

So You've Been Publicly Transphobe'd



[Posted to Medium 21st April 2020].

So you've been publicly accused of 'transphobia' / called a 'transphobe'. Don't worry, you're not the only one! There's [J.K. Rowling](#)[1], accused of transphobia for saying that women shouldn't be fired for saying sex is real; there's [Debbie Hayton](#)[2], a transwoman accused of transphobia for wearing a t-shirt saying that transwomen are men; there's [Jonathan Ross](#)[3], branded a transphobe after tweeting support for Graham Linehan (the latter an outspoken critic of trans rights activism, following the lead of radical and gender critical feminist women in the UK); there's [South Park](#)[4], accused of transphobia for its episode addressing transwomen's competition in female sports; there's [Eva Poen](#)[5] from the University of Exeter, accused of transphobia for the eminently sensible observation, in a tweet, that only female people menstruate and go through menopause. Just throw "accused of transphobia" into Google Search and you'll find all these and more.

Around the world, there are hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands like you. Perhaps they used the word 'woman' or 'female' when talking about experiences like menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause (rather than using dehumanising and/or women-erasing language like 'bleeders', 'pregnant-people', 'chest-feeders', and 'people going through menopause'). Perhaps they made the egregious mistake of referring to a visibly male person as 'he' or a visibly female person as 'she'. Perhaps, when confronted with the question of 'inclusiveness' in sports, they found it more or less obvious that it would be unfair to let men, who have a physical advantage, compete in women's sports. Perhaps they were feminists who had the audacity to apply the lessons of 'standpoint theory' — the idea that members of a specific marginalised groups have situated knowledge that people outside the group are likely to lack — to their own case (i.e. thinking that the people qualified to speak about women's experiences and women's issues are the people who *are* women, not the people who *identify as* women, or *feel like* women, whatever that means). There are many ways to misstep in the eyes of trans rights activists.

Once you've been on the receiving end of these kinds of accusations for a while, they start to lose their sting. Indeed, when it is feminist speech that routinely provokes them, you come to understand that they are not really what they seem to be. They're something like, '*stop doing feminism and start doing trans activism*'.

Something like the frustrated protests of a small child when you tell them they've watched quite enough Peppa Pig for today. But even those who have been liberally peppered with such accusations will remember back to the first or second time, that being charged with 'transphobia' or proclaimed a 'transphobe' could be concerning. *Am I?* You would think to yourself, scratching around in the depths for any buried feelings of fear or animosity towards transgender people.

Despite the frequent suggestions to the contrary, most people who express the kinds of feminist views that get them offside with trans rights activists don't have any fear or animosity towards transgender people, and really aren't that interested in transgender people one way or the other, except in so far as the changes to law that they're advocating for have negative implications for women's sex-based rights. It is a common misconception that gender critical feminism is 'about' trans issues, for example, when it's about female people, and trans is just one topic that's currently relevant because of bills attempting to change the legal recognition of sex and / or gender around the world. So to figure out whether the accusations of transphobia are deserved, we'll need a more expansive definition than feelings of fear or animosity. Let's first take seriously the idea that you're a transphobe when you're not doing trans activism (*particularly* when the reason you're not doing it is that you're doing feminism instead, and you take the two projects to be mutually incompatible).

Philosophers love thought-experiments, and I am no exception. Sometimes they involve fantastical things like people falling from balconies and making split-second moral decisions about how to land on the person below so as to fairly share the physical impacts. This one is less fun: imagine you work a full-time job, and don't have much time around work for all the other things that make life worth living. But you are committed to making the world better in your own small way, so together with a few others you're trying to do something useful for the environment. You and four of your colleagues are trying to get a reusable coffee cup scheme in place in your office. Your role has been to source the cups and design the plastic heat-protection bands that go around them. Suppose that at some point in this process you find yourself in conversation with a colleague from your workplace's LGBTQI+ taskforce. He or she enthusiastically suggests that you get the bands printed with 'preferred pronouns': he/him, she/her, or they/them. You politely decline, for two reasons. The first, and less important, reason is that you are under-informed about LGBTQI+ issues and so feel unable to make a judgement about the implications of doing this. The second, and more important, reason is that you are planning to have the bands printed with facts about climate change and single-use coffee cup waste. But your colleague takes affront at your refusal, and you find out later that he's tweeted about the interaction, calling you a 'transphobe'.

This simple thought-experiment helps us to think about an underlying question, namely, are people allowed to spend their energies on social justice causes other than trans rights activism? I am quite confident that most people would agree that they are. A coffee cup recycling scheme is one of many possible ways of making the world better, and it's okay to stick with doing that even when you're invited in to other activist projects. Trans rights activism is just one cause among many, and there are others which affect much larger numbers of people (like anti-racism movement, and feminism), and affect people in more serious ways (like refugee and asylum-seeker protection, and advocacy against trafficking). Some of these causes help people, some help animals (e.g. movements against factory farming), some help the environment (e.g. activism to protect against deforestation); some are short-term, some are long-term (working for zero-emissions infrastructure, or to protect the rights of future generations). So long as trans rights activism is not *the only* cause anyone is allowed to devote their energy to, then the person pursuing the reusable coffee cups project is not a 'transphobe' for refusing to do what the LGBTQI+ activist asks.

To apply this to feminism, all you need to do is switch out the coffee cups project for any feminist project centred on female people. Liberal feminists (who tend to support trans rights activism) might want to object here and say 'feminism is not centred on female people, it's centred on *women*, and trans women are women!' *Yawn*. Sorry, what were you saying? Oh right. Something something identifies as a woman is a woman. But you don't have to be a radical feminist to find yourself involved in a project that centres female people. Feminists who accept self-identification as their conception of womanhood have to concede (and are generally glad to concede, because that was kind of the point) that there is nothing

women have in common anymore, so from their perspective, there are only bigger and smaller groups of women, and better- and worse-off groups of women, and decisions still have to be made about which women to help. So *even liberal feminists* might end up putting their energies into some projects that aim to make things better for female people, such as the securing of abortion rights, or the securing of legal rights against workplace pregnancy and breastfeeding discrimination. And again, so long as trans rights activism is not *the only* cause anyone is allowed to devote their energy to, then a feminist — of any kind — is not a ‘transphobe’ simply because she does not work on projects involving trans interests.

What might the person eager to defend the idea that at least some of these women *really do deserve the label ‘transphobe’* try out next? Another move — which I’ve also talked about [here](#) [6] — would be to say that the radical feminist in the situation described above really is a ‘transphobe’ while the liberal feminist isn’t, because the radical feminist makes a distinction (crucially, between *female people* and the rest) that the liberal feminist does not make. We need a new thought-experiment to consider this, so throw off your imagined environmentalist costume and sink into this new scenario: you’re a person of colour volunteering in a small student anti-racism group. The main objective of the group is to raise awareness on campus about racial diversity in the curriculum. Suppose a white member of faculty comes to one of your public information sessions, and in the discussion afterwards he makes an impassioned case that racism is not only bad for people of colour but is also bad for white people. His reasons are not entirely stupid; he talks about how inequality is bad for everyone, and how it gets in the way of meaningful relationships, and how it constrains knowledge and innovation. But he thinks these considerations show that your group shouldn’t be making the distinction between white people and people of colour, particularly in positioning the one as oppressed and the other as oppressor. He insists that *everyone* is a ‘victim’ of the white supremacist culture, and that you should all be working together to find positive ways to change racism, for *everyone’s* benefit.

You and the other students, however, think that while some of this man’s points are worth discussing further, he’s gone too far in trying to collapse distinctions that matter. You think it matters that he’s white, and *as* white, a beneficiary of your country’s white supremacist national culture. This makes a difference to his experience as opposed to yours and the other students’, and you think eliding those differences by rolling everything into one big ‘victim’ system would serve his interests more than your group’s. You also chafe a bit at the suggestion that you make space to accommodate white people as victims of white supremacy. You feel you’ve been tolerating white people centring themselves for quite long enough, and you certainly have no interest in doing it inside the anti-racism movement.

Is your reaction warranted? I think so. Given the history of race relations in many countries, it’s hardly surprising that a person of colour would be fed up with white-centrism and not want any more of it. More generally, it’s hardly unreasonable for a person who may have really suffered at the hands of a system which targets her and others like her for discrimination and disadvantage to not have much sympathy for the claim that those who perpetrate and benefit from that system are *also* harmed by it. If you and the other students in your group were firm with this white member of faculty, and said ‘you are not the same as me and I refuse to make space for you in my movement, this space is one of the only spaces in the world that is *not for you*’, would you be a ‘whitephobe’? If this man stormed off and plastered accusations of ‘whitephobia’ against you all over Twitter, would you be upset?

Again, it doesn’t take much to apply this to feminism. It may be perfectly true that patriarchy is also bad for men, and even worse for some men than others (particularly those who would like to depart from norms of masculinity without being policed). That doesn’t mean *we’re all victims of patriarchy and there are no meaningful distinctions here*. Men are beneficiaries of patriarchy, and women are not. Gay men are beneficiaries of patriarchy, even though they have been more hurt by its constraints — one of which is heterosexuality — than other men. Transwomen are beneficiaries of patriarchy, even though they have been more hurt by its constraints — one of which is not repudiating maleness/manhood — than other men. (Those who pass as women will *have been* beneficiaries of patriarchy, while those who do not pass will *still be* beneficiaries of patriarchy. It’s not an accident that in the wider world we hear a lot more from men than women, *except inside the trans movement* where we hear a lot more from transwomen than trans men). There is absolutely nothing unreasonable or surprising about women wanting to say — with

some exasperation! — we've been tolerating men centring themselves for quite long enough, thank you, and we have no interest in doing that inside the feminist movement.

Here the parallel to 'whitephobe' might be 'manphobe', or misandrist. But naming like this would mean 'misgendering' those it excludes, at least according to the gender terms and concepts deployed by trans rights activists (and by the liberal feminists allied with them). So we end up with 'transphobe', even though it is not trans *people* that this distinction cuts out, only *transwomen*. If you wouldn't be concerned about being called a 'whitephobe' for asserting the right to anti-racism activism that doesn't centre (or even include) white people, and you wouldn't be concerned about being called a 'manphobe' for asserting the right to feminist activism that doesn't centre (or even include) men, then you shouldn't be concerned about being called a 'transphobe'. (You might think at this point, surely these are bad parallels, because 'white people' and 'men' are dominant social groups while 'trans people' is not. But the point about justified exclusion is made on the basis of group membership, not social status. People of colour can exclude white people even if they're members of other marginalised groups: disabled white people, gay white people, and poor white people can all be excluded. Similarly women can exclude men even if they're members of other marginalised groups). We can stop this 'concept creep' in its tracks by refusing to take these accusations seriously unless they mean something on a par with others kinds of – phobia, like homophobia and xenophobia. If someone is not a 'xenophobe' for not supporting every political demand made by would-be immigrants, and not a 'homophobe' for not supporting every political demand made by the LGB movement, then someone is not a 'transphobe' for not supporting every political demand made by the trans movement.

Perhaps the defender of calling everyone a 'transphobe' can still bounce back from this and say, well okay, it's not about not doing trans rights activism, and it's not about insisting on distinctions that are politically important, but it *is* about not using derogatory language and it *is* about not resisting legal reforms that make us better off without making anyone else worse off. It's hard to argue with that, surely. If someone uses slurs or pejoratives to refer to immigrants or gays, it seems pretty fair to call them 'xenophobes' and 'homophobes' (setting aside the question of whether calling-out is really the best way to inspire changes of heart, which it probably isn't). The question is what the parallel of the familiar anti-gay and anti-immigrant terms are. There are obvious slurs and pejoratives for trans people that we could probably all agree about. But trans rights activists go much further than this, claiming that it is denigrating to acknowledge their biological sex, or even to acknowledge biological sex at all. It's not just that certain slurs are off the table, which they should be, but that whole areas of knowledge are meant to become unsayable and unknowable, and concepts that other marginalised groups need to articulate their interests and protect/advocate for their rights are taken away (most saliently women and gays, many of whose rights are sex-based). It is far from obvious that one marginalised group has the right to take these resources away from other marginalised groups, even if doing so would advance their interests. So it is far from obvious that people are 'transphobes' for resisting the transformations of terms and concepts that trans rights activists are attempting. The same goes for legal reforms: they simply *don't* make trans people better off without making anyone else worse off (despite much rhetoric claiming that this is the case). That is the whole point of the fierce debate in multiple countries over sex self-identification. Many women feel that they are made worse-off by the attempted changes to the legal meanings of sex terms and *de facto* the legal protections offered on their basis. Not supporting every political demand made by a movement doesn't make you a '— phobe'. But this accusation is unlikely to go away, so I suggest we all get comfortable with it.

Link:

[1] <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/jk-rowling-accused-of-transphobia-after-backing-researcher-sacked-over-gender-tweet/news-story/6882966cb4373b00ce06c80ab78cfb85>

[2] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/12/22/transgender-woman-accused-hate-speech-wearing-t-shirt-stating/>

[3] <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/jonathan-ross-graham-linehan-transphobia-lgbt-twitter-backlash-a9408776.html>

[4] <https://www.nme.com/news/new-south-park-episode-accused-of-transphobia-2574627>

- [5] <https://thetab.com/uk/exeter/2020/02/28/exeter-lecturer-accused-of-transphobia-for-saying-only-females-menstruate-47008>
- [6] 'Patriarchy, misogyny, & the gender system' – archived at hollylawford-smith.org