
Cisgenderism's Move Beyond Anxious Defence: Commentary on 'Gender's Wider Stakes: Lay Attitudes to Legal Gender Reform'

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Peel and Newman's paper on 'Gender's Wider Stakes' throws up many rich methodological threads. In this response I take the opportunity to follow and extend the line of analysis they establish in considering participants' engagement with the 'Attitudes to Gender' survey as a 'snapshot of a cultural moment' (Peel and Newman this issue: 25) which is highly contested and polarised. In particular I consider the affective dynamics producing such polarisation as a form of anxious collective defence which suggests something important about the way that binary systemic power is shored-up, reproduced and filtered through cultural attachments to ideas of biological sex. This shoring up reinforces rather than disrupts hierarchies of inequalities and difference which are sustained through a call to a supposedly majority biology rather than a supposedly minority experience of gender fluidity. I therefore want to take seriously Peel and Newman's central argument around using cisgenderism as a means to interpret an apparently straightforward resistance to a change to the current legal status quo through a systemic lens. Such a systemic lens recognises that we remain attached to discourses and practices of biological determinism that damage ourselves as well as others. In this regard, an understanding of cisgenderism holds important possibilities for coalition working for collective emancipation.

As someone engaged in research and related public debate into the contested area of whiteness as an institutionalised orientation to power and as a lived expression of coloniality, I recognise the experience of having the terms and findings of my research, my own capacity as a researcher and even my personhood put into (sometimes hostile) question. This questioning comes from a variety of conservative, liberal and left progressive positions (see, for example, Haffajee (2013) and the response from Garman (2013)). As someone very obviously positioned through and benefitting from the social, cultural and academic power of whiteness I see much of this challenge as useful in pushing myself and my thinking into a productively discomfoted place (Kinouani 2019). This discomfoted place moves beyond introspection and personal

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defence, to the political and consequential aspects of living and resisting living race (Hunter 2015a). Nevertheless, there is a fine line between doing the important work of recognising and naming power, its everyday functions and its more obvious abuses in nuanced and challenging ways; and creating and sustaining a toxic public culture characterised through anxious defence. Such toxic public cultures mitigate against the sort of reflexively self-questioning, more reparative forms of public engagements necessary to creating systemically oriented social change.

The strength, tone and nature of the 'Attitudes to Gender' survey's qualitative responses are suggestive of the way that such a toxic public culture works via a polarising defensive reaction, popularised through the idea of 'call out culture' (see, for example, Ross 2019). Relatedly they are suggestive of how progressive positions can get caught up and undermined within this dynamic. Jennifer Nash's (2019) insightful analysis of the defensiveness which she argues has come to mark black feminist theorising around intersectionality, shows how 'defensive affect traps black feminism, hindering its visionary world-making capacities' (Nash 2019: 3), and keeping it in a protective posture mired in policing boundaries of identities, ideas and practices. Nash sees this defensiveness as representative of a broader social condition of stunted or obstructed agency, whereby defensiveness over a particular object like intersectionality 'becomes a way of exercising agency, as a wilful form of territorial exertion in the service of autonomy, but one that is frustrating and frustrated' (Nash 2019: 28). This agency is frustrated because of the conditions through which it is enacted, and because of an inability to 'let go' and break out of its continued reference to power's definition. We might see the 'gender critical' defensiveness over the recognition of biological female sex as a territory to be guarded and a status to be claimed and protected in this way. Gender defensiveness can be read as a form of such a 'frustrating and frustrated' agency, enacted in the service of enabling and maintaining women's autonomy as a means to achieving gender equality through owning the terrain of sex. Reinstating sex may sometimes function even as a means to defend a commitment to gender fluid rights. Consider, for example, the survey respondent 'aghast and angry and just about sick to death of the casual, lazy but also deliberate 'confusion' of sex and gender in the debate about these issues' (Peel and Newman, this issue: 22).

Extending Nash's argument more generally, and being more assertive in my claims than critics of so called 'call out culture' like Loretta Ross (2019), I would contend that polarisation enacted through anxious defence of a position *always* works to undermine claims for inclusion by those at the margins. This is precisely because the dynamic of defence diverts the precious and

limited energies of social justice work(ers) to the redrawing of insider/outsider lines of marginalisation. Defensive cultures do not exist outside of the dynamics of power that they name. The circularity of this anxiously defensive dynamic is suggestive of the way polarisation works through the *rhetorical* defence of equality to locate all sorts of negative affect including fear, guilt, shame as well as hurt, pain and blame for negation elsewhere, *unevenly*, in other objects, people, ideas. It locates bad feeling in others whilst mitigating against putting the self/one's own position into question. This polarisation works through a set of culturally enacted projective dynamics which operate through idealisation and denigration by way of association between ideas and persons, where ideas come to stand in for the person and vice versa (Hunter 2015b).

Within defensive cultures there is always a close at hand usual suspect, the someone else who already fits the stereotypical bill as *the* problem, therefore the appropriate locus for 'calling out' and the justified object of blame. For the debate over sex/gender this usual problematic suspect is the figure of the trans or intersex person, whereby common trans stereotypes, for example those around trans women as threats to women and children, are weaponised (Burns 2019) as a means to undermine a case for any form of non-binary gender choice. These stereotypes, as well as fear around and defence against their deployment, are what is at stake in a number of the participant responses presented in Peel and Newman's paper, all of which are pitched in terms of defence of one or other form of equality, usually, but not always for women and children. At some points this assumed threat is obvious like in the comments framing the relation between gender self-definition and abuse where 'Self-ID marital status, claim a widow's pension; self ID age, claim pension ten years early or claim access to school children as a 30-yr-old claiming to be 15. ... The list of potential abuses is infinite' (Peel and Newman, this issue: 20). Or for the respondent who finds the tone of the survey's questions 'misogynistic, homophobic, interphobic and most worryingly encouraging of child abuse' (Peel and Newman, this issue: 11).

Black people and very regularly black women experience the uneven brunt of other versions of this weaponisation in a range of contexts where, in resisting the experience of racist and sexist negation, they are constructed as 'paranoid and angry without cause' (Kang 2019); they become erroneously pinpointed as the cause of polarisation and anxious defence in public debate. High profile examples include the hostile television and radio interview gaslighting of the Black British woman MP Diane Abbott (Kang 2019) and the print media equivalent gaslighting of University of Cambridge based academic Priyamvada Gopal by the Daily Mail (Frazer-Carroll

2019). This weaponisation reframes the experience of defence as attack. It deflects attention away from the reproduction of institutionalised power to its challengers who are undermined, both as witnesses to their own experience and in their role as challengers to the diminishment of others. Defensiveness in the context of such weaponisation can offer immediate forms of release and important catharsis. However, it has limited impact on a systemically enacted dynamic like racism whereby those experiencing symbolic violence can all too easily be positioned as the violators.

Across these examples the patterning of this anxiously defensive culture says more about the fears and anxieties of what might be exposed in the defender than what is supposedly being defended against. There is crossover with debates on the nature of white defence in my own field, where the relationship between defence and desire is understood to be important to the systemic shoring up of whiteness as the unspoken 'master signifier' in the discourse of race (Seshadri-Crooks 2000). Defence against seeing whiteness functions through the establishment of an overall racial (visual) schema which works to protect the myth of racial biological certainty. This racial biological certainty is held onto so strongly because it operates as a form of general protection against the universal human fear of experience of difference and the related uncertainty and anxiety.

We can read this broader mythology of biological certainty in the 'Attitudes to Gender' survey across gender critical and more pro-trans positionings. The common fear exposed by Peel and Newman's analysis is the undermining of the biological certainty supposedly enjoyed by the majority which is put into question by the recognition of trans and intersex people's (assumed) embrace of biological fluidity. The problematic minority become symbolic of the majority fear, able to be sacrificed in the name of the majority benefit. This fear matters, not only because it drives behaviour which impacts the experience of so-called minorities, but because it reframes an understanding of the experience of so-called majorities in terms of these same violences. We might be able to see 'cis' gendered people as at least as much, if not more, impacted by cisgenderism than trans or intersex people - more impacted in the sense that gendered dualisms do not matter 'only' because they hurt some of us, but because they limit the freedoms of and produce losses for all of us, as hinted at by the 72 year-old bisexual feminist Peel and Newman (this issue: 22) quote:

'My legal gender is female but I have always been uneasy about 'womanhood', so I was saved from distress by the Woman's Liberation Movement and its more fluid

understandings of being a woman. I'm too old now to declare gender neutrality but I'm interested in following the debates'.

This recognition that gender binaries are *universally oppressive* becomes very powerful if it is brought into connection with broader coalitions against biologically rooted forms of body categorisation, like those of some intersectional anti-racist positions. What is at stake is a truncated and exclusionary way of understanding the human. This is where we see some of the most innovative feminist queer black theory and activism moving, to open up a different set of human potentialities, which can build on the anti-essentialist positions of commentators like Seshadri-Crooks (2000) and Gilroy (2000) to deal with the complexities of relational ontology (see for example Weheliye 2014; Singh 2018) – potentialities which are not accounted for in biologically deterministic absolutes.

Where cisgenderism can become really powerful as an analytic tool is through its identification of the act of sexing/gendering the body as an act of systemic domination that operates through the tight coupling of social ideas of gender and bodily variations we think of as sex; and which [then] intersects with other powerful ways of framing bodily variation, difference, uncertainty and related to supposed human vulnerabilities like race. The idea of cisgenderism puts into question the idea of biological certainty upon which race, as well as gender, is dependent.

What the shift to cisgenderism does is enable analysis to move on from claiming analogous relations between race, gender and sexuality and other forms of difference, to an analysis of the intersections that uphold white supremacy as the cultural dynamic fundamental to contemporary racial capitalism. Cisgenderism is *fundamental* to the enactment of whiteness within a global colonial context; these intersecting bodily categories rely on each other. The defence of (cis) heterosexual white women and children is fundamental to contemporary global colonial racial formation which is kept in place by the intersection of narratives around heteronormative, cis-gendered dynamics where white women's protection is idealised and instrumentalised in the service of racial domination (Martinot 2010). This recognition is crucial to resisting the pitting of social justice movements against each other in the endless pattern of attack and defence. This splintering between movements for social justice can only be resisted if the assumption of biological certainty upon which race, sex/gender (and other forms of social division) depend is put into question.

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