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Abstract

Gender dysphoria is typically construed as a medical concept. This understanding of gender dysphoria reflects how cisgender people interpret trans experience. This essay proposes an alternative concept of gender dysphoria for critical theory: on this account, gender dysphoria is alienation from cisgender forms of life. If the medicalized concept of gender dysphoria tacitly takes for granted, identifies with, and thereby reinforces cisgender patriarchal society, a critical theory of gender dysphoria instead approaches the issue from the perspective of trans people, their lived experiences and social situation, to offer a critique of society. While the medicalized concept of gender dysphoria refers to a "distress" caused by living in the "wrong-body," the critical concept of gender dysphoria refers to an alienation as a result of living in the "wrong (cisgender patriarchal) society." The critical concept of gender dysphoria may become a tool capable of describing the necessary facets of trans experience necessary to form a political coalition. The paper concludes by claiming that trans subjects are the gendered analogue of Marx's concept of the proletariat.

Keywords: gender dysphoria, Leslie Feinberg, transgender phenomenology, critical theory, Marxism

Introduction

Gender dysphoria is typically construed as a medical concept. The *DSM-5* defines gender dysphoria as "the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 451). Talia Mae Bettcher (2014, 383) refers to this as the "wrong-body" model of trans identity because it defines trans identity in terms of a mismatch between one's gender performance and "natal" gender.[1] The

[1] The *DSM-5* refers to transgender as "the broad spectrum of individuals who transiently or permanently identify with a gender different from their natal gender" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 451, 830). This is diagnosed by Bettcher (2014, 383) as the point of view "developed in the context of sexology, medicine, and

aim of this concept is to assist with the purposes of diagnostic evaluation and reduce the "distress" of the "mismatch" through medical intervention. As a medical concept, gender dysphoria is tied to a medical perspective. Medical perspectives, as Michel Foucault analyzed in *The Birth of the Clinic* and elsewhere, involve taking the body of the patient and making it an object of a discourse. This means carefully charting pathological variations from "normal" functional behavior for the purpose of healing an individual.[2] As a consequence, gender dysphoria as a medical concept is not used to criticize societies and has no express political content. The mere fact that someone experiences gender dysphoria in the medical sense indicates nothing (or virtually nothing) politically substantial about the kind of society that the patient lives in; it merely states a medical problem for the individual in question.

My aim in this essay is to develop an alternative concept of gender dysphoria: a concept of gender dysphoria for *critical theory.* Karl Marx (1975, 209) defined critical theory in 1843 as "the self-clarification . . . of the struggles and wishes of the age." According to this definition, as initially proposed by Marx and further developed by Nancy Fraser, critical theory "frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification" (Fraser 1985, 97). If the medicalized concept of gender dysphoria tacitly takes for granted, identifies with, and thereby reinforces cisgender patriarchal society, a critical theory of gender dysphoria instead approaches the issue from the perspective of trans people, their lived experiences and social situation, in order to offer a *critique* of society. This shift in orientation implies a series of differences: the medicalized concept of gender dysphoria is theoretical, private, and apolitical, while the critical concept of gender dysphoria is practical, public, and politically motivated.[3] As we will see in more detail below, this transformation of gender dysphoria from a medicalized

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psychiatry." In contrast, this essay aims to develop Bettcher's (2014, 387) suggestion of a *political* account of transgender identity from transgender subjects themselves. (See Bettcher [2014] for her analysis of the "wrong-body" model [esp. 383] and for her shift to a politically focused approach [387].)

[2] Foucault (1994, 197) describes how medical experience is rendered possible by "Western man's" constitution of himself as an object for a medical gaze. He further argues that this requires "Western man" to encounter his own death.

[3] Another important reorientation involved in the model of gender dysphoria I intend to propose requires shifting focus away from an analysis of the trans body and turning instead to the treatment of trans bodies within a transphobic and patriarchal society. This follows Bettcher's (2020, 330) suggestion of reframing the question of gender dysphoria to gender discontent while also still accounting for the affective and phenomenological dimension of this discontent.

concept to a critical concept requires the alteration, rectification, and abandonment of many explicit tenets and implicit norms governing the medicalized perspective and cisgender patriarchal society as a whole.

In short, I am proposing a revitalized concept of gender dysphoria as an essential instrument in the struggle against cisgender patriarchal society and thus contributing to the case for the importance of trans theory to critical theory as a whole. The critical concept of gender dysphoria I propose is the following: gender dysphoria is the phenomenological experience of alienation from cisgender forms of life. At the outset, it is worth noting several features of this definition. First, it begins with and answers to the phenomenological experiences of trans people.[4] Second, it replaces the psychological concept of "distress" with the critical concept of "alienation." Third, while the medicalized concept of gender dysphoria claims that trans people live in the "wrong-body," the critical theory of gender dysphoria claims that trans people live in the "wrong-society."[5] Essential to the critical concept of gender dysphoria is a dialectical relationship between first-personal and third-personal perspectives, where the phenomenological experience of alienation is the result of a relation of social domination. The critical concept of gender dysphoria is therefore situated between phenomenology and sociology. All these features of the critical concept of gender dysphoria are a result of a transition from a cisgender perspective on gender dysphoria to a transgender one.

The critical concept of gender dysphoria demands a reflection upon the basic contours of trans existence and experience, which amounts to an examination of the situation that trans people face, the nature of the project of transition, and the deep moral responsibility implied by transition. My analysis therefore proceeds in three sections. In the first section, I try to clarify what I mean by saying that we live in a cisgender society or that there are "cisgender forms of life." The basic claim here is that the societies in which we live are based on schemes of social cooperation that

[4] Henry Rubin (1998) is the first to my knowledge to explicitly call on the importance of transgender phenomenology to the political self-clarification of trans people. I (Haulotte 2023) draw on this tradition to argue for the political relevance of phenomenology to trans theory, history, and activism.

[5] Consequently, my approach to gender dysphoria, transition, and alienation opposes accounts like that of Jay Prosser (1998), who claims that trans alienation is best described as living in a wrongly sexed body. To the contrary, I accept and defend Leslie Feinberg's (1998) claim that the primary source of trans trouble articulated by the concept of gender dysphoria is produced by the situation of being trans in a cisgender society. My account of trans oppression and alienation therefore reflects Beauvoir's (2011) feminist account of women's alienation as stemming from the situation of living in a society that defines women as the other.

mandate cisgender norms and expectations. In fact, it is a tautology to refer to "mandatory cisgender norms and expectations," since the very concept of being cisgender on this account includes mandatory norms for gendered action. Yet these norms are not experienced by cisgender people as mandatory because they have successfully appropriated these norms as part of their identity. Part of the aim of this section is to highlight relevant features of gendered practice that are regularly occluded by theoretical perspectives that unwittingly reflect cisgender praxis. Cisgender people are more likely to feel "at home" in their own gender, and they accordingly adopt a theoretical rather than practical stance toward gender and gendered practices. From a cisgender perspective, one doesn't need to think about how to *act* as a woman, for example, because this is guaranteed by simply *being* a woman. Transitioning from a cisgender perspective to a transgender perspective requires moving from a theoretical to a practical register on gender practices and construction, to show how, for example, being a woman requires acting as a woman and becoming a woman.

In the second section, I elaborate more on what I describe as the project of transition, the experience of shirking the gendered position assigned to you by cisgender society, and I begin to give a phenomenologically oriented account of gender dysphoria. On this account, gender dysphoria is a kind of tension between the project of transitioning and the situation of living in a cisgender society. This existentialist account is therefore able to explain the distinctive resonance of *trans* alienation and its difference from general dissatisfaction with one's gendered or sexed location, and also, therefore, the distinctive precarity and transience that characterizes trans life without having to rely on a dubious cisgender view of what it means to have gender dysphoria or to live a trans life. There is a difference between cis dissatisfaction with society's current gender scheme and gender dysphoria, for the former may be resolved through a slight adjustment of the parameters of acceptable gendered performances, while the latter grates against the core of mandatory sex/gender assignment altogether. From this view, trans life is not fundamentally pathological, tragic, or unlivable, but it is characterized by the need to navigate a specific problem—namely, the tension between one's self-conception and the expectations placed on you by others. Gender dysphoria is therefore not the private suffering of someone who merely experiences a disconnect between how they would like to see themselves and the way that they are seen by other people; instead, gender dysphoria describes the political condition of unfreedom that is the necessary consequence of a society organized around the distribution of externally determined gendered and/or sexed social positions.

I proceed in section 3 with an examination of the moral and political responsibilities implied by the critical account of gender dysphoria. Here I largely rely on the work of Leslie Feinberg (1996, 1998). The medical account of gender dysphoria

sees as its central aim the management of the distress caused by the "mismatch" between "assigned" and "felt" gender or sex. The medicalized account of gender dysphoria therefore sees the *telos* of transition as exhausted by the successful integration of trans life within the scheme of cisgender society, and it therefore sees the true aim of transition as passing. The ideal case for a trans woman, for example, is simply to meet other's preconceptions of cis-womanhood. If trans theory has any special legacy or political import, it must involve the thoroughgoing critique of this idea. Therefore, the critical concept of gender dysphoria proposes the *telos* of transition as the insurrection, revolution, and overthrowing of cisgender society. To be trans or even to love trans life therefore involves a robust moral responsibility to oppose and undermine schemes of mandatory sexed and/or gendered positions and to see as one's foremost aim the neutralization of the unfreedom characteristic of cisgender society.

I conclude by arguing that trans people may adopt a revolutionary role with respect to gender or sex just as Marx argued that the proletariat adopts a revolutionary perspective with respect to class. This framework also helps explain the fact that while the structural interest of both the global proletariat and the trans subject points toward revolution, nonetheless many proletarian or trans political actors are conservative and reactionary. In other words, the thesis that oppressed groups find their true interests only served in revolution against the system that oppresses them is not to be construed as a predictive hypothesis. Ruling classes frequently attempt to placate and fragment oppressed insurrectionary groups and thereby induce a form of political bad faith. While it should not be surprising that these tactics are effective in the short term, the concessions are essentially transitory, conditional, and incomplete. For both the proletariat in Marx's system and for the trans subject today, only insurrection against the class and gender system itself can prove to be finally satisfactory and within the scope of their true interests, aims, and goals.

Section 1: Cisgender Forms of Life

Sociological analysis of gender is burdened with unique methodological challenges. The fundamental difficulty is that sociological reasoning tries to examine or understand social practices, which are essentially first-personal, from the indifferent third-personal standpoint of an external observer.[6] There is thus an

[6] Pierre Bourdieu (2018, 1) famously describes this third-personal point of view as embodying "an implicit theory of practice which is the corollary of neglect of the social conditions in which the science is possible." In this paper, I aim to further Bourdieu's critique by pointing it in the direction of a prevalent unconscious cisgender theory of gendered practices.

inherent displacement within sociological reasoning that produces the tendency to interpret practical action as the inevitable result of a theoretical scheme.[7] Scholars often turn to chess as a model for social action, but this choice of paradigm has important theoretical consequences. For example, if I were trying to understand a certain move in chess, there is the temptation to describe it mechanically, as the inevitable result of the aggregate of facts about the rules of the game and the moves made by the opponent. Or, similarly, I may try to interpret the action as a result of a deliberation by the agent on the action that would maximize future utility. It is easy, then, to use this means of understanding moves in a game of chess as a model for social action, where social action is understood to be the inevitable result of structural features of societies and/or the utility calculations of the agents in question, because it offers the plausibility of a mechanical explanation. But sociological phenomena, unlike games of chess, are not strictly rule-governed. The chess-model is satisfying for an observer but not a player, since games like chess are rule-governed in the sense that there are a finite number of available moves for any player on any given turn, that each move generates an immediate response from the opponent, and so on, which allows for the possibility of closing the field of viable options. In other words, the chess-model of practical action is geared toward providing a retrospective reconstruction of the "move" made by a "player," and so intrinsically favors a model of practical action that can produce (or "discover") reasons underlying particular actions so as to individuate and explain why a player would make one move rather than another. This is why chess holds such a powerful sway as a theoretical model for action and assertion: it is a game, and so appropriate as a model for social action, but one that abstracts from most of the relevant features for a robust sociological analysis.

A better model for understanding social action would be a physical team sport, like volleyball.[8] Like chess, volleyball is governed by constitutive rules that define what

[7] This ideological displacement is perhaps first systematically analyzed from a materialist perspective by Karl Marx (1978b) in his "Theses on Feuerbach," where he explicitly calls for a renewed understanding of praxis. There is a venerable philosophical and sociological tradition of trying to understand praxis, perhaps beginning with Fichte and extending at least as far as Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre Bourdieu, and Saidiya Hartman, who all try to develop theories of praxis.

[8] Bourdieu (2000, 144) also invokes sports as a paradigm of practical knowledge. Bourdieu cites Loic Waquant's sociology of professional boxing to show how sports trainers try to inculcate a certain habitus that allows the players to effectively play the game. The point of this analysis is to provide a more adequate description of practical knowledge. The urgency and immediacy of a fight belies theoretical models for understanding action. Coaching requires "effective ways of speaking to the body"

it means to "play the game." But unlike chess, volleyball allows for a field of possible actions that are not exactly isolated or discrete. It is not possible to play volleyball, or even to retrospectively understand it from a third-person perspective, by trying to understand the whole field of possible actions and systematically narrowing this field down until a determinate action corresponding to the state of affairs arises. The game of volleyball simply outpaces cognitive deliberation of this sort, and there is no uniform decision calculus among even the best players. It is simply not a mechanical process. What makes certain volleyball players better than others is not simply a more elegant decision calculus (or even larger or more physically imposing bodies) but a *habitus*, a durable set of bodily dispositions that function as enabling conditions for practical action.[9] Even the player of chess has a bodily habitus, a way of somatically navigating playing the game, but the case of volleyball is more obvious and instructive. For example, serious volleyball players have a determinate sense of height: they have a kinesthetic knowledge of how high the net is, what their maximum reach is, how tall the opposing blockers are, and so on. This somatic knowledge enables action by narrowing the field of available actions to a set of relatively discrete choices. "Do I go for a block or a receive?" is a question only answerable on the basis of habitus. Similarly, such a question is not answerable except on the basis of the constitution of one's team, the distribution of physical attributes, the coordination achieved in the moment—all of which are implicitly molded into one's bodily habitus. Good volleyball

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(Bourdieu 2000, 144), which involves the training of somatic dispositions rather than complex models of reasoning. For Bourdieu, sports offer a model for the *immediate* dimension of practical knowledge, but this model leaves implicit the *social* dimension of practical knowledge, which is surely operative even in apparently "one-versus-one" sports like boxing. Volleyball foregrounds additional dynamics because it is a team sport where individual players may only infrequently unilaterally determine the outcome of the game. In boxing, there is no time to think; the aim is to respond to your opponent. But in volleyball, you not only need to anticipate your opponent's plays, but those of your teammates as well, in order to situate yourself in the appropriate space to make the appropriate play. Adding the dynamics of a team sport to our model of practical action requires that each individual player learn to reflexively situate themselves within the *social space* of a team, with all of the spontaneity, innovation, and negotiation that accompanies such a process. In short, I would argue that the "language-game" required by volleyball is richer than the language-game required for boxing, which is in turn more complex than the language game required for chess. The "complex" language-game of volleyball captures additional features that are especially important to transgender analysis.

[9] Bourdieu develops this concept in many places, but for a paradigmatic example, see p. 11 of *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu 2000).

players train their minds and bodies to respond to events on the court quickly and efficiently, which implies a great deal of somatic ability developed over the course of many years for a particular purpose.

Like volleyball, gender roles require a habitus. In the same way that we are prone to understanding the action of the chess-player on a mechanistic or teleological model of action, so too are we prone to understanding gender from the position of an observer. Navigating gender norms and performances is a much trickier business than we typically think. Here again the model for action is important. The chess model essentially abstracts from uncertainty and indiscrete action. When a chess player says, "Pawn to E5," there is complete certainty that the move will go through successfully and be recognized as legitimate by the opponent, because the game itself exhaustively delineates the space of possible actions and secures in advance "Pawn to E5" as a possibility. But when a volleyball player goes for a spike, she does not know in advance whether she will actually be set, whether the set will allow her to spike the ball, whether the opposing players will try to block or receive her spike, and so on. Gendered practices are closer to coordinated action in volleyball than moves in chess because the rules governing what counts as an acceptable "move" are themselves in constant flux; and even if we "correctly" or "adequately" engage in a gendered practice, there is no guarantee that this will be recognized by other parties as legitimate. There is not a predelineated space of acceptable gender performances given in advance but a complex and thick set of constantly changing norms that serve as enabling conditions of some spheres of action and as disabling conditions for others.

The fact that gendered practices occur in conditions of uncertainty produces *a textured field of practices* for the agent in question. In other words, whether this reaches conscious deliberation or not, the agent in question certainly knows that there are many available gender practices and presentations that are likely to be accepted as legitimate by others. Some actions are very "safe," while others I would describe as "risky." In other words, while engaging in gendered practices, agents spontaneously *situate themselves in social space*; they prereflectively recognize "where they belong" in the sphere of gender performances, in the same way that the well-trained volleyball player develops a sense for where they belong on the court.[10]

[10] Notably, Leslie Feinberg (1998, 8–10), among others, frequently points out that this process of social positioning begins even prior to birth through the actions and desires of the children's parents and the expectations involved with being born into a particular family, and these expectations are codified into the legal systems of cisgender societies. So, it is not only that agents situate *themselves* in social space but that they are repeatedly situated in social space by others. This will be critical to the

Gendered practices correspond to gender roles, positions in social space meant to be occupied and navigated by the agents in question. From a first-person perspective, one knows without deliberating that there are certain actions "appropriate to" their gendered position, which is given by the field in which social practices take place. This is the agent's gendered habitus. Certain practices are topologically and phenomenologically "distant," even if spatially nearby, if they are deemed inappropriate for one's social position.[11] Sociologists and social geographers have long called attention to the fact that social positionings often determine geographical distribution, and vice versa, just as in volleyball the role one plays on the team determines the area one occupies in the court.

Practical action, like athletic performance, is first-personal, inextricably social, time-sensitive, and performed under conditions of uncertainty. Just as athletic training involves sculpting the body to recognize a limited set of available options, so too are social performances inscribed into our bodies. Effective social coordination involves the institution of a durable set of dispositions to act in concert, a common habitus. These are culturally specific schemes of perception, recognition, and action, which function as enabling conditions for a range of actions but as disabling conditions for others. It forms the background of "common sense" for a group of people. The social world differs fundamentally from theoretical models because a decision calculus for a "successful" action is only possible within and on the basis of the social world itself. This common sense and action-in-concert require agents to distribute responsibilities between them and establish basic schemes for cooperative endeavors, which require them to situate themselves in social space. This positioning, however, is inherently fragile. Everyone is able to adopt the social position belonging to them because this division is recognized in general and has become a part of the commonly maintained habitus. While in volleyball the distribution of social space is paradigmatically equitable because it is the result of a consensus, societies are structured in such a way that hierarchical social positioning provides an incentive to invest in symbolic networks that exploit the underclass. Action occurs in the fundamentally unstable and unpredictable world of social recognition and legitimacy.

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concept of interpellation elaborated below and to the depth and breadth of trans oppression.

[11] This observation is recognized by Martin Heidegger in a phenomenological context in *Being and Time.* There Heidegger (2008, 138) claims that "Dasein is essentially not a Being-present-at-hand; and its 'spatiality' cannot signify anything like occurrence at a position in 'world-space.'" Rather than being merely spatio-temporally juxtaposed to various objects in objectively verifiable distances, Dasein is "close" to objects a practical sense that they are available for action (see Heidegger 2008, 139–41). Similar claims are made by other phenomenologists.

Many actions are performed in public contexts where recognition is an essential element of success, and the reception of one's actions is equally as important as the action itself, since the recognition is what makes it "count" for society as a whole.

To situate oneself in social space is also *to give oneself an identity* or to be interpellated. This is paradigmatically analyzed by Louis Althusser (1971, 175) in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," where he describes a situation in which a police officer hails a passerby. In responding to the call, the passerby recognizes the claim made by hierarchical authority and situates themselves as legitimately subject to his authority. There is accordingly a hierarchical distribution of social space: an addressor and an addressee. What is at stake here is the apparently spontaneous claim by the addressee to adopt the social positioning given to them, but the inclusion of the police in Althusser's example clearly signals that instances of interpellation paradigmatically occur under duress, and this fact adds an important dynamic for thinking about the constitution of a gendered subject (Butler 1997, esp. 128–29). While perhaps interpellative encounters with the police are relatively rare, the institutional position of the police, as a hierarchical role with the express goal of assessing the legitimacy of such a claim to social space, is virtually ubiquitous in cisgender society.[12] This may seem like a strong claim, but an analysis of gender (especially from a transgender perspective) quickly shows how often cisgender people spontaneously adopt the role of the police.

Consider interpellation in the context of cisgender society. Agents claim to know that there is a distinction between the social roles of men and women, which corresponds to different sets of appropriate action in civil society (Bourdieu 2009, 100).[13] Our society is best described as cisgender and patriarchal precisely because

[12] I will examine this in more detail below. In short, cisgender subjects are essentially given the right to "reality check" trans subjects within cisgender society. This process of reality checking is pervasive and virtually ubiquitous: from casual instances of misgendering, to deadnaming, physical and sexual assault, rape, and murder.

[13] Bourdieu (2009, 106–7) furthermore clarifies that "social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties (of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin—proportion of blacks and whites, for example, or natives and immigrants—income, educational level[,] etc.), nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relation of production) in a relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned; but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices." In other words, the process of a social class distinguishing itself does not occur simply at an "inter-class" level between the bourgeoise and the proletariat but occurs at the "intra-class" level as well, where

there are *two* normative sets of operative gender roles, correlated to genital status (or "natal gender"), and one gender role is systematically privileged over the other.[14] Our society is also characterized by compulsory heterosexuality, since one dimension of the normative expectation for each gender is to be "'complementary" in various respects with the other social position.[15] Gender is relatively unique among social roles in that the durable inculcation of the habitus corresponding to a certain gender is a societal project for all of its members. All of us are interpellated as a "boy" or a "girl," the social markings of this position are a project for our parents and for the rest of society before we are born, and all of this takes place before it is possible to understand, let alone accept, this social positioning, even if neither position really suits us. Moreover, because society is textured in such a way that the distribution and orientation of social space occurs *around* gender, we are obliged to signal our gender positioning to others through external markers like clothing.[16] Althusser's example of the police is salient here because the adoption of a social position always occurs within a hierarchical atmosphere, and the distribution of social responsibilities surrounding gender spreads the policing of gender norms throughout all of its members. For trans people, anyone may adopt the role of the police by denying the legitimacy of their gender identification, thereby making action for trans people difficult or impossible.

Judith Butler (2007) rightly refers to gender as a set of performances, performances that are at once the identities we assume within a social matrix and that are normatively evaluated and potentially subject to sanction by others.[17]

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agents seek social distinction within their relevant class through the exclusion of lower strata of their own class.

[14] See Beauvoir (2011, 5) for a paradigmatic feminist articulation of the asymmetry of gender positions.

[15] Adrienne Rich (1980, 632) examines how even lesbian experiences are modeled on heterosexual desire.

[16] Bettcher (2009, 106) notes that clothing operates as an external marker of genital status and, therefore, social positioning. She furthermore argues that forced genital exposure is a distinctive form of sexual abuse that is commonly tied to transphobic violence, as it is interpreted as the "rectification" for the "deceit" of being trans.

[17] In *Gender Trouble,* Butler (2007, 23) describes the matrix of gender intelligibility as defined by normative practices of "sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire." As a result, "specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice."

Similarly, as Sara Ahmed (2006) has noted, these sets of performances and the roles corresponding to them provide an *orientation* for the navigation of social space.[18] Gender roles accordingly are variable with respect to their normative expectations but durably instituted as orienting features of social life. We are therefore justified in saying that gender roles function as a "form of life"; they become essential rather than fleeting dimensions of our sense of identity within a cisgender patriarchal society.[19] It may not occur to a gender-normative subject that there are cisgender expectations for action and gender performances, just as it does not occur to the six-foot, five-inch middle blocker in volleyball just how much this height advantage allows them to "play the game." But it is essential for any critical theory of existing societies to highlight how gender roles become "forms of life," orienting and structuring dimensions for action, which are saddled with normative expectations about "how they ought to be done."

Section 2: Gender Dysphoria as Alienation from Cisgender Society

If we live in a society that interpellates us into a gender, understood as a form of life, what happens when we fail to live up to those expectations or shirk the role assigned to us? This is the question posed in various ways by feminist, queer, and transgender theory, and it explains their basic theoretical comradery. Here I propose to describe gender dysphoria as alienation from cisgender forms of life. To be trans is to engage in the project of transition: that is, one seeks to disidentify with their assigned sex/gendered position and occupy another place entirely. This highly expansive conception of transition is needlessly truncated in the traditional cisgender notion of transition as the movement from one discrete gender identity to another, especially as sanctioned by institutions such as the family, the workplace, the clinic, and the law. This old notion of transition is a model that historically worked to systematically exclude queers and people of color as medically unable to "viably" transition. Here transition is interpreted as a kind of lived, existential project rather than a discrete, regulated, and essentially transitory experience. Trans phenomenology opens the promise of an understanding of transition written at the behest of trans people rather than our jailors, which requires an alternative conception of gender dysphoria.

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[18] So Ahmed (2006, 30) makes the point that the domestic *background* makes possible the philosophical *foreground* of Husserl's writing desk. Because of Husserl's gendered orientation, certain objects are rendered fully present but others are only "co-perceived."

[19] Rahel Jaeggi (2018, 41) describes forms of life as deeply rooted "*clusters of practices* that are *interconnected* and interrelated in one way or another" in contrast to mere fashions (as examined by Simmel; see Jaeggi 2018, 39–41).

It is important to note that the use of the concept of "alienation" is a political decision. Marx (1978a) developed the paradigmatic account of alienation for critical theory in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,* where he describes how industrialized manufacturing alienates the proletariat from themselves, their comrades, and their humanity.[20] But

Marxists from a broadly Althusserian perspective insist on an epistemological break in 1845, when Marx apparently abandoned the concept of alienation in favor of exploitation (Althusser 2010, 223). The motivation for this refusal is the claim that "alienation" is not a strictly historical materialist concept, that it appeals to an unjustified and unjustifiable anthropological thesis about the nature of humanity and our shared "species-being." It is accordingly rejected by this group as a useful analytic tool for Marxists, and they claim that it really belongs to the pre-Marxist or proto-Marxist "utopian socialist" tradition instead of a properly "scientific socialist" tradition inaugurated by the later Marx.[21]

Rahel Jaeggi, however, has recently resuscitated the concept of alienation from utopian socialism. More specifically, she argues that although Marx explicitly appeals to our "species-being" in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1884*, it is possible to develop an alternative concept of alienation that does not appeal to such a notion, one broadly consistent with existentialist approaches. For Jaeggi (2016, 1), alienation is best described as "a relation of relationlessness" produced by systems of domination. On this conception, alienation does not describe a defunct relationship to "humanity," or something to that effect, but a defunct *self*-relation.[22] Renewing the spirit if not the letter of Marx's 1844 work, Jaeggi describes how systems of domination can interfere with our ability to appropriate actions and events and thereby really see them as our own. In alienation, we develop a distant, disinterested, dissociated, and thereby defunct relationship to our desires and life because of an inability to see them as truly "our own."

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[20] In the *1844 Manuscripts,* Marx (1978a) argues that capitalism inevitably produces an economic situation where every member of society has a merely precarious control over their own lives and sense that an alien force controls their entire lives. In this situation, "man becomes ever poorer as man"; that is, we become more estranged from what it means to be human (Marx 1978a, 93).

[21] Althusser (2010) makes this distinction between scientific and utopian socialism, but his source is Engels (see esp. Engels 1978, 700).

[22] Jaeggi (2016, 179) argues that this does not commit her to an overly substantialist notion of selfhood. She describes the structure of selfhood as appropriating actions that can tie together nicely or become undone; there may be a center of gravity or there may not be.

It is because forms of life are ensembles of practices that have become durably instituted and even deeply embodied that one's alienation from cisgender society introduces acute precarity in all social action whatsoever. Since gender is an orienting dimension of the distribution of social space, alienation from this scheme of social cooperation often requires disinvestment from institutions and practices most governed by cisgender norms and expectations. To be trans is to be alienated in the most literal sense: one is no longer able to identify with the social position assigned: one feels it as an "alien power" and responds with refusal. But this refusal comes at a price. In response, cisgender society may now opt for a series of punitive measures toward trans people—from "clocking," to exclusion, to sexual assault, rape, and murder—because the very existence of a trans person contradicts a core matrix of cisgender society. Bettcher (2007, 47) describes how even binary trans people are destined to be "pretenders" in the case that they do not socially "pass" as their gender identification, or "deceivers" if they do.[23] In either case, for cisgender society, trans people are never exactly who they say they are, as their self-identification is unreliable, and their ability to participate in socially coordinated schemes of action collapses. Accordingly, trans people are regularly denied the relevant autonomy and self-determination to live a life they could have any meaningful connection to. Trans people inevitably resist at least one core dimension of social cooperation and accordingly are always potentially open to sanction—this is the ineliminable core of the trans situation.

It must first of all be recognized that the alienation that characterizes trans experiences is a result of a material relationship. Where cisgender society has recognized trans people in history, it has interpreted them primarily as criminals to be punished and secondarily as medical curiosities to be examined. Trans experience is marked by the compulsion to confess and be heard.[24] This fact is reflected above all in the power that doctors and other medical professionals have in the lives of trans people. For Jay Prosser (1998, 101), the quintessential trans autobiographical moment is in fact the moment of confession before a doctor in one's plea for sex

[23] Bettcher (2007) also observes that this is sadly apparent in the murder of transgender women, which is typically justified by their status as "deceivers."

[24] For an analysis of confession as a technique of power, see Foucault (1978, 20): "It was here, perhaps, that the injunction, so peculiar to the West, was laid down for the first time, in the form of a general constraint. I am not talking about the obligation to admit to violations of the laws of sex, as required by traditional penance; but of the nearly infinite task of telling—telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex."

reassignment surgery.[25] This is so for Prosser because this moment constitutes a turning point in a transsexual's life, where they can perhaps begin hormone therapy and move from their "old" gender identity and into their "new" one thereafter. Even if we disagree with Prosser about the centrality of sex reassignment surgery to trans experience, we may nevertheless recognize that his framework accurately reflects the fact that trans autobiography is produced, assessed, and evaluated on the basis of cisgender norms and expectations. It is necessary to prove one is "trans enough" to a medical professional for the transition to be recognized socially, professionally, and legally. It should be no surprise therefore that the schemes that trans people use to make sense of their own experiences bear the marks of the society that would have them not exist.

Gender dysphoria is the affective result of a phenomena whereby trans subjects "disinvest" or "fail to appropriate" the gender role assigned to them by others.[26] Here transgender subjects are defined not by any positive feature of their identity but by their refusal and incongruence with the basic structure of cisgender society. Gender dysphoria is the condition of being alienated from cisgender society, and it defines the trans experience. This is a line of flight away from the form of life assigned by cisgender society and into something *else,* where the direction matters more than the destination. Of course, this concept of gender dysphoria has an important relation to the affective dimension of gender dysphoria typically described from a medical perspective. In the medical sense, gender dysphoria is related affectively to "distress" at living in the "wrong body." Gender dysphoria is thus rightly related to a great deal of personal suffering, and often this suffering is directed toward the body. But in the medicalized atmosphere, this suffering is individualized and rendered apolitical. On the critical model, on the other hand, this suffering is related to a concrete social arrangement: *here I am made to be a person I don't want to be.*

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[25] Prosser (1998, 101) says, "The autobiographical act for the transsexual begins even before the published autobiography—namely, in the clinician's office where, in order to be diagnosed as a transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography. The story of a strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical authorities, by the psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual 'conversion.' Whether s/he publishes an autobiography or not, then, every transsexual, as a transsexual, is originally an autobiographer."

[26] For an analysis of the concept of disidentification, see for example Muñoz (1999, 4): "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."

Gender dysphoria is suffering produced by a structural feature of cisgender society, which will continue to exclude people and must do so in virtue of its basic organizing principle. Gender dysphoria is the phenomenological result of a certain kind of unfreedom—the knowledge that one's space of available action is circumscribed, reduced, or eliminated because of the lack of secure recognition of others.

Understanding gender dysphoria requires, in part, understanding *why* people transition. Consider Andrea Long Chu's (2018, n.p.) beautiful recollection of her desire to live as a woman:

> I doubt that any of us transition simply because we want to "be" women, in some abstract, academic way. I certainly didn't. I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone's girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys, for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner on each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, for the breasts.

Chu's analysis is insightful because cisgender subjects focus almost exclusively on "being" a woman, rather than acting as a woman, precisely because the ability to engage in such actions is virtually guaranteed for them. Being a cisgender woman and being able to act as a woman paradigmatically coincide. The case of trans womanhood, and all trans people, introduces the troubling situation where one *is* a woman, for example, but one is also denied the ability to really *act* as a woman or become one. Being trans in a transphobic society means that there is a certain precarity to these desires: one can be "clocked," policed, and denied the social role that one wants to live. Gender dysphoria is the acute feeling that one's desires, the sort of life that one wants to live, may simply be too difficult or impossible to realize within a cisgender patriarchal society. It is a sense of extreme precarity, often mixed with self-loathing, as the alienated reflection of the judgment rendered onto you by others.

Cisgender people are apt to forget this complicated dimension of gender precisely because their own gender performances do not place them at risk of alienation from cisgender forms of life. This is the source of perennial tension

between *queer* and *trans* theory.[27] Queer theorists have the tendency to interpret trans people as the zenith of queerness, by which they mean a nonnormative identity in a heteronormative society. Trans theorists, however, have insisted on the specificity of a kind of *trans experience,* one that is qualitatively distinct from *queerness* and the examination of sexuality. Cisgender queer people and trans people are not in the same situation since a cisgender society is at least potentially amenable to the incorporation of nonnormative cisgender identities. Trans subjects, *by virtue of transitioning,* reject the authority of a cisgender society to determine their gender identification, and so they can never be stably incorporated into a society premised on their nonexistence. Queerness is at least in principle amendable to a reform of gender roles within a cisgender society, while trans theory necessarily aims at revolution through a basic organizing principle of cisgender societies.

Trans subjects do not simply reject the normative expectations associated with a certain gender performance: they reject the scheme of mandatory gender interpellation altogether. There is a kind of hopelessness associated with being transgender that I believe is revolutionary. While queer cisgender people may successfully lobby for their previously nonconforming behavior to become normative for their gender, this strategy is unavailable as a long-term solution for trans people. Passing is, in essence, transitory. This is because trans subjects do not merely combat a variable set of normative expectations for a cisgender role, but more fundamentally, trans people oppose the system of mandatory gender interpellation that forms a basic axis for societal distribution of labor and responsibilities. Trans people of all kinds accordingly adopt a role or a function that is essentially incompatible with cisgender patriarchal society. There are at least three modalities of this negative contradiction, embodied by "nonbinary," "MTF," and "FTM," respectively, but the iterability of transitioning means that the schemes of possible resistance are innumerable (MTFTNTMTFTM . . .). Each identity is defined not in virtue of its positive features but instead chiefly in virtue of the refusal of a form of life unsuccessfully imposed from without; what trans people share with one another and with those who love them is a certain kind of freedom struggle.

Section 3: Love, Self-Respect, and Trans Liberation

The very act of transitioning implies a rejection of the authority of a cisgender society to determine one's gendered or sexed position from the outside. Transitioning therefore involves making a political claim about the nature of freedom and political self-determination that strictly opposes the organization and administration of society via externally imposed gendered or sexed positions. The freedom of all trans

[27] This rift is articulated in Prosser (1998) and is the subject of much dispute in queer and trans theory.

people is, therefore, integrally interconnected. While it may be politically expedient in certain circumstances for one class of trans or queer people to reject their compatriots and lobby for conditional acceptance of their own gender nonconformity, these freedoms will always be extraordinarily precarious, since such a position entails the tacit concession to cisgender society that gender or sex transitions are acceptable only in exceptional, regulated circumstances and may be rightfully administered by medical professionals and the state. Even if one wins such concessions in the short term, there is no guarantee whatsoever that they will remain, since one has in turn conceded to the sovereignty of cisgender society on such matters. Certainly, it is always the case that some trans people will accept these concessions, but the price of this deal with the devil is the painful contradiction of conceiving of oneself *as if* one was cisgender because, for the moment, others are willing to play along. This situation cannot last.[28]

Therefore, trans subjects have an inextricable obligation to the freedom struggles of all other trans people, since the goal of trans liberation can be nothing less than the unconditional right to self-determination. Moreover, this highly expansive conception of the political responsibility undergirding trans liberation does not merely extend to other trans people. In carving out a vision of gendered and sexed self-determination, trans theory, history, and activism aligns itself with other freedom struggles as well. This fact was recognized early in the development and articulation of trans theory by Leslie Feinberg. Here, in the context of reflecting on the goals of trans theory, sie says "So, what are the goals of trans liberation? There is not one single answer. If you ask me, the aim should not fall a yard short of genuine social and economic liberation for everyone" (Feinberg 1998, 135). This strong claim concerning the unity of various freedom struggles provides a concrete basis for solidarity and a political coalition among various distinct but nevertheless similarly aggrieved groups of gendered outlaws, including but not limited to feminists, queers, the intersexed, and various racialized subject formations that are more liable to be regulated according to gendered and sexed mores.

This vision not only provides an expansive account of what trans people owe to the freedom struggles of various other groups but also helps explain the stakes for cisgender people in trans liberation. For in fact, the system of forced gender and sex assignment violates the dignity of everyone, the cisgender included, because they

[28] See Feinberg (1996, 89): "I have lived as a man because I could not survive openly as a transgendered person. Yes, I am oppressed in this society, but I am not merely a *product* of oppression. That is a phrase that renders all our trans identities meaningless. Passing means having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live. Being forced to pass is a recent historical development. It is *passing* that is a product of oppression."

rightfully ought to take their own gendered projects to be contributions to the realm of freedom. It is undignified and indecent to be told who you have to be, and the contingent fact of fulfilling this obligation inadvertently does not alleviate the offense.[29] Cisgender people who take pride in themselves and their gendered projects must therefore take the suggestion that anyone else has a say in these matters as an affront and an insult to their own freedom. Cisgender people should therefore join in the struggle for trans liberation simply out of a sense of dignity, pride, and self-respect, regardless of whether they even know or are personally invested in any trans people in their lives.[30]

And yet, it is quite rare for cisgender people to join the struggle for trans liberation on this basis. The experience that leads most cisgender people to realize the importance of trans liberation, if they ever reach it at all, is love. In many cases, either they come to know and love a trans person or someone who they love confides in them the need to transition. Here I mean love in an intentionally expansive sense to describe the love that parents might have for their children, that a romantic couple

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[29] Feinberg (1998, 6) is the first to my knowledge to make this point explicitly and it is well worth quoting at length:

> And if you do not identify as transgender or transsexual or intersexual, your life is diminished by our oppression as well. Your own choices as a man or a woman are sharply curtailed. Your individual journey to express yourself is shunted into one of two deeply carved ruts, and the social baggage you are handed is already packed.
>
> So the defense of each individual's right to control their own body, and to explore the path of self-expression, enhances your own freedom to discover more about yourself and your potentialities. This movement will give you more room to breathe—to be yourself. To discover on a deeper level what it means to be your self.
>
> Together, I believe we can forge a coalition that can fight on behalf of your oppression as well as mine. Together, we can raise each other's grievances and win the kind of significant change we all long for. But the foundation of unity is understanding.

[30] Feinberg (1996, 128) puts this extremely expansive notion of the responsibility following trans liberation this way: "None of us will be free until we have forged an economic system that meets the needs of every working person. As trans people, we will not be free until we fight for and win a society in which no class stands to benefit from fomenting hatred and prejudice, where laws restricting sex and gender and human love will be unthinkable."

might have for one another, that a teacher might share with a student, or that friends may have for one another. For love is the most personal and profound way of realizing the interconnectedness of our freedoms. Love is a powerful political emotion that is much maligned by those who would dismiss it as womanly, private, or politically insignificant, but trans theory has frequently maintained that love is at the heart of solidarity and the continual expansion of freedom and self-determination. The nature of this connection is manifested by the fact that both love and freedom are by nature intrinsically unconditional. To love someone is not to desire them to be a certain way but is instead the desire for the loved one to shape their own lives into a form that they deem satisfying and worthy. Truly loving someone, therefore, includes the tacit realization that they may need to deviate from the expectations placed upon them by others—for example, that they may feel alienated by their cisgender identity and feel the need to transition. The difficulties, obstacles, and heartaches associated with this transition cannot help but turn the cisgender lover against the form of a society that would shame, demean, and outcast their beloved. And it is precisely in this way that the love that cisgender people have for trans people in their lives quite naturally turns them against the form of a society that otherwise would benefit them. Love therefore plays a vital political function in awakening cisgender people to the responsibility to trans liberation that otherwise might have been simply ignored and thereby in expanding the political coalition of those committed to trans liberation.

Conclusion

Trans subjects are the gendered analogue of Marx's proletariat. There are two faces of Marx's proletariat. There is a material characterization of the proletariat based on the features of those who embodied this social role in the nineteenth century: here Marx characterizes the proletariat paradigmatically as factory workers in rapidly industrializing societies in Europe.[31] When "proletariat" is taken in this sense, it is hard to imagine more than superficial resemblances between the twenty-first-century trans subject and the nineteenth-century factory worker. This material characterization, however, is based on a more significant and profound *structural* characterization.[32] On this view, which is primarily taken up in Marx's description of the proletariat in his *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* the proletariat are the negative image of the society in which they live, the most alienated, marginalized, and

[31] This characterization stems predominantly from *The Communist Manifesto,* where the proletariat are essentially defined as an outgrowth of industrialization: "The proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product" (Marx and Engels 1978, 482).

[32] I am indebted to Idris Robinson for pointing this out to me.

exploited members of society.[33] And in fact, the proletariat form a class because the *condition* of the proletariat as alienated, marginalized, and exploited is a necessary feature of the operation of capitalist society. The proletariat, considered structurally, indicates a contradiction or a crisis within capitalist forms of life. When Marx claims that the proletariat is a revolutionary class, he is best understood as not principally referring to his *material* characterization of the proletariat in the nineteenth-century factory worker, but to his *structural* characterization of the proletariat as the perpetual underclass (although he clearly believed that they coincided). The admission of some formerly proletariat into the petit bourgeois in the twentieth century does not undermine Marx's theory of the revolutionary character of the proletariat; it merely shifts the distribution of these classes, as Lenin's astute analysis of imperialism demonstrates concretely (where the exploitation of the proletariat is, at a certain breaking point, distributed outward to a colonial periphery).[34] For Marx, the proletariat is the class that has an interest in ending all class oppression whatsoever because they adopt the position of the most marginalized, excluded, and exploited class. As a class, the proletariat, accordingly, has no interest in adopting a new hierarchical position in economic life but has an interest in the abolition of hierarchies as a whole.

Trans people are analogous to Marx's structural notion of the proletariat because both the proletariat and the trans subject indicate a fundamental contradiction in social life. Marx's claim is not that the proletariat *in fact* adopt attitudes or beliefs that are revolutionary but, to the contrary, that their structural position is such that their class interest is only truly served by revolution—that is, the

[33] This is Marx's (1977, 141–42) description of the proletariat in the *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*: "a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society, a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetuated on it; a sphere that can claim no traditional title, but only a human title; a sphere that does not stand partially opposed to the consequences, but totally opposed to the premises of the German political system: a sphere, finally, that cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society, thereby emancipating them; a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat."

[34] In *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism,* Lenin (1970, 671, 674) states that the "split in the working-class movement is bound up with the objective conditions of imperialism" and that "imperialist wars are absolutely inevitable under *such* an economic system."

destruction of class-based society. It is entirely possible to try to appease certain ranks of the proletariat through concessions. But these concessions, because of the *role* of the proletariat in economic life, can never be satisfying or final; there still exists a contradiction at the heart of society that will perpetually generate a new underclass and a new crisis. So too in the case of trans people. It is possible for a transphobic society to accommodate certain trans people and to treat them *as if* they were cisgender, but the act of *transitioning* belies the entire system of mandatory gender identification and interpellation. It therefore marks a contradiction at the heart of our social arrangement. To experience gender dysphoria is to experience a certain kind of political unfreedom, and while a space of action may be *granted* in a transphobic society, it may never be *guaranteed.* The specter of unfreedom and alienation remains. Being trans in a cisgender society means being subjected and alienated in a way qualitatively distinct from mere discontentment or dissatisfaction with one's gender identification: it means, more than all of this, living in a society that can and will force you to live the life of another. This is a threat not only to the freedom of trans people but to the freedom of everyone. To be trans or to love trans people is to oppose, at least in principle if not in fact, the legitimacy of mandatory gender assignment as a whole, and a true reckoning with this fact requires nothing less than the material neutralization of cisgender society.

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