

Sheila Jeffreys
Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism
New York: Routledge, 2014
ISBN-10: 0415539404

Tim R. Johnston (SUNY Stony Brook)

Tim R. Johnston received his PhD in philosophy from SUNY Stony Brook. His research focuses on feminist and queer theory, contemporary French philosophy (specifically Bergson), and philosophical approaches to memory.

Feminist activist and professor of social and political science Sheila Jeffreys has published a new book titled *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. The book, written in part with Lorene Gottschalk, spells out exactly why she and some other radical feminists are opposed to what she calls "transgenderism" and what Janice Raymond named "the transsexual empire," or the transgender people, advocates, and medical systems that provide transition-related medical care.

This book arrives in the midst of a tremendously polarized debate about transgender inclusion in radical feminism: specifically, whether transgender women should have access to lesbian separatist and women-only spaces such as rape crisis centers or shelters for battered women. This debate is still very intense, particularly on social media, and Jeffreys's text is a clear articulation of a position that has gained traction in certain radical feminist circles, which argues that transgender women should be barred from such access.

Jeffreys makes three main points. First, women are oppressed because of their sex, and the concepts of gender and gender identity are used to lock women into positions of subordination to men. Second, "transgenderism" is a condition created by a medical system that seeks to reinforce traditional gender roles and generate profit through required therapy, hormone replacement, and surgeries. Third, "transgenderism" allows "male-bodied transgenders" (that is, trans women) to infiltrate, divide, and destroy feminist and feminist separatist spaces, and "female-bodied transgenders" (that is, trans men) to escape misogyny by masquerading as men. Jeffreys argues that feminists must fight the rise of "transgenderism" because legal protections based on gender identity hurt transgender people, their families, women, and feminism.

Chapter 1 argues that transgender identity is a socially constructed phenomenon and that transgender people deny this fact by appealing to a felt sense of internal gender identity, a concept Jeffreys argues is oppressive to women. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between transgenderism and feminism, and chapter 3 charts the harms transgenderism causes to the bodies of transgender people, and also to women and feminism more generally. Chapter 4 examines the harms done to the female partners of transgender women, and chapter 5 argues that transgender men are women attempting to gain the

privileges of patriarchy. Chapter 6 argues that transition-related care for children and young adults, such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy, are a form of eugenics. Chapter 7 charts how legal protections for gender identity harm women, and the final chapter focuses explicitly on the question of transgender women gaining access to women-only spaces.

Before discussing the aspects of the text I find worthwhile and compelling, I want to outline two problems with the text as a whole. First, Jeffreys relies on a very small, controversial, and often outdated set of texts and evidence to support her arguments. She does not acknowledge the controversial or contested nature of this evidence, nor does she entertain significant and established evidence that is critical of her position. Second, the tone of the book is extremely disrespectful, and there are several places where Jeffreys engages in significant misrepresentations of transgender people, their allies, and research. These problems call into question not only the book's academic integrity, but also Jeffreys's scholarly objectivity and rigor.

To the first point about evidence, Jeffreys claims that transgender activists have effectively silenced all criticism and positions herself and other radical feminists as the victims of this censorship. It is completely true that members of both the radical feminist and transgender communities have engaged in vilification and personal attacks. There is no doubt that people have said terrible things about Jeffreys, and both parties are responsible for a climate in which conversation is almost impossible. That being said, in reading the text it is clear that Jeffreys assumes the position of the censored critic in order to excuse her outdated and selective bibliography and to avoid asking whether the lack of evidence supporting her position may reflect its inaccuracy. It becomes obvious early on that for Jeffreys, everything that does not support her position is no longer science, reasoned argument, or important personal narrative—it is pro-transgender propaganda.

For example, in chapter 1 she discusses the history of transition-related care and asserts that "the male demanders [transgender women asking for transition-related care] fell into two categories: homosexual men who felt unable to love men while remaining in a male body; and men who were overwhelmingly heterosexual and transgendered as a climax to their interest in cross-dressing" (22). The view that transgender women fit into one of these two categories is the crux of her later claims that transitioning is a form of eugenic social control (124), that cross-dressing leads to transitioning (84, 94), and that transgender women want to gain access to women's spaces to satisfy their erotic desires (154–55). She supports this point with the work of three researchers—Ray Blanchard, J. Michael Bailey, and Kiira Triea. All three have been at the center of a long controversy, and the soundness of their research is still a matter of debate. All three have also been subject to a tremendous backlash from the transgender community. Rather than argue why she feels comfortable trusting this research, Jeffreys uses the backlash as a smokescreen to avoid discussing the academic concerns at the heart of the controversy, and to justify her exclusive reliance on this contested material for many of the key premises of her argument.

Another striking example also comes from chapter 1 where she seeks to "identify the forces of male power that constructed transgenderism as a category separate from homosexuality in the twentieth century" (20) in order to debunk the concept of gender identity or a feminine essence. Jeffreys argues that transgender people and the medical establishment have created both the subject position of the transgender person as suffering from gender dysphoria, and also a set of expensive, dangerous, and irreversible medical interventions to treat this condition. Anyone familiar with Foucaultian biopolitical critique will recognize this analysis. And though I agree with much of what she has to say, Jeffreys is simply (and revealingly) wrong when she claims that, "in relation to transgenderism over the last two decades, during which time the construction of this practice has been at its peak—with certain notable exceptions (Gottschalk 2003; Hausman 1995; Jeffreys 2006, 2008)—there has been no such social constructionism analysis" (17).

To the contrary, there have been many transgender people and allies who have used the resources of social constructionism to question both the medicalization of transgender identity and the social forces that constructed the diagnostic criteria for gender identity disorder (GID) and gender dysphoria (GD) (Wilchins 2002; Spade 2003; Butler 2004; Stone 2006; Valentine 2007; Johnston 2013; Wilchins 2014). These theorists share many of Jeffreys's concerns, particularly around the heterosexism inherent in the now outdated diagnosis of GID. Omitting a discussion of this rich debate allows her to cast transgender people as either bullies forcing doctors to provide dangerous medicine (21), or dupes of a medical system intent on profiting from their unhappiness (183). Either view evacuates transgender people of any agency or moral complexity, a rhetorical move that is the hallmark of demonization and dehumanization. It is too bad that Jeffreys did not engage with, or at least acknowledge, this large body of well-respected work. She misses an opportunity to align her critique with the work of respected transgender theorists and begin to build common ground between the radical feminist and transgender critiques of heterosexism.

Let me be clear. No book or argument can contend with all of the literature and anticipate all counter arguments. We must inevitably make choices about our sources and about how we present controversial material. Jeffreys, however, is not making editorial decisions; she is ignoring important material and presenting controversial topics as if they are settled and established fact. It is clear that Jeffreys made her up mind long before examining and selecting her evidence.

Turning to my second overall objection on tone, I want to be clear that I believe it is important that people are able to critique groups of which they are not members. But when the group you are criticizing is a significantly marginalized and vulnerable population, it is especially important that such critiques be grounded in respect. Unfortunately, the tone of Jeffreys's book quickly moves beyond criticism and into scorn. Her refusal to use transgender people's preferred names and pronouns, in addition to her use of the term *transgender* as both a noun ("transgenders") and process ("transgendering"), are hurtful and inflammatory. Jeffreys argues that her choice to not respect pronoun preference is politically important (8–10), and although I disagree, I

could grant her that point if the text were not also riddled with significant misrepresentations of both evidence and arguments that are clearly intended to malign and discredit transgender people and their supporters. This includes character assassinations and misrepresentations of transgender people and allies (49–50, 53, 125–26), straw-man presentations of counterarguments (5, 42, 43–44, 50–51), and red herrings (34–35, 69–71, 95, 133–34, 154–56).

Jeffreys's misrepresentation of evidence and questionable methodologies are particularly clear in the final three chapters. Chapter 6 examines the important issue of providing irreversible, transition-related medical care to children and young adults. Jeffreys draws an analogy to the history of the eugenics movement in the United States, and makes the argument that "a regime of transgendering children as well as adults has the effect of eliminating gender non-conformity through shoring up a correctly gendered and heterosexual state and citizenry" (124).

Jeffreys's criticism raises an interesting question: are a variety of gender-nonconforming behaviors being shoehorned into being called "transgender," or are transgender children being given access to the conceptual and medical tools to express their experience? Far from analyzing this question, Jeffreys claims that children with unacceptable gender expression are coerced into transitioning to normalize their behavior, a view that completely ignores the agency of the children involved. Boys who play with dolls are not forced to transition in order to align their love of dolls with their new female sex. The children themselves are the ones requesting these interventions, often in the face of tremendous resistance from parents and family. Without incorporating the voices of these children and their parents we are left with a familiar form of "won't-someone-think-of-the-children" handwringing that is not an argument; it is fear-mongering.

Jeffreys's most offensive claim misrepresentation comes in chapter 7, where she argues that "men who transgender are more prone to criminal behavior than other men are. Research from the United States has shows that 21 per cent of men who transgender had been sent to prison for any reason, which contrasts with 2.7 per cent of the general American population" (157). This statistic is accurate, but it does not demonstrate that transgender women are dangerous or inherently more prone to criminal behavior than are their cisgender peers. What this statistic shows us is that transgender women are economically disadvantaged, are more likely to be homeless because they have been disowned by their biological or legal families, must often turn to the underground economy to survive, and are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement for punishment that often includes incarceration. This is made perfectly clear in the source material that Jeffreys is referencing (Grant et al. 2005, 158). Jeffreys's obvious misrepresentation of this material is not only bad research; it is a morally reprehensible misrepresentation of a vulnerable population.

It is worth noting that Jeffreys does raise several points that merit serious consideration. For example, transitioning is not a process you go through alone and the partners and family members of those who transition have a right to express their feelings and criticize the behaviors of their transitioning partners without automatically being accused of

transphobia. Likewise, the medical standards for transition-related care are unevenly applied and open to contestation. The experiences of those who regret transitioning should be taken seriously and should inform a discussion of how medical best practices can help prevent people from receiving transition-related medical care that they later regret. Finally, transition-related medical care for children is a difficult issue that involves questions of consent, maturity, and parental responsibility. We should ask how transgender visibility and the availability of transition-related care shapes the way children understand their experience. Children seem to be identifying themselves as transgender at an increasingly early age. We should talk about why this is happening and what role transgender visibility has in shaping their self-conceptions. Discussions and criticisms of that sort are essential, but they must be based in respect for transgender people and for the reality of their identities.

This book casts into sharp relief the fact that disagreements about the nature of gender are at the heart of fights between certain feminists and certain transgender people. This debate has been cast as a zero-sum choice: either you view gender as automatically and inherently oppressive—a view held for good reasons by radical feminists—or you understand the concepts of gender and gender expression to be important ways to give voice to the lived experience of transgender and other gender-nonconforming people. I welcome a book that interrogates this divide between certain radical feminists and certain members of the transgender community, while offering both views respect and understanding. Unfortunately, *Gender Hurts* is not that book.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. 2005. *Injustice at every turn: A report of the national transgender discrimination survey*. http://endtransdiscrimination.org/PDFs/NTDS_Report.pdf (accessed October 14, 2014).
- Johnston, Tim R. 2013. Transgressive translations: Parrhesia and the politics of being understood. *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 3 (1): 84–97.
- Spade, Dean. 2003. Resisting medicine, re/modeling gender. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 18 (15): 15–37.
- Stone, Sandy. 2006. The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto. In *The transgender studies reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge.
- Wilchins, Riki Anne. 2002. It's your gender, stupid. In *Genderqueer: Voices from beyond the sexual binary*, ed. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Anne Wilchins. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- . 2014. *Queer theory, gender theory: An instant primer*. New York: Riverdale Avenue Books.
- Valentine, David. 2007. *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.