing particularly on transfeminism and the position of trans people within the British feminist movement, as historians it is always useful to be reminded that the people we study are real people and not just topics for an essay or seminar discussion. One of the reasons I emphasise this is because I want to draw your attention to the fact that, when today we discuss what has unfortunately become a highly controversial set of issues, we are very likely to be talking to people who are directly affected by them – who may be trans themselves, or who have friends and family who are trans. I hope this knowledge will encourage us to express ourselves sensitively, thoughtfully and with respect.

This is the first year that I have dedicated a week to teaching transfeminism, despite the fact that I have been involved in trans-inclusive feminism for about 15 years. I have to confess that one of the reasons why it took me so long to add this to the syllabus is because I have been unsure and, to be honest, quite nervous, about how to teach it. It’s impossible to be interested in feminism right now and not to have noticed how fiercely fought over the question of trans rights and its relationship to feminism has become. I do not think the so-called TERF Wars have been political useful, and I have therefore thought hard about how to avoid recreating them in the classroom. The question I keep asking myself is this: how do I, as a teacher, ensure that the classroom remains a space in which people can ask difficult questions and express opposing views, while also ensuring that the rights of trans people are respected?

As I’ve already said, my own position on the ‘transgender issue’ is not neutral. It is my view that the struggle for trans rights and the struggle for feminism go hand in hand, and that right now especially, as we see transphobia being mobilised by the far right across Europe and North America, it is all the more important for feminists to make solidarity with trans people. Often as a teacher I try to present both sides of the argument in a particular feminist debate (as I did in the lecture on pornography for example) and to avoid imposing my own particular perspective on you. On this question, however, I don’t think neutrality is possible. Just as it’s not possible to be neutral on the question of racism, I also don’t think it’s possible to be

neutral on the question of trans rights, and therefore I don't think trans rights is something that we can 'debate' in an even-handed way.

At the same time, I do think the classroom has to be a space for people to be able to ask hard questions, to listen to different points of view, and, of course, to learn something new. I think that today's Left, especially on social media, sometimes expects us arrive into the world as fully-fledged intersectional feminists, when in fact we are all people born into a racist, sexist, capitalist and transphobic world and we need to 'unlearn' a lot of this socialisation. So I don't want people to feel frightened to speak just because they haven't fully grasped all the finer points of trans feminist theory and all the correct terminology – it's okay to say that you find something confusing, or aren't quite convinced, or have further questions. This is a difficult balance to strike, and I'm probably not going to do it perfectly. I'd like to invite you to also seek to strike this balance in today's seminar, as well as to give me feedback on how you think this session went – either by coming to talk to me in my office hour or when you fill in your module feedback forms later today.

I'm going to move on now to clarifying some of the terminology you will have encountered in your reading this week. As Koyama says in her 'Transfeminist Manifesto', the word

**'trans'**  
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is often used as an inclusive term encompassing a wide range of gender norm variations that involve some discontinuity between the sex a person is assigned at birth and her or his gender identity and expression.

It therefore encompasses trans women (people who were assigned male at birth but who identify as women) and trans men (people who were assigned female at birth but who identify as men) as well as 'many trans people who do not conform to the male/female dichotomy', people who are often referred to today as 'non-binary'. Trans people include those who have hormone therapy and/or gender reassignment surgery, *and* people who live as a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth without having undergone these kinds of interventions (and who therefore may have genitals that are usually associated with a different gender from the one that they identify as).

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The word '**cis**' is used to refer to people whose gender identity is in alignment with the sex they were assigned at birth. So for example, I am a cis woman because my birth certificate declared that I am female, and this corresponds with the fact that I identify as a woman. Although this has become common parlance today, some people don't use the word 'cis'. Koyama's 'Transfeminist Manifesto' refers instead to 'non-trans' women; while some trans-exclusionary feminists refer to 'women born women'.

**'TERF'** is an acronym that stands for 'trans-exclusionary radical feminist', referring specifically to people such as Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys (whose work appears on the reading list this week). As you all know from this module, radical feminism refers to a very specific ideological current within feminism, and originally TERF was making reference to this. However, the word has increasingly become shorthand for trans-exclusionary feminists in general. Today, trans-exclusionary feminism is not limited to radical feminists

but also includes some liberal feminists, conservative feminists and socialist feminists. I therefore prefer to use the term ‘trans-exclusionary feminists’ because it’s more accurate – e.g. it refers to those feminists who exclude trans women from the category of womanhood and therefore from the feminist movement. Such feminists often argue that TERF has become a slur and instead refer to themselves as ‘**gender critical**’ feminists – e.g. they are feminists that believe that someone’s biological sex is immutable and separate from their gender identity. I will be looking at these views in more detail further on in this lecture.

Finally, a word of advice about writing – trans people ask that when reference is made to **trans women**, that this be written as 2 separate words (akin to black women, white women, heterosexual women, lesbian women – e.g. just another type of woman) rather than all one word – ‘transwoman’ – which implies that trans women are a separate group from all other women.

I’m now going to move on to highlighting some of the key points of crossover between the struggle for trans liberation and feminism, what is often referred to as ‘trans feminism’. (I’m not going to go into these in a lot of detail because I want you to discuss them more in class)

- As you all know from this module, ever since the emergence of an organised woman’s movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, **bodily autonomy** has been one of the touchstones of feminism. Be this women’s right to freedom from sexual and domestic violence, or a woman’s right to choose whether or not to have a child. Bodily autonomy is also central to trans liberation – the right to dress and look a certain way without fear of violence; the right to gender reassignment surgery without having to jump through unnecessarily difficult hoops set up by the medical establishment.
- Women and trans people are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and domestic abuse, and in both cases this violence is symptomatic of a patriarchal society which defines them as inferior to cis men and uses violence to ‘keep them in their place’.
- Feminism has also always rejected the notion that biology is destiny – e.g. that being born with a particular set of genitals should circumscribe what you are allowed to do. Trans people also call this into question – by demanding the right to transition from one gender to another. Disrupting the gender binary also entails disrupting its hierarchy – e.g. the notion that male superiority and domination are ‘natural’ and cannot therefore be changed. Trans people *and* cis feminists both suffer ‘greatly at the hands of patriarchy, which punishes us for transgressing the roles laid out for us from birth.’<sup>1</sup>
- There are many other ways in which women and trans people experience misogyny in similar ways (the policing of body image; pressure to conform to a normative type of femininity; being seen as weak, irrational and emotional) but I will leave you to discuss these further in the seminar.

Given that I’ve just argued for an obvious affinity between the struggle for trans liberation and women’s liberation, why do some people see them as antithetical (and why does the

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<sup>1</sup> Shon Faye (2021), p.239.

media so frequently present them as such). I think the first point to stress is that the vast majority of feminists *are* trans-inclusive, and see trans people as natural allies for the reasons that I've just described above. It is, however, necessary to explore the phenomenon of trans-exclusionary feminism which has become particularly vocal and visible in Britain over the last 10 years.

Trans-exclusionary feminists argue that trans women are not 'real' women and therefore should not be included in the feminist movement. Particular attention is paid to how they should be excluded from women-only spaces such as women's refuges, women's prisons and women's toilets. Trans-exclusionary feminists often justify this on philosophical grounds, arguing that sex (bodies) and gender (the social role attached to them) are distinct. While feminism has long argued that gender is socially constructed and therefore malleable, trans-exclusionary feminists argue that sex is biological and fixed. Moreover, many of them claim that women's oppression historically derives from their biology – in particular their ability to bear children.

Trans-inclusive feminists, by contrast, argue that sex as well as gender is socially constructed, and that sex is defined through gender. Biology and science are themselves shaped by the historical and geographical context in which this knowledge is produced, and are therefore shaped by social norms and ideas of correct gender roles. To quote Shon Faye: **[slide]** 'Sexed bodies never exist outside of social meanings: consequently, how we understand gender shapes how we understand sex. The gender critical feminist idea – that there exists an objective biological reality which is real and observable to everyone in the same way and, distinct from a constructed set of subjective gender stereotypes that can be easily abolished – is an oversimplification. The way we perceive and understand sex differences and emphasise their significance is so deeply gendered that it can be impossible to completely divorce the two.'

This does not mean that there is no difference between sex (bodies) and gender (social roles) but that that difference is not always easily recognised or mapped. Trans women are often perceived to be women, and so experience misogyny, regardless of their genitals or the gender they were assigned at birth. Or they fail to 'pass' and are perceived as deviant, effeminate men et cetera, an attitude which is also informed by misogyny and patriarchy which upholds masculinity as superior and subjugates anybody who deviates from it.

This view of *sex* as socially constructed, is often associated with third wave feminism and/or queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam. Second wave feminists, it is often presumed, worked with a clear distinction between sex as fixed and biological and gender as socially constructed. Certainly the notion of sex as socially constructed has become far more explicit and dominant since the 1990s, but I would like to ask you as historians to consider whether you think it's correct to say that it only came about during the third wave. Shon Faye, for example, points out that many second wave feminists were already pointing to the many ways in which the sexed body was also shaped by culture and society, and in the seminar I want you to think about some of the theorists that you've read over the course of this module and what they have to say about it. Furthermore, I'd like you to draw on your knowledge of the Women's Liberation Movement to consider whether trans-exclusionary

feminism was an important force in that movement and whether trans-women were able to be involved in it. At present, the jury is out on this – but there's some interesting historical research being done on it as we speak so you could make an important contribution to this field.

Trans feminism is often inspired by Black feminism and an anti-racist perspective when arguing for the need to include trans women within the category of woman. Let me explain this: a trans-exclusionary perspective, which foregrounds biological sex as the key identifier of what makes someone a woman, not only excludes some women from this definition but also homogenises the experiences of women who fall within it. In other words, it relies upon an assumption that possessing a vulva creates a shared experience of womanhood in a way that cannot be understood by people who do not possess this physiology. But Black feminism – and many feminisms developed by other marginalised groups such as lesbians and working-class women – long ago pointed out that there was no one universal experience of womanhood. And that when this was claimed, it was usually a narrow definition of white and/or middle-class womanhood that was being falsely universalised. In other words, women's experience of patriarchy is cut across, shaped and often changed by her race and class etc. So trans women may have a particular experience of patriarchy and misogyny and being a woman (although not all the same one) just as all cis women have a particular experience of being a woman dependent upon their particular ethnicity, economic position, age, religion, et cetera et cetera.

Moreover, trans feminists point out that the notion of there being two distinct biological sexes, is not a fixed scientific fact but very much the product of the European Enlightenment and the British Empire. Many non-western cultures had different approaches, some identifying up to 6 different sexes or having more fluid boundaries between who counted as a man and who counted as a woman. But colonialism often entailed the violent enforcement of Western notions of a sex binary on these cultures.

I'm going to end this lecture by prompting you to think historically about why the so-called TERF Wars are happening now, and taking the very heated form that they have. Why is it useful for the global far right to identify trans people as a symbol of everything that's wrong with a so-called metropolitan elite and Western decadence? Why are trans-exclusionary feminists particularly concerned with identifying trans people as a threat to women's rights rather than the many other issues they could choose from? What is it about the wider political context, and the nature of today's public sphere, that encourages this discussion to be so hostile? Is trans-exclusionary feminism a natural development from second wave theories of sex and gender, or is it in fact something new and particular to the 21<sup>st</sup> century?