

Trans and the Normalisation of Difference

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Mica Nava explores the trans issue in the context of other heated historical differences, like ‘mixed race’, that later became accepted norms or at least considerably diminished areas of contestation

The trans issue – the issue of transitioning from male to female or female to male -- has become increasingly topical and widespread. The experiences of trans people and gender dysphoria are now more freely discussed than ever before. The number of young people identifying as trans has increased more than fivefold in the last few years. Estimated numbers nationally of male to female and female to male trans are about half a million, which is approximately the same as the UK Jewish population (though of course it’s hard to establish either for sure). Over the last few years there has been an increasing sympathy for people who are profoundly uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth.

However, as readers will know, the matter is also extremely controversial and divisive. What’s more, unlike other complex social issues where opinions tend to split along a predictable left-right political axis, divisions in relation to trans do not. Although there now seems to be a gradual consolidation of pro-trans on the left and anti-trans – or ‘gender critical’ views -- on the right (see the disputes in the Tory Party and of course among fundamentalist religious groupings) this is by no means always the case. For and against positions – especially in the UK -- cannot be accommodated easily on a left-right spectrum. Most recently this has been visible in Conservative MP Penny Mordaunt’s support (albeit ambivalent) for trans rights and (right-wing) Labour MP Wes Streeting’s essentialist defence of natural difference. There are also significant, indeed toxic, divisions between feminists and in the lesbian and gay ‘community’. Interestingly progressives in the US, Spain and Argentina seem to be more united and inclusive.

People on the left in UK who don’t feel very strongly one way or the other and/or are not very informed about the issues tend on the whole to steer clear of the dispute. They are either unsure of what they think or, aware of the heated nature of the debate, cautious about expressing their views. But a consistent feature of the controversy is always the emphasis on *difference*.

Paradoxically some of the most virulent critics of the idea that a trans woman is a woman, are ‘gender-critical’ radical feminists, many of them lesbians and many, like Germaine Greer, among the radical voices of the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s. (For more see Shon Faye, *The Trans-Gender Issue*, 2022). However, unlike most feminists of that period, the gender-critical feminists of today adhere to a fixed idea of what constitutes a woman based on genitalia at birth. This diverges markedly from the inspirational conviction of most activists in the early women’s movement that boys and girls were *socialised* to be different, or performed difference, but were

not inherently naturally different. In contrast, the latter-day gender-critical opponents – among them conservatives and religious fundamentalists as well – believe that the ‘sex’ you were born into is of paramount significance and should remain so.

My view is that, yes, there are life consequences arising from the difference in the genitalia of babies born male or female, and that, throughout the world, growing up as a girl and becoming a woman is bound to be different from growing up as a boy and becoming a man. *But*, and this is the crux of my argument, *so what? Does this matter?* Why is this so important? There are other significant social differences between women born as female, for example between mothers and non-mothers, between poor and rich, between those with different skin colour and different sexual preferences. But currently none of these differences seem to incur a similar level of anxiety and hostility.

In this piece I don’t want to delve into the intricacies of the range of viewpoints or the increasing visibility and urgency of the trans issue today. I want instead to compare it to other historical moments and formations in which the law and inflexible sociobiological boundaries determined life chances and personal happiness but are now considerably diminished. At the time, these barriers and definitions seemed obvious and natural to many people. Flaunting them or failing to observe them could lead to ostracism, imprisonment and even death. Yet today these differences have become entirely normal. Although not always accepted, they are no longer legally enforced.

There have been many such regimes. Among the most inflexible was Jim Crow, the social and legal formation established in the USA during the early years of the 20th century, designed to ensure that black and white people did not marry or even mix in trains, restaurants, schools, hospitals, and swimming pools etc. The conceptual as well as the physical division was stark even if often invisible. The ‘one-drop rule’ prevailed, so that if your great grandfather was categorised as ‘black’ then so were you, even if your skin was light, even if there was no visible difference between you and the white girl on the cinema screen. In these cases, you ‘passed’ and were able to benefit from the more privileged sphere of whiteness. But even if you looked white you were ‘really’ still ‘negro’. And care was needed because the dreadful truth could unexpectedly be exposed by a ‘coloured’ throwback child. So, it was probably best to avoid the risk of having one.

Today in the UK these categorisations in relation to epidermal difference and ‘racial’ origin seem absurd to most people (despite ongoing discrimination in many spheres). ‘Mixed’ children constitute more than 10% of the UK population and are the fastest growing ‘ethnic’ group. Racism of the order of 20th century USA or apartheid South Africa has long been opposed in principle by the British left but now no longer seems very relevant to the political right either, as evidenced by the line-up for the Conservative Party leadership contest which included four candidates of colour out of the final eight candidates.

Yet the notion of ‘passing’ still has purchase in relation to sexual difference. Gender-critical radical feminists believe that even if you look and feel like a woman, there is a hidden history and moreover (in the case of trans women) a hidden penis, no less, which can give you away and reveal – like the throwback child -- the essential biological ‘truth’ of your being, your male sex.

Comparable obsessively maintained boundaries were also part of the way in which Jews were exposed and categorised by Hitler’s Nazi regime. As with some ‘black’ people in the US and trans people today, differences were not always apparent. So the minutiae of origin, identity at birth, marriage relations and appearance were taken into consideration in order to establish who was a ‘Jew’, as evidenced in the minutes of 1942 Wannsee Conference (written up by Eichmann) where Hitler’s inner circle speedily confirmed the ‘final solution’ and how most efficiently to

‘exterminate’ the European Jewish population though debated at some length on ‘the problem of how a part-Jew or ‘mischling’ should be categorised.

The loosening up of fundamentalist taxonomies of distinction is not a steady tale of progress. As with all historical shifts, change is halting and contested. Nevertheless, the evidence in relation to the trans issue indicates a growing inclusivity throughout the world – an expanding empathy and understanding that trans people are not significantly different from most other people. In this sense the situation echoes transformations in relation to gays and lesbians over the last decades.

In my book *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference* (2007) I tracked similar processes in relation to the cultural meanings attributed to epidermal and ‘racial’ difference in the 20th century and quoted Salman Rushdie’s pertinent and evocative comments about his controversial book:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformations that come of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*, and I have tried to embrace it.

Rushdie’s statement was written thirty years ago following the violent response to his 1988 book (of which, coincidentally, as I write, we have been vividly reminded following the new much-publicised attempt on his life). Fear of ambiguity and impurity is clearly more resilient and embedded than he (or I in 2007) predicted. But he was right to anticipate the direction in which modernity was moving, and to rejoice in mongrelisation, even if at the same time it generated a backlash, a polarisation of cultural positions, a simultaneous and imbricated clinging to the known and what he called the ‘absolutism of the Pure’.

Although Rushdie’s comments do not seem to anticipate gender fusion or transitioning – that is to say the kind of indeterminacy and ‘impurity’ of today’s expanding sexual identifications -- nonetheless, the process of ‘intermingling’, ‘mélange’ and ‘hybridity’ that he describes is definitely an aspect of the same broad process of mixing and transformation, of the way, as he puts it, ‘*newness enters the world*’ and the polarities and certainties of the past are challenged.

Thirty years hence the trans issue may still be contentious in this country. But I doubt it. Just as ‘homosexuality’ has, since the 1980s, become not only legal but also ordinary, just as epidermal variation in the British population has become routine, so will trans and LGBTQ+ more generally. Difference in this shrinking world is increasingly normal.

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