



Social Theory and Transgender: Beyond Polarization

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Abstract

This paper argues that social theory can cast light on some of the main themes in current debates about trans issues. It considers four such themes: social classification and social control; tensions between individual and group rights; access to public spaces; and the relationship between personal pronouns and social identity. In so doing, it seeks to reframe local disagreement and polemic through more general questions about our modes of living together, and concludes that these debates are at bottom about the future of civility.

Keywords Gender · Trans · Ethics · Narrative · Classification · Civil inattention

Some social structures can tolerate anomaly and deal with it constructively, while others are rigid in their classifications. The difference is probably the most important subject on which sociological research can focus.

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*

Hollar: bad manners?

Anderson: I know it sounds rather lame. But ethics and manners are interestingly related. The history of human calumny is largely a series of breaches of good manners...

Tom Stoppard, *Professional Foul*

membership categorization devices, Ian Hacking on ‘making up people’, Goffman on stigma, Elias on ‘figurations’, Sennett and Shils on civility, and MacIntyre on narrative.

Two things are noteworthy about this cluster of social theories. Firstly, it is social constructionist in some way, either in its focus on the symbolic universes that sustain a collectivity’s sense of social order, or in its attention to the resources we deploy in interaction for building and maintaining selves and worlds. Secondly, it is rather old, but I appeal to it here because its techniques of analysis, blown into the social sciences by the second wave of modernism that also gave us European art house cinema, were themselves developed in the midst of a revolution in lifestyles and sexuality, the exploration of new ways of being and of new ways of depicting and thinking about them running parallel, and sometimes hand in hand.¹

Introduction

If you are of a certain age and disposition, the debates over transgender issues can seem like a bed of hot coals best avoided. There are, though, different ways of not treading on them. One is to play the fearful angel and look away. Another is to try to cast new light on them. Social theory can help do that, and in the process help us think better about the consequences of these debates for how we get along with one another with our differences and our prejudices. The social theory I have in mind includes Mary Douglas on classification, Berger and Luckmann on typification, Harvey Sacks on

Mapping the Terrain of Debate

The spectrum of argumentative positions in the trans debates is wide. Brubaker has captured just how wide by distinguishing between ‘essentialism’ at one end and ‘voluntarism’ at the other (Brubaker, 2016), and how lively it is by pointing to ways in which, on occasion, positions at either end may be combined, as when an argument about subjective feeling is

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¹ My brother, a cabinet-maker, told me that when he inherited our grandfather’s chisels and screwdrivers some of them, made in the 1920s, had a better heft and weight distribution than anything you can buy in a DIY centre today; I think the same is true of some older methods of sociological analysis and of the intellectual sensibility that went with them.

bolstered by claims about the objective ineradicable reality of the situation to which the feeling is a response. Inspired by Brubaker's magisterial survey, here I try to assess recent positions taken by some feminists hostile to trans, and offer thoughts on the interactional challenges of living in a seemingly more diverse world.

At the essentialist end, appeals are made to the non-negotiable biological reality of sex. Here, some feminists now rub shoulders with some surprising bedfellows, notably religious and non-religious conservatives, and say that there are two biological sexes; and some pro-trans campaigners join them, claiming for their own part that there are more than two (Fausto-Sterling, 1993).² One of the feminists, analytic philosopher Kathleen Stock, even ends her book *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters to Feminism*, with a plea for 'less theory, more data' (Stock, 2021: 271), an expression, perhaps, of frustration at having to discuss what a woman is at all, and a response to what lies at the other end of the spectrum. There, some feminists and trans activists who say 'trans women are women' not only consider biological sex irrelevant but adopt positions on gender that seem unmoored even from the variously non-biologically based ways in which gender has been thought about in our culture. That is, they go beyond the current legal bases on which people are permitted to claim a gender identity different from the one assigned at birth (e.g., designation on official documents following surgery, hormone treatment).³ Stock thinks that these trans activists are arguing for the rights of 'biologically male-bodied people whose only claim to trans womanhood is an inner feeling of possessing female gender identity' (Stock, 2022: 25).

While Stock's main concern is with some people who, born biological males, wish to be recognized as women, the *World Health Organization* has defined trans more generally in just the terms she objects to: 'a diverse [sic] group of people whose internal sense of gender is different than that which they were assigned at birth and whose gender identity and expression [sic] does not conform to the norms and expectations traditionally associated with their sex at birth'. Just how diverse is suggested by the fact that the UK

campaign group *Stonewall* has described 'transgenderism' as an 'umbrella term' that covers—to date—seventeen distinct identities: transgender, transsexual, gender queer, gender fluid, non-binary, gender variant, cross-dresser, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bigender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine, and neutrois; while already in 2014 Facebook provided its customers with 56 gender identity options, something described in an article in *The Guardian* at the time as 'a good start' (Lees, 2014).

Between biological sex at one end and gender-as-inner-feeling at the other lies most of the debate and scholarship about gender of the last five decades. Much of this assumes that sex is biological and gender is not, and that what is interesting and therefore worth studying is the variety—between and within different cultures—of ways of being a woman or a man and the modes of interaction that arise from and affect ideas about these ways of being. Here, whatever their differences, most versions of feminism and most of sociology have agreed that, however individualized, unpredictable, or messy the variety of ways of being a man or a woman may be, it is rarely a matter of individual choice, inner feeling, or arbitrary invention. They may be rooted in already existing elements of a tradition, readily available or partially buried; they may be part of other traditions that inspire new ideas in one's own; or they may be the work of social or cultural movements desirous of change. It is because of this that the history that is told by feminism of the adoption of whatever new gender roles have emerged in modern societies is one of a long-term process, where ideas about femininity and masculinity—and the modes of comportment attendant on them—took decades to change. Meanwhile the basic claim of much sociology is that this variety illustrates a larger point about the socially constructed and negotiated character of symbolic universes, collective and individual identities, and ways of being in the world. Existing structures of thinking, available types of story, are the only sources we have for our sense of who we are, individual 'identity' being the result of the ways people get attached to collective frameworks of meaning or make use of already existing symbolic or ideational resources to build a self and a world. The point that this does not just happen can be expressed more or less starkly. A stark version goes like this: 'as most practitioners of sociology with a social constructionist orientation would be quick to point out, the argument that socially constructed realities imply social identities and practices that can be readily taken on or thrown off reflects social illiteracy' (O'Brien, 2016: 307).

In the study of these developments, the most challenging problem is to understand the relationship between change and continuity in social structure, frameworks of cognition, and the fate of individuals. In fluid societies like ours, these never match up in predictable ways: different institutions operate with different temporal structures; some are, if they

² The trans activist version of essentialism says that 1.7% of births are sexually ambiguous or hermaphroditic, and draws the conclusion that, in addition to those who sense a straight conflict between their unambiguously male or female body and their preferred or felt gender, 1.7% of the population are potentially trans.

³ This means there is a large mismatch between estimates of the number of transgender people living in the UK—the UK government's own website states that it may be anything between 200,000 and 500,000—and the number—4910 at the time of writing—who have obtained a GRC (gender recognition certificate) since the 2004 Gender Recognition Act. Those campaigning for trans rights are not the first to have faced the need to strike a balance between claims about marginalization and claims about being too numerous to ignore.

are to retain their integrity, more recalcitrant to change than others. Cognitive and symbolic frameworks from science, pseudo-science, social policy, religion, and elsewhere now compete for our attention in ways that makes these about the domination of politics by experts or the colonization of the lifeworld by expert systems sound rather quaint, and because individuals' working and non-working lives place them at varying distances to institutions and ideas, their priorities in life will be a not always predictable mixture of interest and identity.

In one sense, this is basic social theory, the sort of theory one hopes Kathleen Stock did not have in mind when she said we need less of it. Some of it is pertinent to thinking about transgender questions. For instance, the claims about subcategories of 'transgenderism' from Stonewall, and responses to it from Stock, Dawkins, and others (Dawkins 2023), are part of an argument about classification and social control. A notable resource for thinking about the relationship between these is still the work of Mary Douglas, and in particular her 'Grid and Group' schema (Douglas, 1970).

By 'GRID' Douglas meant the extent to which a classificatory scheme was public or private, to what degree it was officially sanctioned; by 'GROUP' she meant the extent to which individuals are subject to social control. These variables are independent of one another, and so she placed them on the vertical and horizontal axes respectively of her famous diagram, inviting us to think visually about the relationship between knowledge and politics, cognition, and social control. As with many a 'pictorial work space' in the social sciences (Lynch, 1991: 7), it's a bit rough and ready, the inventor of it being more adept at using it than everyone else. Sometimes Douglas used it to think visually about whole societies, sometimes to depict positions within a society, sometimes to track individual biographies.⁴

As far as individuals are concerned: if one has control or influence over others, then one belongs in the left half of the diagram; if one is subject to the control of others, one is in the right half (Fig. 1). The top left quadrant is for those who, while adhering to a publicly recognized system of classification, exercise social control or are free from the control of others; the bottom left is for those who question the boundaries suggested by a publicly accepted one and seek both to invent new ones and to influencing others. By the same token, less autonomous people in the right half may adhere to rigid or long-established classifications—and be in the top right—or have a private one of their own—bottom right. The paradigm cases are church leaders in the top left,

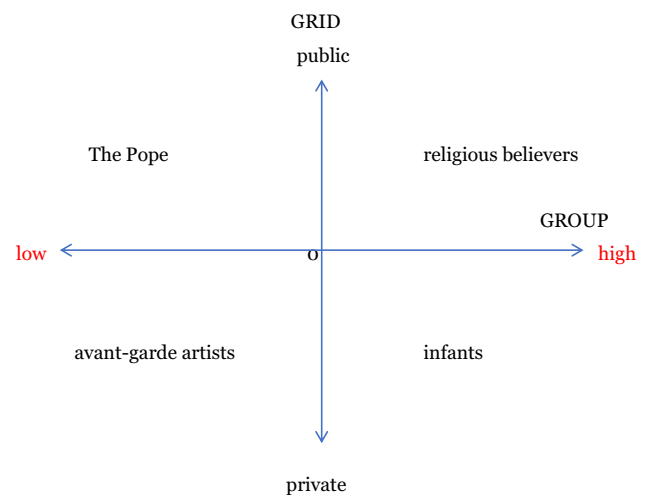


Fig. 1 Douglas diagram attempting to map social life through one cognitive and one interactional variable

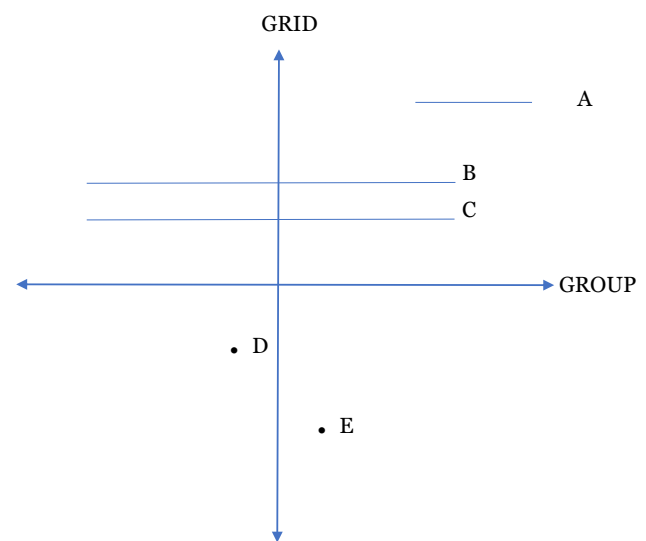


Fig. 2 Douglas diagram attempting to map societies as a whole

avant-garde artists in the bottom left, traditionalist members of religious congregations in the top right, and infants in the bottom right. The centre, where the two lines cross, she labeled simply with a zero, a place for extreme agnostics or 'voluntary outcasts' (Douglas, 1970: 64).

As far as societies as a whole are concerned, tribal societies studied by social anthropologists have been in the top right quadrant, high on GRID and on GROUP, a rigid system of classification (well above zero) depending on and reinforcing a strict system of social control (Fig. 2, A). Modern societies by contrast are 'spread across the diagram at a lower level of classification', though still above zero, as no society is viable without some degree of officially or publicly accepted classification. Too far down though and the

⁴ The Grid/Group diagram is not a pair of Cartesian coordinates. There is no x and y axis with y being a function of x. You cannot input x values into it to generate any new data. It is instead an attempt to map social life through one cognitive and one interactional variable.

society ‘is likely to become one that is continually subject to political upheaval and a changing profile for the distribution of authority’ (Douglas, 1970: 66). Douglas wrote that in 1970 and though she doesn’t say so she was already thinking about the long-term consequences of the sexual revolution of the 1960s for the fate of liberal democracies.

In terms of the diagram, the sexual revolution, the legalization of homosexuality, and *Roe v Wade* in the United States, pushed the Catholic church’s system of classification downwards, towards something closer to the status of a private system of classification for those who continued to adhere to its doctrines (Fig. 2, C). They were, as citizens of a liberal democracy, perfectly entitled to believe that abortion was murder or that homosexuality was a sin, but the right to abortion or to homosexuality were enshrined in law, and that became the more public system of classification, higher up on the diagram (Fig. 2, B). Until, that is, *Roe v Wade* was overturned. A changing profile for the distribution of authority indeed...

Yet while traditional Catholics and progressives may disagree about sexuality, sexual conduct, and reproductive rights, they may agree about the biological reality of sex. On that classificatory criterion, there are two sexes; the differences between them are over what follows for the organization of society. This is why Richard Dawkins, though more accommodating to both lesbianism and transgender than some Catholics are, nevertheless distinguishes sharply between old style transsexuals like the British journalist Jan Morris, who transitioned from one sex-based gender to another, and those who wish to rename themselves as women by self-identification. Morris’s move is what Brubaker calls ‘the trans of migration’, leaving the socially dominant male/female classification intact.

In the bottom left quadrant of Douglas’s original diagram, low GROUP and low GRID, were avant-garde artists or musicians like Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, David Bowie, and Madonna, who break down barriers or push boundaries in a public way but not one that amounts to overt campaigning. In fact, any worldly success for them is ambivalent, since the incorporation of their classificatory or idiomatic innovations into the mainstream culture threatens their *raison d’être* as much as it might be thought a triumph. Appropriation by the culture industry may then set off another round of innovation.

Seen in these terms, we might regard those sympathetic to the radical transgender cause as rejecting a dominant classification but faced with ambivalences of their own. On the one hand, transgender has become the basis for a subculture (bottom right quadrant), on the other, campaigns exist to have classificatory innovations officially recognized and made permanent. Yet as things stand, neither Facebook’s 56-fold classification of identity types (Fig. 2, E) nor Stonewall’s 17 types of transgender (Fig. 2, D) are likely to find

their way into official documentation. Facebook is in any case not a campaigning organization. Stonewall though is. The point about the diagram is this: any group in society may seek to conduct its private business as it sees fit—in offering 56 identity types for its users Facebook is not asking any other organization to do so. The politics of classification arises when the attempt is made to affect what happens above the line, to move an alternative system of classification into the domain of what is officially recognized, to the point where it rises higher than the dominant ones it opposes.

Grid and Group might also help us to think about the relative positions occupied by various protagonists and the rhetorical dilemmas they face. If most feminists have argued that biological sex is one thing and socially constructed gender is another, and have sought to explore or carve out ways of being a woman that do not conform to ‘patriarchal’ gender models, some have remained fairly high on GRID, such as those who have long argued that feminism is good for men too and who have sought out better forms of heterosexuality. Some have gone lower, endorsing or practicing bisexuality of some sort, while others embraced lesbianism as both a personal identity and a political choice. In other words, they sought a classification of gender roles at some remove from those supported by conservatives and distinct from those endorsed by heterosexual feminists.

At a stretch, we may say that in the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian feminists—accepting a distinction between two genders but not the assumptions about sexual identity that went with it—were in the bottom left quadrant of the diagram, where the innovative artists were, whereas today they are above the line, occupying a place in the same stratum of positions (between B and C) where the traditionalists are found, and are frequently reminded of this by trans activists, who tell them that their experiments in gender variousness amounted to not very much. In particular, by seeking to protect women-only spaces from anyone born as a biological male, they are seen as ‘gender conforming’. In other words, their classifications around sexual orientation are insignificant sub-classifications of the conventional male/female distinction. Indeed, when she says, with a note of sarcasm, that the idea of gender as inner feeling ‘takes us far indeed from the traditional concept of womanhood’ (Stock, 2022: 26), Kathleen Stock has been read as genuinely embracing that traditional concept.

Julie Bindel by contrast is a lifelong activist less enmeshed in arguments about biology than Stock is. For her, several decades of feminist argument and activism are now under threat:

in the early days of the women’s movement feminists employed the term gender as a theoretical tool to describe the social construction of femininity and mas-

culinity, the fabricated identities and sex stereotypes we wanted to dismantle and reject. We are now being told to forfeit that term or to concede that it means its opposite – a biological phenomenon that determines our assumed identity. We are told that anyone that challenges this new orthodoxy is a TERF... and a fascist (Bindel, 2022: 13)

Bindel's version of feminism refuses to deny biology, but only so that biology may be treated analogously to the way socialists have treated class, as a shared inherited disadvantage but also as an irrefutable, non-negotiable basis for solidarity. Whatever sort of a feminist one is, therefore, indeed whether one is a feminist or not, and regardless of whether one is heterosexual or a lesbian, feminism for her is a fight on behalf of all women, who at a basic level suffer disadvantage in the same way. Whatever positions different groups of women take on different social issues, there is a class-like politics of access to contraception, to abortion, to maternity benefit entitlements, and an attendant fight to be waged against FGM, rape in marriage, and domestic violence. It is this solid core, as she sees it, of the female experience of patriarchy, that Bindel sees assailed by the trans movement.

If that brief sketch gives us a map of locations in cognitive and social space, we may also reflect on how, leaving aside the classificatory inflation that goes under the transgender heading, how 'trans' itself has become a badge of assertive social radicalism rather than an ignorable eccentricity. For the clash between some lesbian feminists and some trans activists is not only about the stability of social classifications, it is also about the identity generating power of single categories themselves. Social history has always been partly a history of the different ways in which a society's structures of plausibility make some ways of being a person easier than others, and of the ways in which societies have created new ways for people to be. The fact that we long since stopped living in a world of peasants, priests, and warriors—of plough, book, and sword in Gellner's terms—does not make social analysis via the study of social types any less relevant or important. After all, since the beginning of the twentieth century, sociologists and historians have told us at various points that we live in the age of 'homo economicus', 'psychological man' or 'organization man', 'the other directed person' (Riesman), 'sceptics-as-a-matter-of-principle', 'the short-circuit people' and 'those who wait' (Kracauer), 'the manager' and 'the aesthete' (MacIntyre), or 'vagabonds' and 'tourists' (Bauman).

But 'types of persons' emerge historically not only as scholars' labels. New categories emerge for people to belong to (Hacking, 1986). Sometimes this is a matter of social control, the categories being created by states or other administrative agencies, but sometimes they emerge 'from below', as hooks for more voluntary forms of personal identity. In these

terms, the story of trans resembles that of homosexuality, in that the more trans is invoked, the more readily people will be described as such and be ready to identify with it. That does not mean that trans people are not responding to genuinely experienced personal difficulties, merely that 'trans' has gained a social valency that it lacked a few decades ago. Hacking's 'dynamic nominalism' says that the 'space of possibilities for personhood' changes: 'In some cases...our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on' (Hacking, 1986: 228). Thus, just as, in the early nineteenth century in Germany, an 'ethos of suicide', including the suicide note, was created following the extensive reporting of the suicide of Kleist and his lover, so the extensive reporting of trans stories, and the publication of trans narratives, may help cement an ethos of trans.⁵

If we put the matter like that—trans as idea, membership category, symbolic resource, and thus a reality whether we like it or not—we may understand a rhetorical difficulty that Stock and Bindel find themselves in. For, while it might be thought that a radical constructivist account like Hacking's denaturalizes trans, and so is useful to arguments against more libertarian versions of it—trans is just an historically contingent, invented category that cannot trump biology, and might decline as fast as it has risen—exactly the same argument was used fifty years ago by traditionalists hostile to lesbianism. Those traditionalists may say today that there is nothing more natural about lesbianism than there is about trans, that both are ways of making up people in ways that deny biology.

Yet Bindel unintentionally meets that argument halfway:

compulsory heterosexuality is a condition of patriarchy. Without patriarchy, heterosexuality would be a state women could freely choose. But you can be damn sure that in post-patriarchy there would be a significantly higher number of women who would choose to be lesbians (Bindel, 2022: 38).

To which some might reply that by extension, in a post-binary world, one in which official classificatory schemas had lost their traction, there would be a significantly higher number of men who would choose to be women and

⁵ Social theory classics retained for their formal analytical acumen may also resonate substantively, with occasional hints of prophecy. 'The existence of vague boundaries is normal: most of us are neither tall nor short, fat nor thin: sexual physiology is unusually abrupt in its divisions. The realist will take the occasional compulsive fascination with transvestism, or horror about hermaphroditism ... as human (nominalist) resistance to nature's putative aberrations. Likewise the realist will assert that even though our attitudes to gender are almost entirely nonobjective and culturally ordained, gender itself is a real distinction' (Hacking, 1986: 227–228).

women who would choose to be men.⁶ This is more or less the position adopted recently by Jacqueline Rose, for whom transgender people and trans as a category are mutually supporting: ‘challenging the binary by transitioning becomes one of the most imaginative leaps in modern society’, so much so that, according to her, ‘people over 65, especially women, are almost as gender fluid as the young’ (Rose, 2023: 39). Be that as it may (or may not), Rose rejects Stock and Bindel’s appeal to a solid core of experience that is beyond discussion: ‘reality for feminism is something to be negotiated’. On its own, that statement looks like a conventional social constructionist or symbolic interactionist claim, but it is followed immediately by: ‘What is a Woman? Speak for Yourself’. ‘Who on Earth can presume to answer the question on behalf of anyone else?’ (Rose, 2023: 39), which sounds more like libertarianism even as it may be rooted in more sophisticated anti-essentialist feminism (Heyes, 2000).

Be that as it may, it raises the question of how far any category may be mobilized in this way, how far down and to the left of Douglas’s diagram social radicalism can go before it loses traction and is shunted off into the bottom right half. For instance, a tactically astute move for many minority rights campaigns is often to say that there are ‘more of us than you think’, or that there will be more of us in the future (as Bindel says on behalf of lesbians in a post-patriarchal world and Rose says on behalf of trans people in a post-binary world). It is more contentious to make the same move—by argument or by scholarship—for the past, to seek to give ‘trans’ traction by establishing or asserting the existence of a tradition of belonging with deeper roots than were previously believed to exist.

This is just what some cultural historians have sought to do. Take Simon Joyce’s treatment of the well-documented historical case of ‘Fanny and Stella’, two men who in London in 1870 entered a women’s theatre toilet dressed as women and were charged with disturbing the peace. There was more than a degree of confusion among witnesses about both the men’s sexual orientation and their gender, and so Joyce claims that, despite the fact that ‘the period lacked

a concept of the transgender individual’, ‘we might... be justified in viewing them anachronistically as bigendered or genderqueer *avant la lettre*, consciously mixing up male and female signifiers of the period’ (Joyce, 2018: 87). Joyce thinks this approach is justified in so far as it helps us ‘to understand transgender people as having a history’ (Joyce, 2018: 86).

Quentin Skinner, by contrast, would have dismissed this sort of thing as ‘prolepsis’, the act—cavalier about historically specific meanings—of finding what one wants to find in the past because of a research agenda governed by the present, though I think his point is stronger as a critique of a certain sort of activism than as a critique of ways of doing history. In the study of history, after all, new terms come along and get fashioned into useful analytical tools. Weber does this in *Economy and Society*, ‘presentist’ scholarly concepts being a way of noticing things about the past that were not noticed before. One can take this too far—Weber surely used ‘charisma’ to cover too many dissimilar examples, and newer terms like ‘totalitarianism’ can get strained when used carelessly for anything that happened before 1923 when the term was coined—but when that happens it is a scholarly mistake. Quite different is the politicized effort to create or assert a substantive historical continuity of identity where none was thought to be there before. The operation here is a delicate one, the claim that something was there all along yet unacknowledged by our descriptive vocabulary prey to naïve realism, even as it seeks to rescue people from the condescension of history. The most successful version of this is of course the one made by nationalist intellectuals and politicians, who push the origins of their own nation as far back as it will go in order to create a sense of deep, ineradicable belonging.

At any rate, the greater cultural availability of the move from man to woman or woman to man—however painful or difficult it might be for individuals—may be due to the more ready availability of ‘trans’ as a category of belonging (cultural), and doubtless to improved surgical techniques (medical). It is also the product of more basic structural changes in the relationship between men and women (Todd, 2023: 195). One of the central achievements of feminism has been that there are now fewer roles in Western societies that are not, in principle, as open to women as they are to men, so that the sense of separate spheres is less acute than it once was. The leap from one bank of the river to the other has been made to seem shorter, and easier to make, or risk. If that is true, it may partly account for something that has struck both some feminists and many non-feminists as troubling, namely the apparent brazenness of some who see ‘becoming a woman’ as a matter of nothing more than self-identification, a voluntary and individual change of nomenclature seemingly free from doubts about acceptance or fear of imposture.

⁶ Most of the anthropological literature on classification is about less fluid societies than ours, and one theme in it is that significant questioning of official classifications in such societies may occur but only in liminal periods, to be followed by the restoration of order. While classification struggles in industrial and post-industrial societies are sometimes like this—Nazism’s distinction between Aryan and Jewish science, or Lysenko’s version of biology, are pretty sharply defined historical parentheses—it is hard to imagine that we will one day look back on trans as a temporary hiatus, though the reversal of *Roe v Wade* is a cautionary tale. We may though ask whether Stonewall’s 17-fold categorization of transgender, for instance, will gain traction as a primarily private classificatory scheme that provides markers of identity for some people, or become an officially recognized standard for organizations and institutions.

It ought, so their opponents may want to say, to be more of an effort. If we leave aside the claims—some appealing to biology, some to culture—that no amount of effort can make a man a woman or a woman a man, in most of the objections to trans, there seems to be an implicit idea of an ‘effort bargain’, in which the acceptance that trans men or women seek may be granted in return for evidence that the move from one gender to another has involved a measure, if not of self-sacrifice, then at least of exertion.⁷ And if that makes sense then so perhaps does the idea of an effort bargain scale, with at one end those who say with Jacqueline Rose that it is up to the individual to decide whether they are or are not a man or a woman, and at the other figures like Dawkins who expect to hear uplifting stories of struggle of the sort told by Jan Morris or Jamison Green (Green, 2004).

The key here is ‘of the sort told by’. For if all societies make some types of person more possible than others, and some categories easier to belong to than others, they make some stories more believable than others.

I Am My Story

One argument against trans women’s claim to be full women—an argument supported by some feminists and most non-feminists—is that, however much effort someone born male makes to become a woman, they not only lack the physical equipment women were born with, they lack all of the possible stories that women in our culture can tell themselves, and have told themselves, about what it is like and what it means to be brought up female. If they have had a series of medical procedures, for example in their thirties or forties, they will still, so the argument goes, be three decades short of a full female biography. They have neither participated in female culture, nor been on the receiving end of what a male-dominated society throws at women.

⁷ I take the term ‘effort bargain’ from Wilhelm Baldamus’s industrial sociology classic, *Efficiency and Effort*. There the bargain was between managers (the few) and workers (the many). Here it can mean social acceptance by members of the target gender (the many) in return for effort from those members of the gender of origin (the few) wishing to make a change. But it is also generalizable, and if we understand how then we may understand why the libertarian end of the trans spectrum elicits so much hostility from some feminists and most non-feminists.

The principle of the modern social contract was expressed as well as anyone on the eve of the French revolution by Beaumarchais’ Figaro: ‘How came you to be the rich and mighty Count Almaviva? Why truly, you gave yourself the trouble to be born!’ Nobody has a natural right to lord it over anyone else, and if one is a member of the nobility by birth then all one is entitled to inherit is one’s name. For the rest, achievement should trump ascription.

To which the trans activist may reply: it was precisely being born that gave me trouble...until I was able to rename myself.

One trans response to this is that precisely because one’s sex is an accident of birth, the individual who is born a man but who feels ‘like a woman in a man’s body’, may, despite what is offered him in the way of advantage, claim to have no more connection with the history of men’s experience than he or she has with women’s experience, no real investment in it. So although it is true that, when they change sex, they lack the experience of suffering and discrimination that they would have known had they been born a woman, they are not necessarily bringing with them the baggage of decades of confident masculinity either, with its sense of privilege and power; they may simply be putting an end to decades of emotional confusion, and finding a greater measure of belonging. Moreover, if we agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that the individual stories we are able to tell require an audience that will understand them, and so will depend upon an existing repertoire of communally recognized narratives, then it may be said that the public stories available to those men who felt they were ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’ have always been rather limited and not granted anything like the public status granted to the very large store of public narratives available both to men who wanted to remain men and to women who were born women.

That is, at least, the kind of story—a story about lacking a story that others would want to hear—that prominent transsexuals used to tell in the 1960s and 1970s. These were people who had been born men or women, and with the aid of medical procedures then available, had sought to reinvent themselves, as best they could, as women or men, the reinvention not being a joyful embrace of contingency and possibility, but a painful and protracted effort to find a more settled and welcoming place in society. The stories these people tell are often both instructive and moving, not least because they are not stories of a quest for a higher social status, or of ambition realized, but of the effort to reduce a disparity between felt and ascribed identity. At the same time, they become readable to the extent that a culture accommodates such narratives. And here there may well be a difference between the stories told by trans women and trans men, in the sense that the genre of ‘growing up a girl’ is the one with the greater cultural resonance.

Yet the field of argument about trans would not be the complicated place it is without the existence of counterintuitive positions. For instance, there are people today who have gone through a full medical procedure, but who, when pressured into taking sides in the debates between trans activists and traditional feminists/radical lesbian feminists, come down on the side of the latter. Invoking the idea of effort, they say that nobody should simply be able to redefine themselves as women or as men overnight as it were, without a serious and life-changing experience of transition and without a story of any sort to tell about it. They argue that the whole point of changing one’s gender is that it should

be a story worth telling, one of an arduous moving away from what one was born with and grew up with, along with a desire to be accepted, not as ‘full members’, but as people who have as far as is possible sought to become women. They ask, in short, not to be classified as ‘women among women’ but as people with the legal status of women who know and accept that they are not ‘real women’ just as they are accepted by women who have befriended them. Today it is easier to tell one’s own trans story—there are now online lists of ‘the hundred best trans narratives’—but the polarized character of the trans debate is such that it is also easier to eschew all such narratives and simply declare one’s new gender identity and seek to have it recognized.

It is because of this—the prospect of biological men being able to call themselves women without serious bodily modification—that when trans activists who are in favour of radical individual choice proclaim ‘trans women are women’, traditionalists and some feminists draw the line. So do some more traditional transexuals, such as the British writer Debbie Hayton, who has opposed the trans activists’ ‘transwomen are women’ position by sporting a T-shirt which says ‘trans women are men’, and the old idea of being ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’ with the proclamation that, despite the fact that she herself has had extensive gender reassignment surgery, she was ‘a man trapped in a man’s body’.

So the climate today is not the same as it was in the 1970s, when this sort of transgender story was told. Then, transgender was not much of a thing and when it was it generated rather different constellations and alliances. There were for instance transexuals—born as men—who after transitioning claimed to be lesbian feminists. This produced some fairly sharp reactions on the part of those women were already lesbian feminists, in a relatively new movement, who saw these former men as muscling in on their scene. The concerns expressed by today’s lesbian feminists such as Bindel recall that earlier dispute, one in which, for instance, the writer Janice Raymond, who saw lesbian feminism as ‘a total perspective on life’ in patriarchal societies, argued in 1979 that all MTF transexuals were by definition, and even if they had had seriously invasive medical procedures, rapists, inserting themselves into female spaces, drawing attention to themselves in masculinist ways. All transexuals, she said, including those who wanted a quiet life, ‘rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to a mere artifact, appropriating this body for themselves’, but ‘the transexually-constructed lesbian feminist violates women’s sexuality and spirit as well’. Accepting transexuals into the feminist community, she argued, was merely a variation on an old theme, that of women nurturing men. ‘A man who decides to call himself a woman is not giving up his privilege. He is simply using it in a more insidious way’ (Raymond, 2006: 137). The transexual lesbian feminist ‘turns his whole body

and behaviour into a phallus that can rape in many ways, all the time’ (Raymond, 2006: 134).

So much for the field of argument. But it is just that, argument. Hacking said of his dynamic nominalism that it ‘reflects too little on the ordinary dynamics of human interaction’ (Hacking, 1986: 222). In the next section, we turn to that interaction and the spaces in which it is played out, for what matters in the end is the effect these discussions have on our comportment towards one another. That comportment is partly a matter of law, but partly too—a larger part—one of manners and civility.

Trans Rights, Individual and Collective

In a liberal society, the purpose of law is to regulate the relationship between citizens in such a way that they may live as they see fit without harming others. Law is a framework of rules that connects people but without pressing them too closely together or asking them to participate in a shared project. The idea of law in such societies is that it should proscribe certain sorts of behaviour harmful to the public good, but at the same time not seek to enjoin any behaviour on the basis of a thickly substantive idea of the common good. Citizens of societies where diversity is legally provided for cannot be expected to share ‘values’ with one another in any but the most abstract sense; they can be expected to adhere to the same rules of conduct, if those rules are the product of public discussion and legislative deliberation. Some rules are compromises, some result from the force of the better argument. If the latter, a live and let live principle says you win some you lose some.

That principle is tested by any new law, be it newly permissive or newly repressive. When homosexuality was legalized in the UK in 1967, for instance, traditionalists saw it as licensing not only a form of sexuality they disapproved of, but also paedophilia, homosexual culture being widely believed at the time to involve, to a greater extent than heterosexual culture, the initiation by older men of young people below the then age of legal consent. Today, more than half a century on, few people are proposing to make homosexuality illegal again, as legalization was followed by the development and greater visibility of homosexual culture to the point that same sex marriage is routine. A law that said what a person can or cannot do with their own body was opposed by traditionalists as an abomination when it was proposed, changed while the controversy was still hot, and then, as the years went by, largely accepted.

By now liberal societies have some experience of making initially controversial measures work. Where the legalization of homosexuality was permissive, smoking bans have been repressive, but the same point applies, namely that laws introducing new rules about bodily conduct were introduced

in a blaze, or fog, of controversy, only to be accepted with some alacrity, with a consensus rapidly emerging that less smoking in public is better for all of us, albeit that it entailed the loss of some of the social pleasures associated with it, such as the conviviality generated by giving someone a light, or offering or sharing cigarettes over a cup of coffee.

With respect to trans rights, the biggest challenge—or at least the object of greatest controversy—is striking a balance between the rights of individuals and prescriptions about behaviour in certain designated settings. Here a familiar enough tension operates between the rights of individuals and of groups, rights—both individual and collective—to do what others are entitled to do, and to be protected from harm. Trans people who appeal to existing human rights legislation run up against policy that makes the granting of those rights conditional, while an appeal to group rights runs up against a lack of the forms of collective organization that might allow them to be considered collectively as a legal persona.

This is of course a staple of liberal political theory and has been finessed in various ways. One reason that group rights have proven easy to theorise but difficult to put into practice is that in principle, just as individual rights should apply to all individuals equally, so group rights should apply to all groups equally. The ‘no favours’ approach is expressed well by Thomas Pogge: ‘a society should find a principled way, supervised by the courts, to decide about a particular claimed associative freedom on the basis of criteria that do not include, or take account of, the type of associative identity at issue’ (Pogge: 1997, pp. 199–200). Of the groups that lack formal organizational status, ethnic minorities have had the greatest claim to have ‘solidarity rights’ accorded them, often in forms that grant them exceptions to existing laws, from everyday matters such as being allowed to ride motorbikes without crash helmets to marriage and divorce arrangements. One reason for this is that ethnic minority membership is more inherited than chosen. The reply to that is always: why, in principle, should the accommodation we make to our fellow citizens’ group identities vary with whether they claim to choose them or to inherit them, when in principle all are chosen, members of any ‘community’ being at liberty to renounce their inheritance? Why, for instance, should Sikhs be accommodated more generously than members of a trade union?

For now, the issue of group rights in relation to trans issues is not looming large, not least because of the extent to which the voluntarist positions mentioned earlier have gained prominence: the individual, so one argument goes, should have the right to self-identify as male or female, or for that matter to choose one of Stonewall’s 17 categories, and not have their gender preferences policed. This rhetoric of radical choice is different from the one that stresses the need to protect members of ‘vulnerable

groups’. In this sense at least, trans men, trans women, trans people, are not, even in the first place, a group like ethnic groups: there is no common descent, no continuity of culture, no group closure; but nor are trans people associated, as members of trade unions are, for a determinate, bounded purpose.

Gender recognition legislation of some Western European states seeks to prevent the radical libertarian move, and to make the right to change gender and have that change contained in identity documents contingent on obtaining a gender recognition certificate from a doctor. In principle, this would only be provided subject to the individual’s willingness to undergo various medical procedures, but the framework of Human Rights Legislation within which European states operate is such that one dimension of the rights of citizens is the right to bodily integrity, and not to have the state demand bodily modification, so legislators find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Norway (Protestant) and the Republic of Ireland (now departing from Roman Catholicism at top speed) allow self-declaration, and Pakistan (Muslim) allows people to declare themselves a member of a third gender.

The legal issues here are of some complexity but for now what matters is the way in which they bear on questions of social solidarity. One dimension of it has involved fear, the sense on the part of some feminists that the extension of gender recognition will make them less safe in women only spaces, and the fear on the part of trans people that they may be unsafe in all spaces.

A number of prominent feminists have argued that the extension of trans rights to those who wish simply to rename themselves as women, that is to those who, born as biological males, wish to have their newly chosen female gender recognized in official documents such as birth certificates, and to be classified as women, with the attendant rights to conduct themselves in certain ways, creates a situation in which women have more to fear from men than they had before. There are several dimensions to this, and several arenas in which this battle is being fought, but the most prominent ones are public toilets, changing rooms, and prisons, the question being one of whether these physical spaces are made more dangerous for women as a result of trans people being allowed to use them.

One intriguing argument here is that the recognition of someone’s right to choose their gender will increase the danger to women that comes not only from trans women who have undergone no surgery, but also from heterosexual men, since the possibility arises of the latter’s pretending to be transwomen and entering those spaces under that pretext. The fear is that heterosexual men intent on doing harm may be encouraged or emboldened to enter women’s toilets and pretend, not to be fully transitioned transgender women, but transgender women who are transitioning, the point being that transitioning takes time and that this gives the man intent on doing harm a range of possibilities for passing.

Note here that the ‘gender critical’ feminist argument assumes that transgender women themselves can never successfully transition to being a complete woman with all the requisite behavioural characteristics; it is easy, they imply, to tell the difference between a genuine woman and a transwoman, and therefore all the more difficult to tell the difference between genuine and harmless transwomen who are just using the toilets and cis-men who are pretending to be transwomen and intent on harm.

This argument though translates into a policy demand, supported with alacrity by conservative Christians in the USA that, since men and women are born as such, they should only be allowed to use the public toilet that matches their sex at birth, which runs up against the fact that, if people are what they are by virtue of what they were when they were born, then it also applies to trans men who were born as biological women. So while it demands that trans women be excluded from women’s toilets, an insistence on the facts of biology would also demand that trans men who were born and grew up as women, use those toilets and only those, even if they are undergoing medical procedures to make themselves more masculine, and seeking to appear more masculine in physical appearance and behaviour. It is not clear on this reading how allowing, or forcing, trans men to use women’s toilets and changing rooms would be any less of a danger to women than trans women being allowed to do so, since if anything, heterosexual men seeking to enter women’s spaces to do harm to them might be said to find it easier to pass as a trans man in transition than they would to pass as a trans woman in transition. Indeed, there have been cases where ‘butch lesbians’—women who themselves adopt more masculine forms of behaviour—have been attacked in toilets by heterosexual women who mistook them for trans men. Here the gender critical feminist argument will then fall back on a more visceral argument about safety. So regardless of whether someone is a trans man, a trans woman, or a member of one of Stonewall’s other categories, and regardless of what degree of bodily and behavioural modification trans people have undergone, women’s toilets and changing rooms, so the argument goes, are for the sole use of those born as a member of the female sex and who have remained female in their gender ever since. No version of maleness, however it is defined or manifests itself, in women’s toilets.

This position raises the question of how much accommodation should be made to our new circumstances. One of the reasons that the issue of safety in toilets has become such a contested area in the debates between trans activists and traditional feminists is not simply that women fear that using a public toilet will be more dangerous; it is that the women’s public toilet is more than a place in which to meet the call of nature: not exactly a scene of conviviality, but in certain circumstances—Saturday nights in large cities—a place of temporary respite or refuge.

A different sort of anxiety surrounding the possibility of self-identifying trans women in women’s changing rooms—say at gyms or swimming pools—centres on the prospect of biological women being looked at by people with penises and having to notice, without wanting to, those people themselves. Of course for sociology ‘those people themselves’ is not the right way to think about the matter, because what we are dealing with is strips of interaction that are structured by participants in terms of what Berger and Luckmann called ‘typifications’:

The reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended and ‘dealt with’ in face-to-face encounters. Thus I apprehend the other as ‘a man’, ‘a European’, ‘a buyer’, ‘a jovial type’, and so on. All these typifications ongoingly affect my interaction with him as, say, I decide to show him a good time on the town before trying to sell him my product. Our face-to-face interaction will be patterned by these typifications as long as they do not become problematic through interference on his part. Thus he may come up with evidence that, although ‘a man’, ‘a European’ and ‘a buyer’, he is also a self-righteous moralist, and that what appeared first as joviality is actually an expression of contempt for Americans in general and American salesmen in particular. At this point, of course, my typificatory scheme will have to be modified, and the evening planned differently in accordance with this modification (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 45).

Or as Harvey Sacks put it, categories are not groups or organizations, and are inference rich.

Now while Sacks sought to grasp the processes through which we categorize through the study of language, much of the anxiety surrounding toilets and changing rooms derives from the fact the encounters in them are non-verbal, unfocused gatherings as Goffman called them. They are, notably, encounters where nobody is expected to greet one another on entering the same space.⁸ If in toilets the anxiety concerns

⁸ Tilman Allert showed why this matters in his study of the interactional perversion that was the Hitler salute: the most general object of greetings is to communicate to the other person that one is not a threat to them and that a firm basis for interaction exists; they are ‘an initial gift’, unsolicited but necessary. The awkwardness of stepping back to make room for the raised right arm, and the ambiguity of ‘Heil Hitler!’ created a ‘sphere of mistrust’ around the very device whose most basic function is to create trust (Allert, 2010).

A personal illustration. In 2008–2009 my wife and I lived in the tough Praga district of Warsaw, opposite a small gym with images of improbably shaped muscle men on the outside walls. When we started using it, my wife would confine herself to the cycling machines in a raised area at one end, while I would use the weights, where nearly all the users were young men hoping to resemble the images outside. There, each new arrival, before he started his work out, would go round the room and greet and shake the hand of everyone present, whether he knew them or not. It was a small yet necessary act of reassurance.

the possibility of sexual assault when trapped in a public facility with one other person, in changing rooms it pertains to the unwelcome prospect for women either of being looked at by people born male, or having to look at and be intimidated by the sight of them. Self-identifying trans women in women's changing rooms, and more so communal showers are, so the argument goes, an assault on dignity, the male gaze being what it is.

Here I have no principled position either way, but instead would suggest that there may be some cultural variation in the scope available for negotiating these matters. In the early 1990s, I was a postdoctoral researcher at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences in Munich, where the scholars went quietly about their research, used the formal 'Sie', or Herr this and Frau that, and unsmilingly greeted one another with 'Mahlzeit' after 11.00am. A few weeks into my time there, a female colleague in my section invited me to join their weekly volleyball game at a fairly unrenovated old school in Schwabing. They were predictably unathletic. Less predictably, afterwards I found myself chatting away with some of them, both male and female, all of us naked, in the one row of available showers. Fortunately, having already spent several summers in Tübingen, I was acquainted with the German culture of nudity and so just about ready not to bat an eyelid or to be surprised the next day when this enforced proximity proved to have had no impact on the stiffness of our professional comportment.

It is not unimaginable, then, for people of different genders to be able to share the same fairly intimate physical space without anyone caring one way or another. It is a matter of what Goffman called 'civil inattention' (Goffman, 1972: 385), the refusal, for reasons of propriety, decorum, and face-saving, to notice the potentially discrediting traits of another unknown person.

In middle class society, care in the use of eyes can readily be found in connection with nakedness. In nudist camps, for example, apparently considerable effort is taken to avoid appearing to be looking at the private parts of others. Topless waitresses sometimes obtain the same courtesy from their patrons when engaging in close serving. A rule in our society: when bodies are naked, glances are clothed (Goffman, 1971: 71)

Of course, 'middle class society' covers a multitude of innocence. The distribution of the capacity for civil inattention, and of our readiness, so to speak, to display it, will vary. Everyone survived the weekly communal shower in Munich because there was always critical mass of people there with a similar disposition and their faces at least were all familiar to one another. But there often isn't. So what to do?

The new swimming pool at my own university has a new unisex 'changing village', with individual cubicles for changing, and for showering, and a standard mixed sauna

where people keep their clothes on anyway, though male and female toilets, accessible from the changing rooms, are separate. For the rest, everyone walks through the same space for a few metres in their swimming gear, and then swims in the same water. As with smoking bans, this arrangement doubtless discourages an older sort of gender-specific conviviality, yet visits to the swimming pool by boisterous groups of young men or young women engaging in exuberant ritual display and flicking towels at each other are increasingly a thing of the past. So insofar as the compartmentalization of changing and showering space is all of a piece with the individualization of swimming as a pastime, there is little sense of its being a special arrangement to satisfy the needs of a small trans minority.

Public toilets are a trickier issue, by virtue of the possibility of unwanted encounters during slack periods. Some organizations have started to turn all toilets into unisex ones, with cubicles all of which contain both toilet and wash basin; some have provided unisex ones like this plus male and female ones; the Barbican Arts Centre in London turned its male toilets into 'unisex with urinals and cubicles', and its female ones into 'unisex with cubicles', leading to complaints that the traditional 'queue for the ladies' was made even longer at peak times as a result; some English schools have introduced a unisex toilets only policy, though this has in many cases made girls reluctant to use them.

There has never been a formal way of policing these arrangements, the distinction between men's and women's toilets and changing rooms resting on convention rather than law. It is by no means clear how these dilemmas will be resolved. Certainly it will not be resolved by having male toilets for non-trans men, female toilets for non trans women, and 'unisex trans toilets' for everyone else, since the entire point of being trans is a renunciation of the sex which was assigned to one at birth and an aspiration in many cases to be a woman or a man rather than a man or a woman.

The Politics of Personal Pronouns

A final feature of the trans debates that I would like to mention here is the discussion around personal pronouns. Throughout much of the English-speaking world, in a remarkably short time, people working in large organizations have been encouraged to announce their 'pronoun preferences' at the end of their emails. As this has happened, a tension has arisen regarding the effect this might have on interaction in professional and educational settings.

Here, once again, some older social theory may prove useful or at least thought provoking. It turns out that one of the major figures of twentieth century sociology, Norbert Elias, had something to say about this in *What is Sociology* (1970), with a whole section of this relatively short programmatic

statement devoted to ‘the personal pronoun as a figurational model’. Elias’ argument is that attention to personal pronouns can give the sociologist a sense of the fluid and processual character of social relations, and help them to get away from ‘the egocentric model of society’, and from an approach that turns ‘relationships into unrelated static objects’ (Elias, 1970: 122). Elias writes that the whole point of personal pronouns, their interactional function, is that they are relational terms that undermine the idea of determinate personal identity. There is no I, in other words, without a he or she, a we or you or they:

...the set of positions to which the personal pronouns refer differs from what we usually have in mind when we speak of social positions as roles – sets of positions like father-mother-daughter-son or subaltern-corporal-private. These latter words must, within a given communication, refer always to the same person. Typically [however] in one situation the same personal pronoun may be used to refer to various people. This is because the pronouns are relational and functional; they express a position relative either to the speakers at that moment or relative to the whole intercommunicating group’ (Elias, 1970:123-124).

Elias is suggesting that a focus on personal pronouns can stop the sociologist thinking about society in ways that suggest people have fixed identities, including identities they have ‘chosen’.

This suggests that the appeal to pronouns may be more niche than either pronoun specification enthusiasts or their opponents believe. For the rules of grammar being what they are, all that pronoun instruction can do is to specify how a person is to be referred to in the third person—as he, she, or they. I, You, and We, by contrast, are as grammatically inflexible as the communication they make possible is contingent. Third person pronouns specify how people wish to be referred to when in a communicatively passive state. With respect to interaction, two situations spring to mind: when they are being introduced by somebody else at a social event, and when they are silent during a conversation and others refer to them. In the first case, some possibilities are ‘this is my wife, he’s from Turkey’, or ‘say hello to Roger, they are one of our star philosophers’, although there is a small subculture of people who, finding ‘they’ as alienating as ‘he’ or ‘she’, prefer a more individualized amalgam of he and she, such as ‘zhe’ (Valentine, 2007). For the rest, in direct communication, be it face to face co-presence or letters or emails, there is no way to address anyone other than as ‘you’. As for official documents, a request to be referred to as he, she, or they is rather easily met.

One may speculate here about how much transnational scope and import pronoun specification has, since languages vary in the provision they are able to make for them. In some for instance there is only one third person gender neutral singular pronoun. Thus, whereas English has ‘he’ and ‘she’,

in Turkish ‘o’ is the singular third person pronoun for both men and women. This is why even Turks who are fluent English speakers will say ‘he’ when they mean ‘she’ and ‘she’ when they mean ‘he’. It’s a very noticeable mistake, but not one that prevents people communicating and getting along.

Conclusion

Earlier I referred to the case of Fanny and Stella. A year after their arrest, in May 1871, William Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton (Fanny and Stella) were finally acquitted of felony charges. The trial had explored at some length the ins and outs of who they were, or were not, what they had intended, or not intended, to do in the women’s toilet. It had fascinated the press and its reading public. It fascinates cultural historians to this day, unsure as they are whether it is a story of cross-dressing men, homosexuality, or soliciting, or a trans narrative before its time.

In the end, the two ‘accepted a form of plea bargain to exhibit ‘good behaviour’ for the next two years’ (Joyce, 2018: 86). Today we don’t need plea bargains but perhaps we do need a bargain of another sort, one in which we all, with our differences, agree to find ways to get along, and to accept that assertions of identity, biological or freely chosen, are less important than creating the conditions for civility, decency, and good manners. I am not at all sure how those conditions are to be created or whether they should be ‘created’ at all. In his magisterial survey from 1955, Harold Nicolson suggested that all the codes of civility worth remembering, from the ancient Chinese and Greek to late nineteenth century muscular Christianity, had been the work of cultural elites. In the modern day, absence of such elites he feared the reign of dullness and held on to the idea of an ideal society that would ‘furnish opportunities for the expression of idiosyncrasy, the enjoyment of different pleasures, and the embellishment of life’ (Nicolson, 1955: 2). A year later Erving Goffman would begin to suggest why those fears might be ungrounded, as he explored what civility without a code looked like, and in the course of it demonstrated just how much idiosyncrasy North American middle class society at least could accommodate. In thinking about how much more it can accommodate, about a future civility, his work may be as good a resource as any, just as some of the more muscular types of social theory I have mentioned may help us frame the nature of the disputes that threaten it.

Declarations

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