

# Trans rights debated

## Letter from Orla Ní Chomhraí and reply from the editor

Dear Editor,

Hanlon and Wallace (IMR, Issue Number 23) claim that *"The trans community have wrongly been accused of reinforcing...rigid gender roles" and that the "the trans community reshapes and challenges our perceptions of gender and sex, rather than as some would claim, reinforcing it"*. I think the facts do not support this view.

If you see press interviews with people who are transgender, or their families, the appeal to sexist stereotypes to bolster their claims normally features prominently. A liking for pink, long hair, dolls, makeup and dresses is often seen as evidence that a biological male is really a woman 'on the inside'. Sometimes the references are not just about superficial tastes, but also about personality traits, with submissiveness and nurturing being seen as a female traits, and confidence and aggression being seen as male traits.

For example prominent trans advocate and leader of Mermaids (UK), Suzy Green, said this about their biologically male child: *" what cuddly toys she had she would nurture and treat like babies, not at all like a boy... initially her dad just said: 'I'm not having this' and when she was aged about four he insisted we have a go at trying to stop her having anything girly. She had a few dolls which were put away."* (Source: <https://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/health/from-jack-to-jackie-why-i-had-sex-change-at-16-1-4018711>).

But, the main problem is not that some individual trans people, or their advocates, might express some sexist ideas. The internalising of sexist ideas in our current social environment is to be expected. The most worrying issue is that institutions and the press are promoting these sexist ideas, and undermining women's rights, under the banner of being trans inclusive.

Miranda Yardley, a gender-critical transexual, has examined how cultural stereotypes seem to be important in labelling children transgender. They point out that this attitude is not just to be seen in newspapers and parenting websites, but can be promoted by key institutions. They quote a section of the NHS Choices website to illustrate this point (this is a story by a mother about their biologically male child who now is seen as a girl): *"When my child Nick was about two, I realised that he wasn't playing with toys that I expected a boy to play with. He was interested in dolls and girly dressing-up"*

<http://mirandayardley.com/en/common-threads-and-narratives-of-transgender-children-and-what-this-means-for-our-lesbian-and-gay-populations/>

Other professional bodies have also promoted sexist ideas under the trans inclusive banner. New guidelines from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy in the UK (since withdrawn due to public criticism) promoted a version of womanhood and manhood that would not be out of place in any conservative handbook:

*"It is important not to assume being a woman necessarily involves being*

*able to bear children, or having XX sex chromosomes or breasts...being a woman in a British cultural context often means adhering to social norms of femininity, such as being nurturing, caring, social, emotional, vulnerable and concerned with appearance."*

And it claimed being a man in Britain: *"often means adhering to social norms of masculinity, such as being competitive, ambitious, independent, rational, tough, sexual, confident, dominant, taking risks and caring about their work"*. (quoted in

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/women-are-emotional-except-in-the-aggressive-north-says-therapists-body-3vs6jk0d6> and

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/02/transgender-politics-world-say-thing-true/> )

Police training in the UK, given by Mermaids, includes a **"Gender Spectrum"** slide with a picture of GI Joe one one side (meant to represent the most male) and Barbie on the other (representing the most female). The slide can be seen here

<https://twitter.com/kiritunks/status/987686293785096193?s=19>

Possibly partly as a result of this sort of training, police in the UK have been making politicised comments and statements on the trans issue (promoting gender ideology, and taking the dominant transactivist side on political issues) and engaging in political thought-policing (e.g. see case of a man questioned by police for liking a tweet, and told to check his thinking

<https://twitter.com/HarryTheOwl/status/1088144870991114241?s=19>  
This is not the only such case.)

It is the promotion of unscientific and sexist thinking at an institutional level which has caused a lot of the controversy in the UK. I think this is the most likely factor to cause future conflict in Ireland, especially if gender ideology is taught in schools. The left, especially the Marxist left, should not support sexist and unscientific teachings, or the targetting of teachers (or others) in the workplace for not agreeing with these ideas (as has happened elsewhere <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/teacher-roy-wilkes-wins-fight-over-transphobic-comments-5c0m0g2nd> and <http://www.oldandnewproject.net/Essays/StoptheHarassment> )

As a potential taster of what might come here, in the UK Children are being taught the concept of pink (female) and blue (male) brains in schools (see slide which is used here <https://www.transgendertrend.com/cps-schools-project-the-erasure-of-sex-and-the-silencing-of-girls>). This concept is reminiscent of anti-suffragist ideology from the early 20th century.

One teacher described her experiences of having to teach lessons on this subject: *"I was given 3 lessons on Transgender issues to include as part of the syllabus. The content of these lessons made me feel very uneasy. The three lessons I was asked to deliver were like something from the 50's in terms of gender stereotypes. Slick animations showed diagrams of boys with mainly blue brains and girls with mainly pink brain..."* (Quoted in <https://www.transgendertrend.com/teaching-transgender-doctrine-in-schools-a-bizarre-educational-experiment> )

In the US a girl was told, as part of a sex-ed programme in school, that: *"if she was into fishing and wearing athletic gear, or playing basketball, that those were boy things. And that would mean that she was a boy inside"* [https://web.archive.org/web/20180320031947/http://q13fox.com/2018/03/19/sequim-school-](https://web.archive.org/web/20180320031947/http://q13fox.com/2018/03/19/sequim-school-district-halts-sexual-health-education-courses-for-now/)

[district-halts-sexual-health-education-courses-for-now/](https://web.archive.org/web/20180320031947/http://q13fox.com/2018/03/19/sequim-school-district-halts-sexual-health-education-courses-for-now/)).

Official, County Council approved, handbooks used in UK schools suggests girls be encouraged to move on to another sport if they object to a male taking part in their (female sex-segregated) sport. Biological males (from about teens upwards) have a major physical advantage over females in sport, which is why sports are sex segregated. Self-identity does not alter this material fact.

Some of these approved school handbooks also suggest that if girls have an issue with changing in front of biological males (in the girls changing rooms) alternative arrangements can be made for the girls. It suggests objectors can be told: *"although the individual in question may have the body of a boy, they are in every other respect a girl"* e.g. page 30, East Sussex County Council, Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit).

So basically, trans inclusion can mean move over for the boys girls. How revolutionary. Marxists should be aware that sometimes individualistic liberalism (which self-identity politics is par excellence) sometimes benefits the dominant group (in this case biological males). This is what is regularly seen with transactivism, and why so many feminists are speaking out.

For anyone who thinks Ireland will be immune to this sort of teaching in schools, there is pressure here to introduce teacher training and school lessons promoting gender ideology ( See Catherine Cross et al. Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools [https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/6889/Neary\\_2018\\_Exploring.pdf?sequence=2](https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/6889/Neary_2018_Exploring.pdf?sequence=2) Some of the suggestions from the parents are quite sensible, some not, but the first few pages of definitions are a hint at the post-modernist anti-materialist thinking some people and groups would like to see promoted as fact in schools. Secularists should not support the promotion of unscientific ideologies, or faith based ones, as fact in schools).

On the issue of male violence and sex

segregated spaces, the authors of the IMR piece (Hanlon and Wallace) imply that concerns over male violence towards women is coming from an ideological position of thinking males have an innate drive to dominate and hurt women. Many gender-critical people do not think male violence is an innate but a learned socialised behaviour. They think not allowing women to set boundaries in terms of privacy, safety and sexual partners (see Cotton Ceiling rhetoric) will feed into this problem.

But, regardless of what one's position is on the cause of male violence, the figures speak for themselves. Almost all sexual offences are perpetrated by males, and most of the violent crime in society is also perpetrated by males. This is the reality we have to deal with. Refusing to allow women and girls to have some sex-segregated spaces where women are vulnerable (e.g. changing rooms, shelters and prisons) will put women at greater risk of violence (e.g. *"Almost 90% of reported sexual assaults, harassment and voyeurism in swimming pool and sports-centre changing rooms happen in unisex facilities, which make up less than half the total."* <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/unisex-changing-rooms-put-women-in-danger-8lwbp8kgk> ).

If any man can self identify as a woman (a position the authors support), and potentially gain access to female spaces, abusive men will take advantage of this. This has happened elsewhere, and there is no logical reason to think Ireland will be an exception to this.

Some trans advocates may feel the increased exposure of women to voyeurism and male violence is acceptable collateral damage in the advancement of their cause, but many women do not hold this view. These women are not suffering from a phobia, or bigotry, but from a rational position of concern for women. I think it is high time for the left to listen to them.

Yours Sincerely,

Orla Ní Chomhraí

## The Editor replies:

It is fundamental to socialism that we oppose all forms of oppression and that we stand with the oppressed in their struggle. We should be 'tribunes of the people'. Moreover, we want to unite all the different oppressed groups – people of colour and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ people, refugees, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, people suffering mental distress and so on – within and around the working class, in a common struggle against their common enemy – capitalism and the 1%.

The disappointing and disturbing feature of Orla Ni Chomhráí's letter is that it contains not a single sentence, not a single phrase, expressing recognition of the oppression of transgender people or solidarity with their struggle for equality. Instead her letter is structured entirely round the notion that the advocacy of trans rights in general and specifically the right to self determination of gender identity is a threat to women. This is a disastrous starting point.

To support this approach she cites examples of trans people or trans advocates deploying or promoting traditional or conservative gender stereotypes. I think Orla exaggerates the extent of this but this is not the point. The point is that in so far as conservative gender stereotypes are promoted by trans people and their advocates this is regrettable but it is not a reason for refusing solidarity or rejecting demands for trans rights.

The principle involved here can be illustrated simply by substituting any other oppressed group for transgender people. Our opposition to anti-Traveller racism and solidarity with the Traveller Community is not dependent on the absence of conservative gender stereotypes and other reactionary ideas in the Traveller Community. Our opposition to Islamophobia and solidarity with Muslims is not at all dependent on the absence of sexism and other conservative ideas among Muslims or their representatives. Indeed it is precisely the racists who often cite sexism and homophobia in the Muslim community as a justification for their racism. If we are going to see trans rights as a threat to women's rights are

we going to start seeing the 'influx' of Muslims or of African asylum seekers as a threat to women? That way lies the road to Tommy Robinson.

Nor is it just a question of racism. Has it not been the case that conservative gender stereotypes also reproduced themselves to some extent within the lesbian and gay community? Of course it has, because neither oppressed groups nor workers break all at once and completely from the dominance of all aspects of bourgeois ideology. In every group we will find elements of contradictory consciousness. Indeed a purist could argue that the very demand for marriage equality was reflective of bourgeois gender stereotyping. But obviously any socialist who didn't vote yes in the referendum would have been spectacularly missing the point. Then again Ni Chomhráí may have forgotten this but elements within the feminist movement itself have been known to embrace essentialist gender stereotypes as in the idea that women are inherently kinder, more caring than men but this should have zero impact on socialist support for women's rights.

Ní Chomhráí makes much of the stereotypes employed in police training in Britain. But given the role of police as a key part of the capitalist state it would be astonishing if their training did not contain conservative stereotypes. This an argument for challenging those stereotypes not for rowing back on our commitment to trans rights.

The cutting edge of Ní Chomhráí's argument is that trans self-affirmation will endanger women's safety by allowing predatory 'biological men' to gain access to women's safe spaces.

First of all it should be said that Orla approaches this question through a very narrow lens – that of the claimed threat posed by transwomen – and seems oblivious to its wider historical significance. The fact is there have long existed various gender segregated spaces such as single sex schools, women only colleges, separate bars in pubs, swimming at the Forty Foot etc and support for this segregation has usually been associated with conservatism and sexism even though 'defence of women' against predatory

men and boys often played a role in the justification of this separation.

Obviously Ni Chomhráí can reply that she is not talking about schools and colleges but only toilets, changing rooms and prisons. But this does not strengthen her position, rather it reinforces the image, on which her whole letter implicitly relies, of transwomen as a threat to 'vulnerable' women.

It is simply not credible that there are significant numbers of predatory biological men out there willing to subject themselves to all the difficulties, traumas, social stigma and, yes, oppression of transitioning in order to get into women's toilets, changing rooms and prisons (!) and assault women. To be sure Ni Chomhráí and others can, by trawling the planet find individual examples but then it is possible to find individual examples of every conceivable pathological behaviour. It would be quite wrong to base social policy or legislation on such isolated exceptions and, I repeat, would lead to highly racist conclusions if applied to Black people, Muslim etc on the basis of individual examples of Black rapists, Muslim child abusers and so on.

Moreover, Ní Chomhráí, in confining herself to criticising Wallace and Hanlon, does not elaborate on the logic of rejecting the principle of gender self identification. Rejecting this principle, as she wants to do, would only make the already difficult process of transitioning more difficult and oppressive: it would make transgender people subject to the power, and indeed whims and prejudices, of the state bureaucracy and the medical profession whose appalling record in all these and related matters, such as a woman's right to choose, is well known to us all.

In short we believe that on this issue as on others the way forward for socialists, the left, and the working class movement lies in solidarity, inclusion, and unity not fear, rejection and division.

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## Reviews

Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann *Climate Leviathan* / Rob Winkel  
 Jack Robertson *The Man Who Shook His Fist at the Tsar* / Paul O'Brien  
 Talat Ahmed *Gandhi* / Seamus O'Kane;  
 Short reviews / Willy Cumming

Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann

### **Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future**

Reviewed by Rob Winkel

■ *Climate Leviathan* provides a straightforward yet detailed analysis of possibly the greatest crisis facing the world today. Many books have been written on the subject, but few provide the crucial analysis of the dynamics of capitalism as presented in *Climate Leviathan*. The struggle against climate change is, as far as the authors are concerned, the struggle against capitalism. Their book maps out how the impending climate crisis is likely to shape – and be shaped by – the future political economy of the world.

The discussion, using a Marxist framework, presents four distinct potential future responses to climate change based on the possible political paths that face us. The authors term these outcomes 'Climate Leviathan', 'Climate Behemoth', 'Climate Mao' and 'Climate X'.

'Climate Leviathan' is the state the planet would tend towards under continuing liberal capitalist rule. This is a scenario in which the capitalist class achieves stability for itself during a climate crisis. In the world of climate leviathan, there is an emphasis on the 'securitisation' that capitalism will require when faced with the fallout, including the increasing production of climate refugees. In this scenario, which is today already playing itself out, the poor pay the highest price for the effects of climate change, while the wealthiest are the main culprits of the root causes; the world's wealthiest will

be able to shield themselves from a planet heading towards ruin.

The emergence of reactionary regimes and their climate change denial is described as 'Climate Behemoth', which the authors describe as 'the spectre haunting the world's core capitalist states'. 'Climate Mao' refers to the call for a state-led push back against climate change, reflective of some of the measures being taken today in China. Finally, the scenario of 'Climate X' refers to an anti-capitalist path that still needs to be drawn and that is based on solidarity. This path of 'Climate X' involves an analysis rooted in Marxist ideas and a rejection of control from both capital and the sovereign state.

The authors contend that 'it is not just possible but imperative that we imagine the end of capitalism'. Assessing the work completed by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Mann and Wainwright point out that the IPCC – who have done a great deal of research and much of it very strong – have paid no attention to any work critical of capitalism, which causes a serious analytical problem. Analysing climate change without an understanding of capitalism is, the authors note, like 'trying to model hurricanes without a theory of Thermodynamics'.

The authors quite clearly understand and make a strong case that an analysis that puts 'green capitalism' at the heart of the solution will never suffice. It is this part of the analysis where they differ from authors such as Naomi Klein, who, in her landmark book *This Changes Everything*, has a strong approach towards direct action to stop

fossil fuel exploration but stops short of an analysis of capitalism.

*Climate Leviathan* provides a strong theoretical grounding and a complex analysis, yet its underlying message is simple: the endless drive for growth in capitalism means that it can never sufficiently tackle climate change. As the book tends in places more towards an academic text, it may not be a strong introduction to anti-capitalist ideas for the fight against climate change, but it certainly provides a detailed analysis for the thousands of people arriving at the conclusion that system change is what is necessary if we are going to meaningfully tackle climate change.

This text is useful for anyone who wishes to flesh out in detail the political arguments for the kind of fight-back we need against the capitalist drive towards climate catastrophe and demonstrates well why the fightback needs to be based on international anti-capitalist popular movements. The book maps out well the arguments against the current trajectory of 'Climate Leviathan'. Perhaps frustratingly for a book on climate change, the authors do not go into detail about what 'Climate X' should look like on the ground. This may be because the challenge is of such a monumental scale and complexity that it still needs to be worked through, but it does make for a slightly unsatisfactory conclusion.

As a whole, *Climate Leviathan* provides a useful analysis for anyone who wants to better understand the political economy of climate change, but readers should not expect from this book many ideas on how best to engage in the struggle against climate change.