

TRANSADVOCATE

What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism (Part Two)

By John Stoltenberg

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Abstract

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Article



What if male supremacy is no longer about reproductive biology? What if male supremacy's engine has changed?

That

question comes to mind whenever I read in trans-critical radical feminists' writings their bedrock argument that women are oppressed on account of their reproductive capacity. This central historical assertion often appears as a proof text in debates with trans folk and their allies--like a factual gotcha hurled to discredit the opposition. Occasionally this viewpoint is referenced to account for who's doing the oppressing (sperm producers presumably). More often it's used to set apart the folks the oppression happens to--like a tenet of faith that's self-evident to its true believers because their membership in the

oppressed sex class rests on their biological certitude.

The argument that women are oppressed on account of their reproductive capacity leads logically and ineluctably to several corollary arguments. For instance, the view that if female binary biological sex is erased in law, an indispensable lever for resisting women's oppression will be lost. Also: the view that by definition no one can be a woman unless she was born with said female binary reproductive capacity. Also: the view that liberal and queer theory ideas about gender multiplicity--according to which someone can transition to being a woman even if born with male binary reproductive capacity--are bollocks. Trans-critical radical feminism argues that such notions--sometimes conflated as "transgenderism," "transgender ideology," or "the trans-activist agenda"--are not only wrong-headed; they're out and out heresy, for they gut radical feminism's foundational analysis of patriarchy. Take away the linchpin notion that women are oppressed on account of their reproductive capacity and the whole radical feminist revolutionary project falls to pieces. Therefore, say these trans-critical radical feminists, to be radical feminist and trans-inclusive is oxymoronic and a betrayal of all the women who were born that way.

Lately, I have read several trans-inclusive feminists take apart the notion that biological reproductive capacity holds any functional validity as a marker of who gets to belong to the category woman. To paraphrase some of these writers' arguments: The very logic of the category is flawed. There are way too many exceptions, even among those who were assigned female at birth (so-called women born women)--too many grown people deemed women who never were nor could be mothers. Therefore, transwomen should not be shut out of the category either. Moreover, the concept of binary sex isn't even scientifically grounded in our species' anatomy. Like the concept of race, binary sex is a cultural projection not borne out by scientific evidence. Therefore, to insist that transwomen cannot be admitted to the sex class women is simply specious biological essentialism. Though this essentialist insistence is sometimes called out by trans activists and allies as "transphobia" and "transmisogyny," at its most cogent core, it's a sexual-political philosophy derived from faulty logic and bad science.

I can see why this kind of thinking is utterly unpersuasive to any radical feminist whose politics hinge on the belief that throughout patriarchal history, women and only women have been systemically oppressed on account of their reproductive capacity. Origin stories for this system vary: There was a matriarchy once and male people overthrew it. Male people needed certainty about who were their offspring and heirs, so they made female people chattel. Childbearing sealed female people's fate. The tradeoff was that the male people defended the tribe and ran things. Or so the anthropological fable goes. For argument's sake, let's assume that this story is true. It really happened at a point in homo sapiens history that patriarchy arose, that father right prevailed, that anyone born with binary female reproductive capacity was screwed. And then began the entrenched oppression and exploitation of women that we see nearly everywhere today. In line with this origin story of patriarchy, the liberators of women as women must never cede their central certainty that females are born into a world where it's their inferred fertility that occasions their oppression. Moreover, the radical feminist revolutionary project to root out patriarchy must always keep its sights on the binary biology that got it planted, to

begin with.

But

there's a big problem with the theory that women as a definable category are oppressed on account of being born with presumptive capacity to bear children. Even from a radical feminist viewpoint, one can argue that it's the oppression that causes the sex class woman to exist--not the other way around. Not only are women "made not born," but the very category woman is a political construction--kept demeaned and defined as Other by those whose own distinct identity requires that they not belong to it.

We're

talking here of men and manhood, of course, and we're looking at how, culturally, the identity "real man" depends upon being deemed not a woman. Much aggression and dominance are required to sustain one's certainty that one is such a real man, because manhood is nothing if it is not against. Whether subjectively or objectively, whether in microaggression or massive full-on attack, manhood is an identity that does not exist except in opposition and negation. Manhood needs male supremacy in order to exist.

There are two observable dimensions of manhood as an identity: the personal and the political. For individuals who grew up aspiring to be bona fide members of the category "men," manhood functions as a personal marker for one's social self and a template of appearance, activity, affect, and attitude for presenting oneself as masculine. This personal dimension of the category identity has many stylistic variants, different ways of presenting oneself so that one will be recognized by others as a man, not a woman. But these esthetics do not have meaning apart from a core cultural code of ethics whereby manhood must be transactionally demonstrated in actions. Though this framing of masculinity as having both an esthetic and an ethic is not generally understood as such, there are now plenty of conversations that take the form of distinguishing which sort of masculinity might be healthy and which sort is arguably toxic. Basically, these deliberations are attempts to rescue a socially acceptable esthetics of personal manhood presentation from the identity's downside requisite ethics of derision and domination.

In addition to this personal dimension of the identity manhood, there is a political structure of manhood, and this too is not generally understood. Whereas the personal identity manhood can present itself in a plurality of ways (so-called masculinities), the political structure manhood is far more monolithic, hierarchic, and archetypal. The political structure of manhood is based in belief and behavior, not biology. Its mythic existence precedes any individual's attempt to self-identify with it. Apart from unquestioning belief in it, and apart from the autocratic behavior that asserts it, manhood as a political identity could not exist. The category "real women" has meaning only because without it there'd be no "real men." Today the persistence of male supremacy is, therefore, a function of entrenched social dominance, not our species' reproductive capacity.

Radical

feminists, knowing full well that biology is not destiny, have tried to denote, describe, and denaturalize this identity structure--"the sex class men"--with

reference to how it oppresses women. Men who oppress women, they say, are not born that way but become that way. Cultural misogyny is the great socializer that turns boys into rapists and batterers and killers. Male supremacy requires young men's psychic loyalty and makes them foot soldiers in the war on women. In this regard, radical feminism holds out hope that individual adherents to the personal identity manhood can change.

Some people raised to be a man can and do resist their acculturation. Some can and do repudiate the toxic ethics by which the personal identity manhood must be reiterated. Some can and do become allies and partisans in the revolution to root out male supremacy. Not all men but some. And that's a start.

This is the radical feminism I have learned and tried to live by. And this is why recent efforts by trans-critical radical feminists to naturalize the meaning of the category women seem wrongheaded to me. Defining the victim class women biologically instead of structurally begs a serious philosophical question about the purported victimizer class men: If women are oppressed on account of their reproductive capacity, is the oppression of women in men's genes too? Put another way: do penises cause rape? If so, we might as well give up the fight and yield to nihilism.

This nihilism is implicit whenever trans-critical radical feminists say that "transwomen are men." It would be more accurate to say that in intentionally defecting from the sex class men in order to live where they belong in the sex class women, transwomen are affirming that male supremacy is not biologically ordained.

In transitioning, transwomen become subject to the same male-supremacist social dominance that reifies the political category "real man." The same misogyny. The same risk of rape. The same pornographization. The same economic vulnerability to prostitution. The same race-based hate. That situatedness as second-class in male supremacy--as radical feminists of all people ought to know--is what makes transwomen women. And it's what by rights should make them respected as sisters in struggle.

I suspect that the reluctance of trans-critical radical feminists to recognize transwomen as women stems in part from resistance to the unbearable knowledge of what makes all women women. Given how much contempt and violence men deploy against women in order to keep afloat their belief they are real men in the world, to believe that procreative capacity is essentially what makes real women in the world must be a kind of comfort. But radical feminism was never about offering solipsistic solace within male supremacy. That's what liberal feminism and queer theory are for. What the trans moment offers radical feminism is a material reminder of its revolutionary roots.

John Stoltenberg, author of *Refusing to Be a Man*, *The End of Manhood*, and the novel *GONERZ*, is a trans-inclusive radical feminist, theater reviewer, and communications consultant based in Washington, DC. He tweets @JohnStoltenberg.

See also:

Part One: What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism by John Stoltenberg

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