#GenderWeek: Truce! When radical feminists and trans feminists empathise

**By Finn Mackay**

*We wanted to explore the ground between the polarised, entrenched positions in the so-called “TERF-war”. Radical feminists on one pole, trans-inclusionary feminists and trans activists on the other. The disputed territory being women-only space, language and the ever changing legal framework surrounding gender.*

*Entrenchment leads to stalemate. Stalemate is no friend to progress.*

*We want to know how feminism can progress when it comes to these gender debates. Can we stop hurling abuse and start listening? What would happen if people in these polarised positions began to empathise with each other? Is it possible to find common ground and start building towards a shared vision of the future? Fighting common enemies?*

**Finn Mackay:**

The disagreements between some feminist theory and the growing movement for trans rights and recognition perhaps began most publically with Janice Raymond’s 1979 book *The Transexual Empire* and Sandy Stone’s famous riposte in *The Empire Strikes Back*. The main two critiques were that Raymond denied a history for trans people and stated that trans people are not ‘real’ men or women.

It’s not difficult to see why the latter would cause offence, and indeed Raymond does suggest this in her book. Mainly she is concerned with critiquing the medical industry and its pathologisation of gender in the clinics of the 1970s, which she sees as charm schools for gender stereotyping.

Raymond does not deny a transgender history; she is not naïve to the fact that gender rules are different around the world and are often flouted. However, Raymond argues that it wasn’t until legal and medical advancements that it became possible to talk about the identity of transexual.

This highlights an important distinction between [gender and sex](http://finnmackay.wordpress.com/articles/article-on-genderless-baby-2011/). I am not an essentialist; I believe gender is a social construct – by which I mean masculinity, femininity, camp, butch, high femme or androgynous, for example. Sex describes the biological features of our bodies, such as genitalia, reproductive capacity and hormones. In patriarchy of course, sex equals rank and gender roles are used, promoted and policed so that sex rank is obvious and unequivocal.

I don’t believe gender is natural, fixed or innate, but made and not born. It is made by all the stereotypes around us about how men and women are supposed to look, act and dress. Everyone works hard at their gender, it does not come naturally. Men and women work to live up to narrow and impossible gender ideals; they diet and spend vast amounts on cosmetics and plastic surgery. In that way we are all performing gender, and it is difficult to say if anyone is a ‘real’ man or woman.

Therefore, I don’t believe that trans people are any less ‘real’ men and women than anyone else, and I don’t believe trans women are ‘men’. I respect self-definition and use the pronouns individuals identify as; I would never refer to trans women as ‘he’ or to trans men as ‘she’. I agree that women-only spaces should be open to all women, including trans women. However, I also respect the right of all oppressed groups to self-organise. For example, recently a mixed feminist conference in Manchester held a workshop on girlhood sexual abuse which was open only to women assigned female at birth. I do not think it was right that the conference was attacked as a result.

I do not agree with the term ‘cis’ and do not use it. It suggests that all non-trans people are gender normative Stepford wives, which is far from the case. I do not get read as a woman in many daily interactions and experience harassment and violence as a result. I do not have the privilege of not being questioned about my sex and gender in the street, in passport control or in interactions with health services. I also do not believe that being categorised as female in a patriarchal world can ever be seen as a privilege, and the facts of sexual violence, marginalisation and poverty bear that out.

- See more at: http://www.feministtimes.com/genderweek-truce-when-radical-feminists-and-trans-feminists-empathise/#sthash.GGG6ZjfZ.dpuf