

Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

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**Trans Rights, Identities
& Insightful Drag**

TRANS THIS, TRANS THAT, is causing a great deal of confusion and heartache as people wrestle with challenges to “the binary”, gender bending fluidity, and much else. It’s often difficult to make sense of it all. Just a moment ago I read of “sapiosexuals” accompanied by a cartoon of a man gnawing on a disembodied brain – No I haven’t invented that. Look it up. Endless contemplation and worry about our identity appears to have brought us to this treacherous pass. We scramble up and down and around, looking this way and that, and wonder where the exit is. In truth, of course, there is no way out. We’re stuck with multiplying identities and mounting dismay.

Yet there is help from the most unlikely quarters. Recently, I saw the anthropologist and drag queen, Chedder Gorgeous, performing on the Allan Turing Stage at Manchester’s Gay Village Party. She often touches a raw nerve by opining that drag is about finding our unseen selves, displaying what is

concealed: the people that we're not allowed to be. The artifice involved in dressing up and making a holy show of oneself is calculated to upset the applecart of expectations and codes that we're supposed to live by.

Here, I think Cheddar Gorgeous on to something. In a part of the world where 'peak consumption' appears to have been reached, where choice appears boundless, and freedom untrammelled, it is said we can all be who we want to be. Yet manifestly this is not so. It is an illusion produced by the commercial culture of commercial society. Whether we've reached 'peak' anything is moot, but without doubt, here in the West, we appear to have fallen into a buttery vat of plenty, a cornucopia without historical parallel. Everything is on offer and everything is possible for those who deserve it.

"Merit" is the word put to pernicious use here. In a meritocracy like the one in which we live those who have, merit their good fortune, those who have not, have failed to deserve the good things in life. The triad of love, prosperity, and well-being, is available to all, it's on offer, one of them might be gained for a time, yet all three are rarely achieved together, if at all. Consequently, the histrionic pop anthems get more determinedly fraught as love, loss, and courage in the face of it all, gets bolder and more outrageous, by the day.

Irate determination to survive *the slings and arrows* gets more camp in the telling. Vividly alive to our aspirations, we encounter the manner in which the open-ended commercial promise of commercial society, is mangled together with reality. What is revealed is a sense of alienation so strong that every aspect of our identity becomes detached, like floating retina. Flashes of light appear, then suddenly we're in the dark, as all certainty about ourselves and our identity loses definition, fading into an indeterminate blur. All this is happening while the authorities unaccountably bang on about mental health, telling us of helplines, charities, and initiatives that will get us back to right-functioning normality in a jiffy.

The radical response to all this has been the insistence among the young, and the disorderly, that everybody has the right to be whoever they want to be. They've taken the promise of commerce and commercial society at its word, and initiated the attempt to actualise the freedom, and the limitless choice, that is said to be on offer.

This is without doubt a progressive and radical step. It is a challenge to the alienation often felt between ourselves, our bodies, and our real circumstances. After all, what can be said to be our true or real identity amid the incessant ebb and flow of this society? Evidently, we can make it up as we go along, challenging the stability of venerable identities hidebound together with venerable conceptions of gender and sexuality.

This is now where we find ourselves in a flood of multiple identities and very personal pronouns. Just to confuse us all even further, big capital and big companies have bought into it all, endlessly respecting all the identity choices being made, absorbing the radicalism of the radical into the world of the-powers-that-be. Now royal princes, moguls and billionaires, share the fragility of their emotions, of their innermost troubles, with the masses. Meanwhile popular artists, entertainers, and celebrities, queue up to join the revolutionary creation of multiplying genders and fluid identities.

The only barrier to this limitless self-expression appears to be those too frightened to risk the stability of their identity. Those who want to stick with venerable certainties rather than throwing caution to the wind. These are the new reactionaries, that must be denounced, silenced, and blocked at every turn. It is at this point that an intellectual rationale closely cobbled together in university literary and cultural circles meets up with messy reality and words themselves assume not merely new histories, but acquire entirely new meanings in a style similar to that of Humpty Dumpty who was in no doubt, no doubt at

all, that words meant exactly what he wanted them to mean.

Direct concepts like “man” and “women”, have apparently lost their utility, along with “Mum” and “Dad”. The anchor of he and she, of Ma and Pa, to biological sex, and to the biological nature of our genitals, has been weighed and found wanting. This is because biology is said to be a patriarchal construction, along with science, logic, and reason. The kernel of truth in all this is that biology, science, logic, and reason, do emerge largely from the thought and actions of men – the people with male genitals – the “dead white men” who created most of the works of the past which have been thrown into doubt by the oppression involved in their creation.

The oppression, of course, was and is real enough. Women have been subordinated to men in most cultures for millennia. The reality of male domination has influenced and inevitably shaped our modes of thought for countless centuries. Consequently, the concept of patriarchy is employed by radical identitarians to create a kind of linguistic Year One, or revolutionary Year Zero, in which the accumulated wisdom and knowledge created by men in the past is rejected out of hand in favour of newly minted usages.

As a result, the biological, historical, and cultural differences between men and women are routinely denounced as “binary”, and are deemed to be a threat to the non-binary fluid reality of gender and sexuality radical identitarians insist upon. They have whipped the rug and certainty of biology from under our feet, as everything – science, biology, logic, and reason – join our gender and our genitals in the realm of the ‘culturally constructed’. All reality is said to be a product of culture, all ways of seeing are cultural artifacts, and nothing stands outside of history.

This is an engaging thought, not least because it contains more than a grain of truth. The scientific method, biology, logical systems of thought, and conceptions of reason, are indeed cultural artifacts and they do all have discrete histories. However, the

truths which they strive to reveal have a reality and a utility above and beyond the cultures, oppressions, and the histories that created the words and categories for these truths.

For example, masculinity and femininity are without doubt products of history, they change from time to time, from place to place, from culture to culture. However, our genitals are biologically determined. Men have genitals of a particular form and bodies quite different from those of women. These differences are key to the understanding of Lesbianism, male homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and much else, including fairness in competitive sports.

There are certainly some people whose genitals are indeterminate at birth; on occasions it is difficult for midwives and medical staffs to assign either male or female gender to some babies at birth. However, the overwhelming majority of us, have our gender assigned at birth according to the clear and certain form of our genitals. The assignation, male or female, boy and girl, are culturally based upon the form of our genitals, which are undoubtedly not 'cultural constructions', but immutably biological.

It is also a cultural and historical fact that a transwoman is not identical with a born woman – the transwoman, like the transman has an entirely different physical and social experience. They have faced challenges and difficulties which have no parallel for those of us untroubled by the gender assigned us at birth. By the same token the transman and transwoman does not share the same biology or experience as the born man and the born woman, and no form of self-declaration can change this fact.

If born women do not wish to share the same spaces or facilities with transwomen, so be it. Other arrangements can always be made to recognise and respect the unique nature of transmen and transwomen without trespass upon the rights of born men and women.

However, it is right that all adults should be able to dress as they like, alter the shape of their bodies and

genitals, with or without the aid of surgery and other treatments. Everybody has the right to call themselves anything they like and to determine what they wish others to call them. These are fundamental freedoms that all should respect and defend.

The modern cultural sensibility increasingly common amongst the young, and those who have unhooked their identity from their biology, is to be welcomed. The modern trend of irately defending the right to be whomever we want to be, to present ourselves to the world, regardless of our personal biographies, is to be celebrated. As Cheddar Gorgeous might say we must make an exhibition of ourselves in order to become the people that we're not allowed to be.

We must take the manifold promises and beguiling deceptions on offer within commercial society at their face value, we must call the bluff of the authorities and the social relations that give rise to our alienation, by turning from the fight for the formal equality in law (which we have lately won), to the much greater struggle for emancipation, the struggle to be whomever we want to be, and to live life as creatively as we would like.