



The F Word

FEMINIST MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Facing Our Fear: Transgenderism versus Radical Feminism

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This is a transcript of Meghan Murphy's interview with Sheila Jeffreys which was broadcast on 7 May 2012 over at The F Word. The audio is available to listen to [here](#).

[transcript]

MM: What is your perspective on transgenderism?

SJ: I understand transgenderism to be a diagnosis of the medical profession constructed in the late 20th century ... it seems to have come from work that was being done by sexologists in the mid 20th century when the sexological profession – endocrinologists and so on – invented the idea of gender (I know feminists took up that term, but the term was invented by sexologists in the mid 20th century) and they invented that term in connection with their work on children that they identified as intersex in order to work out what surgery they should do on those children to make them what gender, and they understood gender to be largely socially constructed but partly biologically constructed. So they invented the term, then they invented the term 'gender identity'. Now anybody who's aware that the medical profession and diagnoses ... should be politically extremely seriously criticized and analysed, in other words as social scientists that's what we do with the medical profession, will understand that one needs to look at that diagnosis and that idea and see where it came from.

What interests me is that, at the end of the 19th century (while there's some doubt as to the date), but lesbian and gay historians and social scientists in particular have argued that homosexuality itself is a social construction, in terms of there being seen to be a biologically-constructed particular kind of person who is homosexual. The sexologists at the end of the 19th century said that the homosexual liked the colour green and that the women who were sexual inverts would be able to whistle and the men who were sexual inverts would not be able

to whistle and so on, so they ... the problem was they had the wrong ... they were women trapped in men's bodies or men trapped in women's bodies and it was biological: that's what they said, so that seemed to be the invention of homosexuality and it was very much gendered in the way that they did it and saw it as biological.

Now, lesbian and gay sociologists and historians have criticised that: well, they haven't criticised it, but they have noted that, because they understand that ... homosexuality to be a form of behaviour, rather than a particular kind of person. It's a form of behaviour that people engage in and before the late 19th century it was understood that anyone might engage in this behaviour, and most of the men who were homosexual were married, you know, who engaged in that sort of behaviour and so on. So that's the invention of homosexuality – the invention of it as a political identity – I call myself a lesbian feminist – is a different matter altogether, but the idea that you're a particular kind of person biologically constructed is a historical construction.

Understanding that, the puzzle is why, when at the end of the 20th century, there was a quite similar construction, a biological construction of people who were actually biologically constructed to engage in strangely gendered behaviour, probably about the whistling still, because it's very similar ideas that are put about. That was not criticised in the same way. And that's a puzzle really, or it was [criticised] in the 1970s and 80s by feminists and social scientists, but in the last 30 years or so there's been very little criticism of the construction of transgenderism ... that's an interesting question in itself – why that criticism didn't occur, and why it got squashed out and censored.

Because, apart from anything else, apart from the fact that it's a very similar construction, and if you don't believe in biology then it doesn't make any sense at all, the construction of transgenderism. There are two – it was mainly constructed around men, because men were most of those who became the demanders asking for the surgery and so on – there were two categories of them: one category was definitely homosexual men, and in fact the first transsexual surgery that got a great deal of publicity in the US was a man called Christine Jorgensen who actually specifically said that he was homosexual, and in fact we have it on record that it was his doctor who said to him “no, you're suffering from a condition which affects every cell of your body” and so on. But his was the first case, and that was about ... basically it was about the gay-hating of the general society, which causes

men like him, and unfortunately there are still many men like him, to have surgery because he could not bear to love other men in the body that he had. I mean we know that this hatred of homosexuality is still around, because even in my city of Melbourne there are several Christian organisations which are set up to try and change gay men, and gay men go to them and they're afraid because they're religious and they think they shouldn't be homosexual – Jorgensen was religious, he said that his religion did not allow him to be homosexual – all of this is still going on.

You might have thought, therefore, that this phenomenon would come under serious criticism from lesbians and gay men who are normally critical of gay-hating, particularly when gay-hating takes the form of ... in the 50s and 60s there were lobotomies, and all kinds of terrible aversion treatments by the medical profession. And also in the case of Jorgensen, surgery to remove his genitals and supposedly turn him into a woman which would mean that he was not homosexual. Now you'd think there'd be very very serious criticism of those kinds of treatments of homosexuals – lesbians and gay men – the vast majority of the women who are now going for the treatment are lesbians in the sense that they're involved with women before the surgery and so on. But there hasn't been that criticism, and that's particularly surprising.

But what's interesting as well is that therefore what was happening in the construction of transgenderism is the behaviour which was very very normal for lesbians and gay men, particularly gay men in the earlier part of the 20th century, which was that gay men would be effeminate in the way that they acted out – that was classified by the late 20th century as transgenderism, and in fact the gay anthropologist David Valentine has written a very fascinating book published in 2007 – he went out to research the transgender community – because he was told there was [a transgender community] when he was working as a safe sex educator – went and talked to all these effeminate gay men who said “no of course not, we're men and we're gay” and most of them had not heard of the idea of transgenderism at that time. And Valentine talks about how the idea had already become institutionalized – public services, academic departments, and so on where already recognising this thing, identifying it as transgenderism, which many ordinary gay men on the street who were going to be put into that category had not yet recognised themselves as.

So that's another reason why there should have been very serious criticism from lesbians and gay men that a section of the lesbian and gay community has actually been removed and placed in this category, which fits with the way history is being treated. Something's going on which I call 'transnapping' – which is the transgender activists identify those who have previously been identified as part of lesbian and gay history, and they 'transnap' them and say "actually, no, because they engage in a cross-gender way, they were not gay, they were actually transgender", which makes sense because the majority of those who were gay behaved in transgender ways in those times because that's simply how it was!

MM: I wonder how you think this ... the current discourse has gone ... the way that it is right now around transgenderism. How has that impacted feminism and how does it have the potential to impact feminism and the feminist movement?

SJ: The problem is, I think, that transgenderism got picked up and theorized by queer theorists and some feminists who were queer-identified in the way that they approached theory, and some very very confusing theory came out because, in theory, queer theory is very social constructionist ... in as much as Foucault is very social constructionist – he argued that the homosexual was invented at the end of the 19th century. Foucault said that and I'm sure he would say the same thing about transgenderism. But nonetheless, queer theory which is very social constructionist created this idea that gender is socially constructed – true – but therefore that there can be all kinds of genders, and gender doesn't have any kind of relationship to the actual material reality of the subordination of women and the dominance of men from which gender actually arises. So they queered the pitch on gender and made it all appear very confusing and anybody could be anything, and that theory was very much picked up – not the social constructionist element of it, but the idea that anyone could be anything they liked – and that became part of American individualism: anybody can be absolutely anything if they simply say they are.

At the same time there was the development of plastic surgery of course – the medical profession had to develop certain skills in order to make transgenderism happen – they were indeed engaged in a project to create heterosexual correctly-gendered people, but they needed endocrinology, they needed plastic surgery, they needed anaesthetics in order to do transgenderism. The plastic surgery, cosmetic surgery industry really got going in the second half of the 20th century and was able to offer its goods and these could be taken up by a sort of individual

consumers who, instead of having breast surgery could indeed have transgender surgery and have various organs removed and so on. And the transgender surgery is very similar to the cosmetic surgery done on women in as much as the surgeons who offer labiaplasty on women because they say women's labia are somehow too big, or the wrong shape and they should be removed, they would also build labia for men who decide that they are transgender.

So the medical profession is offering all of that, queer theory has offered the ideological backdrop, at the same time as the big industries of the medical profession have become involved at a particular stage we also have to say of capitalist history, of economic development and so on ... so there are many forces constructing this.

The problem for feminists is that this all happened at a time when feminism, particularly in the academy, was not very strong anyway – there hadn't been an activist feminist movement (although of course it's happening again) for some time. And any kind of academic feminism that's not connected to activism is bound to go off on very strange tangents, and not have a very good materialist analysis of what's taking place. So we had a kind of academic feminism which wanted to be respectable by using queer theory and male theory and so on in order to have any kind of status in the academy – they picked up all these ideas and they started saying all kinds of stuff about transgenderism which actually really makes no sense at all.

So that was very destructive of feminism, indeed you can get conferences in the States now, I've seen them, women's studies conferences, at which there are transgenders as the keynote speakers, which is kind of extraordinary because transgenderism is a symptom of a construction of a male dominant society which is enormously harmful both to those who travel under the idea that they are transgender, as well as to feminism and to women as a class.

The other problems for feminism, apart from the destruction of feminist theory – because this queer postmodern theory said 'there is no such thing as woman', and once you've deconstructed women and there's no such thing as woman, of course, anybody can say they're a woman so that's an important part of what was going on – apart from the destruction of feminist theory, and the way that this helped with the development, the fact that there was some kind of recognition that any man could say he was a woman which is a kind of crazy idea, you know, at the same

time as *that*, the development of transgenderism as being seen as a category of persons with rights, rights-bearing people, has had a huge political impact on feminism because it has meant that, with women-only organising, which *is*, always has been, and will in the future be *fundamental* to feminist activity, the creation of women's spaces came under threat from a group of men in particular who saw themselves as rights-bearing transgenders who, because they said they were women, *needed* to enter the spaces of women.

That led to court cases – there have been court cases here in Victoria where I live in Australia – lesbian gatherings now have to take place secretly, pretty much, because otherwise transgenders will make legal challenges. So the driving of a movement and of lesbian spaces and feminist spaces underground is an important part of what's happened. Obviously there are so many things I could say here to ...

MM: Well, the other part that I'm interested in knowing is, you know, what's been your experience in having these conversations and in putting forward the critiques that you've explored a little bit here?

SJ: Yes. The problem for feminists who want to be critical of the construction of transgenderism as a category, of the way that the medical profession does that, of the impact of the construction of that category on feminist thought and practice, the difficulty for us is that some of the men who have transgendered – certainly not all, but some – have formed themselves into groups of fierce agitators and campaigners for their rights in *opposition* to the rights of women and feminists, and they organise to try and make sure that feminists speakers who are critical – and there are very few at this moment who are prepared to be critical openly because of the responses that they get – but they try to ensure that feminists who are critical do not get the space to speak.

So for instance if they hear that a feminist who is critical is due to speak, such as myself or Germaine Greer who was critical in the 90s, or Janice Raymond who wrote *The Transsexual Empire* back in 1979, then they will demand that the organisers remove those persons from their programmes, they will create campaigns to get the speakers removed, they will – (laughs) in relation to myself for instance, they've drawn up something on the net which is supposed to be all the dreadful things I've said about transgenderism – actually all of them, I think, very sensible and not peculiar at all – but they put things together in a sort of

propaganda sheet that they send out on the net and send to those who organise conferences and so on to try and really pressure people into not permitting anybody who's ever been critical to speak. And it's not as though I speak publicly about transgenderism very much – I haven't in the past but I certainly intend to much more in the future – but *whatever* you're speaking about they will try to keep these feminists out.

So there's really a campaign of censorship on the net, which frightens people ... it's not just feminists that they do this to – there was an American sexologist called Michael Bailey who wrote a book back in I think 2004 called *The Man Who Would Be Queen* in which he made arguments that transgender activists do not like – which is that transgenderism for, not those men who have been homosexual and do not wish to be in that category, but the other large category of those men who decide that they're transgender who come from cross-dressers who've been sexually excited by female, by women's clothes. Michael Bailey argued that for that category of men – which is a very large one – who've usually been married with a couple of children and decide they're transgender in their 50s or so – he said that that was sexual and it was about sexual excitement, at least in its origins.

Now this isn't accepted by transgender activists – some of them do accept it and say that of course that is true, because if you look at the pornography then that's absolutely what it's about – but the ones who reject it, they reject it because they think that won't be acceptable to people, the fact that it's a form of sexual expression, and it will lead to bad repute, it will mean that the health insurers will not pay for the surgery and so on. So that's a huge issue for transgender activists and they are divided amongst themselves as to whether this is actually a sexual interest, usually developed at about the age of 11 years old when boys start to wear their mother's clothing and think it's sexually exciting – and for increasing numbers of those men leading to transgender surgery when they're in their 40s or 50s.

Michael Bailey made this argument and he had the most extraordinary campaign against him, a very very vicious campaign from transgender activists including the putting of details of where his children were on the net – it was an extraordinary campaign and there's a very good, detailed article by a woman scientist about how shocking that campaign was and how it developed and what was done to him. So when that kind of thing happens in the academic world, people become afraid not only to do their own research and put out their own

ideas about what's going on, but to be critical of the phenomenon generally. Michael Bailey is no feminist, but he did make arguments as some other sexologists do that transgender activists did not find acceptable.

MM: So why is that this debate is so heated right now in feminism because it is of course very heated – but what is it about this time in the feminist movement that's impacting the debate and making it so heated?

SJ: I think feminism is not yet very strong, because there were a couple of decades, you know, in the late 90s and the 2000s, when feminism was not really strong at all and it was almost impossible for women to even say they were feminists without criticism. That's changing and feminism's developing again – in fact the reason we're having this discussion is because feminism is developing again and many more feminists are becoming critical of the idea that any man can be a woman if he simply says that he is. Now many feminists are being critical of that and as a result these conversations are happening. But for a long time when feminism was very much reduced in its impact transgenderism was becoming – in terms of surgery and drugs – more and more significant.

We haven't even discussed what that means for lesbians – because another aspect of what's going on is that increasing numbers of young lesbians in particular are supposedly transgenering. But in as much as in the 1950s many lesbians bound their breasts and there were stone butches for example who did not allow their bodies to be touched and found it very difficult to have a woman's body whilst also being a lesbian – that, in the present manifestation, and I think it's not a womanifestation exactly but a *manifestation* – we have many young lesbians who cannot bear to be in woman's bodies so they're increasingly taking testosterone, having anything removed from their body that would suggest that they are women.

The reasons for this are not simply that they find it difficult to be lesbians or to love women in the bodies of women, it's not so much that now I think, as that they find it difficult to *be* women, because of the way women are treated as this particular stage of male dominance – the pornification of young women, the way that they're supposed to carry themselves, the contempt with which they are treated, the way that the pornography industry has had an impact on the very concept of woman and the way women are able to think about themselves. That's been so very severe that I think that many young women – who wish to be self-

respecting – find it difficult to picture themselves as women or to inhabit the bodies of women and I think we've also got to recognise – very unfortunately – that for many young lesbians who transgender, although the surgery and drugs will have very harmful effects on their bodies, for instance they have hysterectomies very very young and then have to have drugs all of their lives, or they have premature menopause – apart from that, they are able to access some of the things that men have allocated to themselves: such as safety walking down the streets, such as promotion at work, such as being listened to and paid better attention – all very important social goods that are allocated to the class of men in male domination which *can* seem very attractive to women who no longer wish to remain in the despised class of womanhood.

So for lesbians it's a very serious situation that increasing numbers of young women – for instance, back in the 1970s, in America there would have been a lesbian group in virtually every city: now, you can look to see where the FTM groups are, that is women who have decided that they are transgender, and in America again, in virtually every town there's an FTM group – now that's an extraordinary change around. How did we come to that situation? Now if there was strong feminism and strong lesbian feminism which there will be again but is not now, then obviously there has to be an absolute campaign against the destruction of lesbian bodies. The mutilation, chemical and surgical destruction of lesbians, which follows on from what was happening in the 50s and the 60s and the 70s but is much much more severe now, what is being done to lesbians.