

# **The Call for Gender Abolition: From Materialist Lesbianism to Gay Communism**

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# Contents

Early Calls for Abolition . . . . .	3
Trans Feminist Abolitionism . . . . .	6

Here in Vienna, there are two permanent feminist centres: the Frauen Zentrum (Womens' Centre), and Frauen Cafe (also known as F\*Cafe). The Frauen Cafe was founded by a younger generation of feminists, and permits entry to all 'Frauen Lesbens Intersexuelle Trans\*' (FLIT). Last year I ran a Revolutionary Feminist Readergroup using their premises. The better established Frauen Zentrum has a 'female only' entry policy, prohibiting trans women from visiting (with trans men, intersex and female-assigned non-binary people being left a grey area; although in practice usually also unwelcome).\*

Gender distinctions pervade even gender liberatory efforts and institutions. Yet since the late 20th century, a range of theorists have argued for gender differentiation to be ended altogether. The call for gender abolition has been sporadically articulated both in communist theory and other revolutionary writings since the 1970s. The greater levels of violence faced by trans women suggests that we, as a group, would stand most to benefit from the abolition of gender. Yet increasingly, this aim has become a dead letter in many trans activist circles.<sup>1</sup> For various reasons the term 'gender abolition' itself has become a term of considerable contention in recent years. For the most part the aim has become a phantasm in the worldview of reactionaries. A recent piece by notorious 'gay Tory' Andrew Sullivan, who decried:

... the current attempt to deny the profound natural differences between men and women, and to assert, with a straight and usually angry face, that gender is in no way rooted in sex, and that sex is in no way rooted in biology. This unscientific product of misandrist feminism and confused transgenderism is striding through the culture, and close to no one in the elite is prepared to resist it.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the proposal to abolish gender does have a proud history, spanning various traditions of revolutionary thought. Through introducing the various uses of the term, I hope to provide some strategic clarity. If abolition is to be of any political use, it must be as a basis for shared action, rather than a lofty aim ever hoped for and never realised.

## Early Calls for Abolition

Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* is well known for proposing the end of womanhood and the family through technological means. An early 'sex class' theorist politically awakened in New York's women's consciousness raising groups, Firestone sought to describe women's oppression systemically. In Firestone's analysis, the tethering of women to biological reproduction was foundational to social oppression, and was to be overcome through a social revolution deploying and developing the bounty of 20th century technology. Firestone presented her liberatory aim in the following terms:

...the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. (A reversion to an unobstructed pansexuality – Freud's 'polymorphous perversity' – would probably supersede hetero/homo/bi-sexuality.) The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the

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<sup>1</sup>I deal with arguments from Julia Serano presenting trans womanhood as a natural fact in my piece 'Transition & Abolition'

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Sullivan, 'The Triumph of Obama's Long Game'

option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either....<sup>3</sup>

A year later, in 1971, Italian psychoanalytic Marxist Mario Mieli's *Towards A Gay Communism* provided an equally provocative account of homosexual liberation. Unlike many other Marxist writers on gender, Mieli includes and indeed centers transsexuals in his polemic:

'...we call 'transsexuals' those adults who consciously live out their own hermaphroditism, and who recognize in themselves, in their body and mind, the presence of the 'opposite' sex. (...) Persecuted by a society that cannot accept any confusions between the sexes, they frequently tend to reduce their effective transsexuality to an apparent monosexuality, seeking to identify with the opposite 'normal' gender to their genital definition. Society induces these manifest transsexuals to feel monosexual and to conceal their real hermaphroditism. To tell the truth, however, this is exactly how society behaves with all of us... we have all been transsexual infants, and we have been forced to identify with a specific monosexual role, masculine or feminine... Far from being particularly absurd, transsexualism overthrows the present separate and counterposed categories of that sexuality considered 'normal', which it shows up, rather, as a ridiculous constraint.<sup>4</sup>

Mieli claims that transvestites suffer violence because they reveal gender's fabricated polarity:

We can observe, for example, the attitude of 'normal' people towards transvestites. Their general reaction is one of disgust, irritation, scandal. And laughter: we can well say that anyone who laughs at a transvestite is simply laughing at a distorted image of himself, like a reflection in a fairground mirror. In this absurd reflection he recognizes, without admitting it, the absurdity of his own image, and responds to this absurdity with laughter. Transvestism, in fact, translates the tragedy contained in the polarity of the sexes onto the level of comedy. [Ibid]

Mieli opposed gender deviants to 'monosexuals' (a reference to the Freudian thesis that infants are 'bisexual', and attach to a gender developmentally). We can understand the murderous 'trans panic' which continues to inspire so many murders of vulnerable trans women each year in these terms.

Mieli presents trans/homophobia as arising from the monosexual's contempt for their own circumscribed condition. At present, no one escapes the regulatory violence of gender. Benefits acquired within the system will always be contingent, and no actor escapes its shadow. One can only benefit through the acceptance of the heterosexual order's constraints. For Mieli, success in these conditions required its own kind of (self-inflicted) mutilation. Unconscious awareness of this inevitable state, ensures hatred by those who have obliged the prevailing order through their attachment to the conventionally expected gender, towards those who appear to have avoided it. For Mieli, contempt for homosexuals (and especially transvestites) arises inevitably from others being forced to deny and destroy parts of themselves.

Mieli's position contrasts with any identitarian perspectives which discretely categorise: heterosexuality is always exclusionary and can only be sustained through homophobia. Political movement towards revolution must come from homosexuals embracing their status overtly, and in turn, siding with the political struggles of women. Those most oppressed receive greatest insight into the system as a whole, and those males 'who most resemble women' are granted most insight into the functioning of heterosexuality's constitutive brutality.

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<sup>3</sup>Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*. Bantam Books: N.Y., 1970, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Mario Mieli, Trans., David Fernbach, *Homosexuality & Liberation: elements of a gay critique*, London, Gay Men's Press, 1980, p. 27-28.

Thus, for Mieli liberation from the heterosexual order could only occur through the creation of a woman-aligned, transexual homosexual:

But the homosexual struggle is abolishing this historical figure of the queen enslaved by the system (the 'queer men' whom Larry Mitchell distinguishes from 'faggots'), and creating new homosexuals, whom the liberation of homoeroticism and trans-sexual desire brings ever closer to women, new homosexuals who are the true comrades of women. To the point that they can see no other way of life except among other homosexuals and among women, given the increasingly detestable character of heterosexual males. And if the gay struggle elevates the acidic and put-down queen... transforming her into a folle, a gay comrade who is ever more trans-sexual, it also negates the heterosexual man, since it tends towards the liberation of the queen that is in him too. [Ibid]

Finally, French materialist feminist thinker Monique Wittig proposed a strikingly similar view of gender to Mieli, and shared an equivalent proposal for an anti-heterosexual politics of abolition. Best known now for their influence on Judith Butler, Wittig's writings (both fiction and theory) are characterized by succinctness, and strategic ostentatiousness. A founding member of the *Gouines rouges* ('Red dykes') in 1971, Wittig's political focus remained firmly throughout on urging women to abolish themselves through lesbianism.

A striking feature of Wittig's thought is the argument that social oppression is the foundation of sex differentiation, rather than vice versa.

Sex is an instrument of gender, for Wittig, with appeals to differences in bodies being used to *enfold* the oppression women face from society onto their physical forms. For Wittig, female embodiment is both an upshot and retroactively applied justification for women's oppression. Whatever biological physical weakness women may have is doubly deployed: first women are literally disempowered, and then their relative weakness is pointed to, to justify this oppression. Wittig terms this the 'fetish of sex'; she is a materialist feminist in that her thought attends to the joint where the physical form is deployed by the existing regime of heterosexuality, and her politics are centered around the abolition of this state. Sexual characteristics are an assembly of citations used by a regime of gender enforcement to justify its continued existence. In a contrast to more strictly dialectical understandings of 'class' as a category, Wittig further argues that women *stand alone* as a sex, and are in fact distinguished by this sex identification. Here, Women are defined primarily by their relationship to reproduction, and as such the status of their unique service to men.

For Wittig, the declaration of lesbianism constitutes a refusal of women to accept their definition in relation to men, and laying claim to the universal through beginning to live on their own terms. An operative contradiction appears as women at once assert their particularity through a claim to womanhood defined by an absence of participation in the expected foundations of male kinship. 'Lesbians are not women' for Wittig, in that they exist against the prevailing heterosexual order, and cannot be accounted for by it: 'it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems.'

The specific use of the term 'lesbian' deployed by Wittig has been ably summarised by Judith Butler, whose scholarship has done much to bring Francophone materialist feminism to prominence in Anglophone theory:

Wittig thus does not dispute the existence... of sexual distinction, but questions the isolation and valorization of certain kinds of distinctions over others. Wittig's "Lesbian Body" is the liter-

ary portrayal of an erotic struggle to rewrite the relevant distinctions constitutive of sexual identity. Different features of the female body are detached from their usual places, and re-membered, quite literally. The reclamation of diverse bodily parts as sources of erotic pleasure is, for Wittig, the undoing or rewriting of binary restrictions imposed at birth. Erogeneity is restored to the entire body through a process of sometimes violent struggle. The female body is no longer recognizable as such; it no longer appears as an “immediate given of experience”: it is dis-figured, reconstructed, and reconceived...in the emergence of essential chaos, polymorphousness, the pre-cultural innocence of “sex”.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this earnest engagement with abolitionism, Butler has expressed a marked political pessimism, and distinguished her own stance from Wittig’s in an interview on precisely that basis:

There is no circumventing the categorical violence of naming “women” or “men.” Wittig, in her early years, wanted us not to use these terms anymore. She even wanted to change hospital practices, questioning why it is necessary to name a child a “boy” or a “girl” when it comes into the world. (I actually heard her say this in public at one point.) She also thought that we should not accept the given terms for anatomy, so that if asked if you have a vagina, for instance, you just say, “No.” She felt that this would be a form of radical resistance to how vernacular language structures the body in ways that prepare it for heterosexual reproduction. There is a necessary violence that must be committed in the act of naming. I was probably more Wittigian in that way at the time that I wrote *Gender Trouble*.<sup>6</sup>

Here the division between Butler and Wittig is set exactly around the prospects of sex abolition as a viable political end. For Butler, the political potential of gender is an inevitable feature of ‘subversion’. Even as it secures an indispensable role for gender politics within the emancipatory left, this approach places a firm ceiling on the potential for an abolitionist gender politics. For Butler gender is a continually appearing point of departure, and inevitability.

I cannot side with Butler’s pessimism. There is no reason that an end to hospitals declaring infant’s genders and more could not be achieved (although this could never occur as some shallow institutional reform alone, suggesting the need for revolutionary movement). Our concern is less with the nominal violence behind gendering itself as the physical brutality such social edifices require: hospitals dividing infants ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ directly leads to the surgical ‘correction’ of the intersex infants unfortunate to fall outside ready discrete categorization. (Usually with devastating lifelong consequences, given the aimlessness and indelicacy of such operations.) Physical brutality can here be seen to arise clearly from ‘violence’ in Butler’s vaguer sense of the word, and it is for this reason that we side with Wittig in urging for political abolition.

## Trans Feminist Abolitionism

While the stark and discomfoting qualities of Wittig’s prose still have merit for contemporary revolutionaries, developments in trans and black feminist theory can leave her seeming a distant figure of the past. Whereas once disavowal of womanhood appeared an ultimate sub-

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<sup>5</sup>Butler, Judith. “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault.” *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih with Judith Butler. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. p. 21-38.

<sup>6</sup>Olson, Gary A, Lynn Worsham, and Henry A. Giroux. *The Politics of Possibility: Encountering the Radical Imagination*. , 2016. Internet resource. p. 21

version, now various states are mobilized against exactly the opposite: those usually deemed ineligible by society asserting themselves *as* women. There is little that cannot be squared with the current condition of trans women; however, reactionaries are prone to pointing first of all to trans women's lack of reproductive capacity as disqualifying us from womanhood, and second our assumed undesirability to men as sexual partners. (Many of us are happy enough without either wombs or male partners, as it happens.)

Understanding womanhood from this perspective of assumed reproductive service makes the current developments in the US easily understood: the same political forces are driving for abortion to be outlawed state-by-state are attempting to outlaw trans women's participation in public life, using the same approach.

Trans womanhood in this respect constitutes womanhood existing in its own right, and against the wishes of a considerable body accustomed to the prevailing heterosexual order. Politically, this can be a point of pride. Our inability to bear children is cited by traditionalists and radical feminist 'abolitionists' alike as grounds to disqualify us from womanhood, demonstrating at once the fixing and fragility of womanhood as a sex class. For as long as women remain often defined by their relationship to biological reproduction, trans women can only be considered inadequate imitations. Abolishing womanhood, as defined by Wittig, could be furthered by inclusion of trans women in that category as currently constituted. If co-existence can not be achieved, abolition is inevitable.

This struggle will surely be a refiguring and visceral one, challenging and overcoming arbitrary demarcations in embodiment through diverse and unrelenting means (surfacing in hospitals, street corners and bed rooms). In reclaiming this abolitionary drive towards unchecked expressiveness, revolutionary trans feminism has much to learn from the gay communist and materialist lesbian traditions.

Grasping the insights of these texts, the cream from the bygone era of the New Left, can equip contemporary communists with both a sense of analytic clarity, and fitting contempt for the heterosexual order (which regrettably has survived doggedly into the present). These late 20th century visions denaturalizing the existing gender order differ in certain respects, but share an abolitionist ambition now being revived forty years later. Next I will consider these more recent developments of gender abolitionism, which since the 21st century have come to include a range of trans perspectives.

\*\* This is the first of a two-part series. You can find the second part [here](#).

\*As such, I have never visited. I have contrived to complete this piece without their input.

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