

Any Excuse to Denigrate Radical Feminism

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Abstract

For the past week or so I've been digging through just about every post I could find about this post on I Blame The Patriarchy. I was planning on writing a mega-post in response to the different blog posts I found, but today I found this post by ampersand at Amptoons.com. Ampersand breaks it down [...]

Article

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“Argument #1: The argument from freeform, irrational hatred of transsexuals. Luckynkl provided such an exaggerated example of drooling, bile-soaked hate that if I hadn't known her for years, I would suspect she's a sock puppet intended to discredit feminism. Here's a couple of examples, drawn from a dozen or more similar statements:

In this case, the important part of Lucky's argument isn't the argument itself (which is based on the nonsensical notion that men “or transwomen” who are apt to break the law by being violent against women in public bathrooms, will be stopped by the sign on the ladies' room door). Lucky's real argument here isn't what she says. It's her derisive, sneering tone: the point is to let transwomen know that they are “men” (in Lucky's view, men are evil) and that they are semi-human objects of contempt. The most reasonable reply to Lucky's argument is (to quote Brownfemipower): Fuck you. Lucky's a bigot and an asshole; the difference between Lucky and a Klanswoman is only in which oppressed minority her hate is focused on. (I should note that although Lucky was the most extreme, several feminists joined her in her hate-fest.)”

The same thing dawned on me in the last week. Lucky's comments are not much different than the comments of the neocon extremists over at Say Anything blog:

Argument #2: The argument from essentialism. “All of these arguments are based on the idea that there is an essential, universal ‘womanhood’ which ‘women born women’ have access to, but transwomen do not. This argument assumes that our essence is determined by what's between our legs at birth. In this view, our abilities and potential is determined not by our individual talents, desires and actions, but by which box the doctor checked off on the form a few minutes after we came screaming into the world (‘we are born, not made’). Women are the class that feels longing when faced with a cute two-year-old; men are the class that, I dunno, feels a longing for power tools or

something. Haven't we heard this before? This is the conservative, anti-feminist vision of gender that feminism has been fighting against for centuries. Feminism was born to fight against this vision; to fight against the harm done to women and men who are shoehorned into these obsolete, confining gender roles; and to fight against the warped culture created when people are taught that gender roles must be respected."

I do think that much of what is looked at as "womanhood" is a cultural default and not an innate state. That being said, I am also personally aware of the fundamental biological differences that hormones regulate.

As far as "feeling of being born in the wrong body," I do see some validity in this claim. There have been studies comparing certain structures in the brain between transsexuals and natal men and women.

Before I comment on biological determinism, to be clear, I'd like to define it.

While I do think the above study would indicate some amount of biological tension, I don't like calling it "determinism": I don't believe that just because our biological structure tells us to do something that we necessarily will. I think of it more like biological "suggestionism." For example, women and men have a certain amount of biological drive to procreate, but not all choose to do so.

"That some feminists are willing to throw core elements of feminism overboard in order to exclude transsexuals speaks volumes."

But are these people really feminists? If these "feminists" throw out the core elements of feminism, it would seem to me they've morphed into something that isn't feminism. Many Christians claim to follow Christ, but few live their claim.

"Note that essentialism isn't limited to just biological essentialism. There is also "experience essentialism"; in this case, certain experiences are said to define womanhood, always in a post hoc manner designed to exclude some unwanted class of women. As Brownfemipower points out, making "womanhood" an exclusive space in order to keep out unwanted, marginalized groups is not something new, or something that has been done exclusively to transsexuals. Throughout history, the experiences of relatively empowered women has been positioned as the norm; the experiences of other women is then positioned as non-representative of "womanhood." This has happened (and is still happening) to women of color, to lesbians, to Jewish women, and it is currently happening to transwomen."

I would never claim that my experience is the same as a natal woman's experience. I'm not a natal woman. The only genuine experience I can know is my own, but that fact doesn't invalidate me as a woman either. I live in this culture as a woman. I fly under the radar and am accepted by society at large as a woman. I don't wear t-shirt's saying, "I have an inverted penis," or "If you like my tits, you'll love my cock." You'll only know if I don't pass well, or if I tell you.

As far as white male privilege, if anyone is aware of it, it's me. I have less personal security and less job security now. I know what it's like to be sexually assaulted in public. I know what it's like to be passed over for a job. I'm a seasoned radiologic technologist who has worked for the same company for almost 20 years. Since transitioning my gender I've been denied 16 times for job transfers. I won't

even go into the depths of all the stereotypes I encounter if I'm open about being trans. Suffice to say some think they automatically have the right to tell me what about my life isn't "womanly."

"Experience essentialism" reminds me of "my dick is bigger than yours" contests that men engage in. It's basically a victimization pissing contest.

To my eyes, a lot of the "womanhood is our exclusive domain" arguments strongly resemble anti-same-sex-marriage arguments. "Womanhood," like "marriage," is described as if its implications and social meaning has never changed in thousands of years; this false description of unchanging history is then used to argue that all change must therefore be not only bad, but a threat to those who are currently married and/or women. Consider this quote from Magickitty, arguing against accepting transwomen as women:

First of all, is there a time frame for "knitting?" I may not have lived my entire life being oppressed by the patriarchy, but is that a requirement for womanhood? How long must I suffer before I am able to knit? The oppression I feel may not stretch my entire life, but the amount of it served up now is deep and expansive. If I live as openly trans, I am not only shit on by men, but my a good portion of women as well.

Maybe I'm dense, or vagina-centric, but is this a comment on a post-surgical vagina verses a natal vagina? In my sexual experience, the shape, taste, and overall structure of women's bodies differ greatly.

Argument #3: The argument that the word "transphobia" is a form of censorship. Sly Civilian quotes this comment, left by Heart at BFP's place:

Conservatives frequently use this exact argument to try and put discussions of racism, sexism and homophobia out of bounds. The idea is that because these concepts make (some) people in the majority culture so uncomfortable that they hesitate to speak, these concepts should therefore not be included in our discussions. The emptiness of Heart's argument is, I think, obvious. Transphobia does not become an illegitimate concept to discuss merely because discussing transphobia makes some cisgendered people uncomfortable. It's true, of course, that someone could be accused of being transphobic when they're not. This is obviously hurtful when it happens, but not nearly as hurtful as "refusing to talk about transphobia at all!" The need for transsexual and transgendered people to be able to talk about how bigotry harms them outweighs whatever "need" cisgendered people have to not be pushed outside their comfort zone.

I'm a big one on defining terms before debating a topic.

Maybe I'm an elitist, but I value those that live an "examined life." I have phobias, and I'm grateful for them! Exploring and dispelling my irrational fears makes me a stronger and more diverse person. I'm not so egomaniacal to think that I know everything. I learn by interaction and analyzing. In this discussion, I may have some very patriarchal ideas that have no basis in fact and are left over from my male socialization. If I can get my own ego out of the way and listen and learn, I believe I can grow.

Argument #4: Transsexuals are dupes of the medical establishment. Over at Little Light's blog, in comments, Ravenmn writes:

Nanette responded:

The only way they can make that argument, in my view, is if they feel the same sense of ownership over the bodies of trans-folk as the right wingers and others feel they have over women. Funny how sometimes the language, actions and tools of oppression or marginalization take such familiar and similar forms, across beliefs, political views and boundaries.

I agree with Nanette, but I'd add that it's true, historically, that the medical establishment has used access to medical treatments (like prescription hormones and surgery) as a means of forcing transsexuals to endorse and live by traditional gender roles. As far as I can tell, this has become less true in recent years, to a great extent because many transsexuals have actively resisted the conservative status quo of the old medical establishment.

Finally, it's worth noting that the "dupes of the medical establishment" analysis ignores the fact that not all transsexuals and transgendered people seek medical help to transition. There are a wide variety of trans narratives: One persistent flaw of the anti-trans critiques is that they frequently are framed as if male-to-female surgical transsexuals who describe themselves as "women trapped in male bodies" are the be-all and end-all of transsexual and transgendered experience.

This is a good juncture to point out the similarities of this argument (i.e., that transsexuals are being duped by the medical community) to that of the religious right about homosexuality (i.e., that the mental health field is duped by the pro-homosexual lobby). The reality is that the study of gender dysphoria has been around since the dawn of the 20th century.

"In persons diagnosed with transsexualism or profound GID, sex reassignment surgery, along with hormone therapy and real-life experience, is a treatment that has proven to be effective. Such a therapeutic regimen, when prescribed or recommended by qualified practitioners, is medically indicated and medically necessary. Sex reassignment is not 'experimental,' 'investigational,' 'elective,' 'cosmetic,' or optional in any meaningful sense. It constitutes very effective and appropriate treatment for transsexualism or profound GID." - The Harry Benjamin Standards of Care

This debate boils down to one of faith versus science. It seems there's a section of the feminist movement that is based more on faith than actual analysis of data. If the feminist movement's underpinnings are on a statement of faith, then it would seem that feminism is not a social, political or cultural movement, but a religious one.

Argument #5: Transsexuality implicitly endorses essentialism and traditional gender roles. In the I Blame The Patriarchy thread, Edith (of the blog Because Sometimes Feminists Aren't Nice) wrote:

As I've stated above, I think that there is evidence that transsexuals are "wired" more like women than men. Does that mean that every person that is "wired" that way will transition? I don't think so. No more than the man who is "wired" to be gay has to be in a same-sex relationship. Action can be controlled, but desire is a biological response to stimuli.

“[â€] In this way, I personally think that the more modern, ‘biological’ view of transgender is the more essentialist. I agree with Edith that the ‘female brain trapped in a male body’ â€” or the ‘male brain trapped in a female body’ â€” view of transsexuality is essentialist. But it’s hardly as if ‘X brain trapped in Y body’ narratives are a fair way to describe all of transsexual and transgendered thought! There’s no doubt that some individual transsexuals â€” like some individual cisgenders â€” have essentialist views. But to take disagreements with how some transsexuals view gender as a criticism of the entire idea of transsexuality is unwarranted.”

I like discussing the theory of gender in the context of my own journey. I’m willing to discuss the validity of my beliefs. I think it’s important that I understand my own motivations. But for all the theory I discuss, my life experience is what has taught me the most about gender dysphoria. For years I suffered silently. I was afraid, confused, and needed constant validation from others. I struggled with it for 33 years and tried everything I could do to hide it, bury it, fix it, or Jesus it away.

For me personally, I don’t go around saying I’m a “woman trapped in a mans body.” I can say that I’ve always felt more of a spiritual connection with women, I’ve always felt more comfortable in the company of women, and I feel more comfortable with this body configuration. I don’t have all the answers about the genesis of my gender dysphoria. But after 33 years of trying running from it, I’ve tired from the fight. I’ve come to the conclusion that this is who I am, and simply accept it and grow from it.

The results are pretty obvious to those that know and love me. I’m no longer an insecure person that needs someone to validate me. I know who I am, what I want, and what I will and will not accept. I am an individual. I can only control things that I do and I am responsible for. I have worth based on how I feel about me, not how someone else feels about me. I know who Marti is, even if you are confused about what “sex” or “gender” Marti is. Knowing Marti, finding Marti, has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I’ve been transitioning and on hormone replacement therapy since September 1st, 2001. Five years out, I am the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. I feel focused, centered, and in control of my life. Growing into the person that I am has been one of the best things that has ever happened in my life. I am happy. I am content. If allows me be to function in society and find joy in life, I believe it’s evidence that I’ve made the right choice.

“In a sense, those transsexuals who move from one sex to the other ‘entrench the system’ of gender as a binary, because they are willing to dress and be identified in society as one gender and not the other. But all of us go along with the gender-binary system in some ways, whether its women who shave their legs or faces, men who avoid wearing dresses and gowns, or any of a thousand ways people adapt to the gendered society we live in. It’s simply unfair to single out transsexuals for criticism on this score. (I discuss this in more detail in this post). To (once again) quote from Winter’s excellent post: Moreover, why are transgendered and transsexual women scapegoated and made responsible for upholding gender roles and the patriarchy when every single one of us upholds gender roles every day of our lives? I uphold gender roles every time I call myself a ‘woman,’ every time I answer to my gendered first name, or use my patronymic surname, every time I buy an item of clothing classed as female in a shop for women, every time I use the toilet with that symbol on the door which is supposed to denote womanhood. We are all of us thoroughly gendered under the current conditions. If gender eventually disappears, it will go in its own time; we cannot just get rid of it and we certainly can’t get rid of it by denying other people their rights to their own gendered embodiments.”

Ultimately, I don't think gender identity, in and of itself, is a bad thing. Diversity of thought, of action, and of being are what make this world beautiful, unique, and full of wonder for me. The gender binary is fiction. Like many things in life, gender is a spectrum. In light of that spectrum, gender identity should be a decision that is made from personal choice, not something that is expected or forced by society.

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