

Revolutionary Trans Politics and the Three Way Fight

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3WF: Trans and other gender-nonconforming people have become a major target of right-wing political attacks in recent years, and they continue to be major targets of systemic oppression and physical violence in U.S. society. How do you apply a three way fight framework to help us understand the contending forces in this situation?

Rowan: It feels important to start this out by speaking to the seriousness and urgency of this moment. Transgender people I know (particularly trans women) are panicking. Trans people are fleeing Republican-controlled states, and even trans women in Portland, Oregon, are considering and planning how to leave the United States. Parts of the country controlled by the right are passing laws that make it impossible for us to live as trans people, criminalizing our healthcare and our families. In some ways it seems that the kind of fascistic polarization that liberals were panicking about under Trump is occurring now for trans people, often without a peep from the liberals. The stakes are high, the moment is desperate, and this hardly feels like an academic discussion. This is a trans woman, the mother of a trans child, trying to think and to strategize about how we fight for our lives.

That said, clear thinking, beyond moralism and desperation, is essential if we are to survive this moment, let alone build movements for trans liberation that not only defend us, but fight for total liberation. I think this current moment of struggle around trans lives is a place where the three way fight analysis is incredibly useful.

The past decade has witnessed a real cultural transformation around gender in the United States. From *Time* magazine's declaration of "the Transgender Tipping Point" in 2014, to the widespread use of pronoun go-arounds in liberal social and business contexts, to Portland Public Schools implementing gender-neutral bathrooms, transgender people are more visible than ever, and in certain contexts more welcome and accepted. Whereas previous generations of trans people (and in particular trans women) were forced to live as outlaws, doing sex work or other criminalized labor to survive, today there are trans politicians and CEOs. The liberal ideological assumptions of trans liberalism tend to assume that being transgender is an inherent, innate, in-born, and immutable (perhaps even genetically determined) characteristic, that trans people are "born this way," and that given that our condition is not our fault, we ought to be protected by civil rights legislation and incorporated into the project of capitalist

In response to these changes, the right (Republican, Christian theocratic, and fascist) has come together to push back hard against the emergence of trans people as a force in society and against the room that we've won to survive. The backlash has been fast and fierce. Ideological and legislative attacks on trans young people have sought to keep them out of sports and from accessing gender-affirming medical care. These attacks have of course escalated, where now some states are for all intents and purposes banning medical transition altogether, teachers are being forced to out trans and gender-nonconforming kids to unsupportive parents, and the families of trans kiddos are being investigated by child protective services. The right is explicitly seeking, through legislation and media demonization, the elimination of transgender life. In the wake of the Black uprisings and the defeat of Trump, the right is seeking to scapegoat trans people. The right, the gender fascists, understand transness as being an ideology and a social contagion. They believe that if this transgender trend continues, sex/gender roles will come undone and western civilization will be overrun by gender anarchy. (Some anti-trans feminists oppose trans life based on a different framework that we'll deal with later.)

So again, with the current struggle around trans lives we have on the one hand a sort of liberal defense of multicultural capitalist democracy, sometimes with an eye toward making it more equitable. In this moment of exterminationist anti-trans politics, I do think it's probably worth distinguishing between transgender liberals, who are fighting for their (or their kids') survival, but are doing so within a horizon of assimilating into capitalism, and the cis political establishment, which may be willing to give lip service to trans people, but, as of right now, seems pretty willing to throw us under the bus in order to compromise with the right and protect stability. On the other hand we have a right-wing coalition united around eliminating us, forcing us from public life, preventing us from accessing what we need to survive, and reducing us to a state of constant terror in order to force us back to our assigned sexes and assigned roles in reproducing capitalist patriarchy.

Our task is to build a radical pole that fights for trans liberation against fascism and capitalism. Let's think about this as being a politics of revolutionary trans leftism, though it will certainly not include all transgender people and certainly not all leftists. We need to build a politics and practice that doesn't seek assimilation into this society, but seeks the destruction of patriarchy and heterosexism. Rather than acting as a small minority political constituency for the Democratic Party, we need to build alliances with other oppressed people as we attack the systems that hurt all of us. While liberals argue that trans folks are born this way, and fascists say we're mentally ill, we reject the violence of asking why we are the way we are in the first place, and we celebrate the beauty of trans life and of its potential to burn this world down.

3WF: In the interview we did two years ago, you also talked about the three way fight as “an ethical stance toward political struggle” and “a demand that radicals tell the truth.” How do you see that playing out with regard to transphobia and anti-trans oppression? To put it another way, what kinds of ethical dangers do leftists face in relating to this struggle?

Rowan: I think part of what I was getting at in that earlier interview was the way that the three way fight framework not only helps us understand our world and the contending forces within it, but can also help us understand and clarify our own values, politics, and tasks as leftists and as radicals.

So I think that the first ethical mandate of this moment, for leftists, is that we must take a side. In this moment where the right is pointing the spearhead of reaction at trans people, and

seeking our extermination, standing aside is not an option. The survival of trans people, most of whom are working class, is not some kind of culture war distraction from the real work of class struggle. Any left that seeks to ignore this struggle is ethically and politically bankrupt. To ignore the attacks on trans people is to conciliate and enable them.

This kind of position seems to be most popular among Marxists, particularly social democrats and Marxist Leninists (so called “tankies”). It is associated with a class-centric dismissive view of so-called “identity politics.” This ranges from social democrats dismissing trans people and our lives as identitarian distractions from the real class struggles to some “communists” allying with transphobic feminists (and others) in their denunciations of trans existence as neoliberal or a conspiracy of the pharmaceutical industry.

It is certainly true that feminist, anti-racist, and queer politics are increasingly recuperated and defanged by capitalism and incorporated to defend the ruling class and its system of exploitation, and we need to be critical of this. Our commitment to liberating oppressed people must always be about building fighting bonds of solidarity for the freedom of all people, and that means the destruction of capitalism. But to use this reality to ignore or even oppose trans folks’ fight for our survival is reactionary and puts you in the camp of the enemy.

It is my sense that building some limited alliances with liberals is probably necessary in order to defend trans survival. If trans people are prevented from being out, from transitioning, from accessing medical care, from surviving, every other political task will be harder. We must build broad and popular movements to defend trans life and push back against and defeat the gender exterminationist right. Some of those people are going to be liberals, or otherwise hold pro-systemic politics that we reject.

That said, we need to go into building alliances with our eyes wide open. The reality is that too often, building alliances with liberals, whether we describe it as a coalition, a popular front, a united front, or whatever, means subordinating ourselves to them. The Democratic Party and reformist nonprofits tend to have power, resources, and sometimes a clarity of vision that often revolutionaries lack. Lacking these things, but engaging in joint struggle with our more powerful “lesser evil” enemies, tends to work out in practice as radicals functioning as the foot soldiers of other people’s politics.

None of this is to suggest that we should content ourselves with the most radical political critique in a moment of crisis and urgency. Purity and sectarianism are hardly things we can afford in this moment of trans extermination. While the particulars of concrete struggles are best left to activists on the ground, it is certainly likely that we will need to build alliances with liberals in order to push back anti-trans attacks and to make and defend space to survive. The point is that when we, as radicals, enter into these alliances, we must do so as radicals. We should be building our own independent collectives, organizations, and projects. We should prioritize, and push for, forms of action, particularly direct action and militancy, that cultivate popular power and agency, not dependence on politicians and professionals. We should engage in political education that develops and promotes revolutionary visions of, and strategies for, trans liberation. We should never throw the most marginalized under the bus in order to win short-term reforms for the benefit of a few.

No matter what particular strategic and tactical decisions we make to defend ourselves and our communities, we need to be clear about what our politics are and about our critiques of trans-inclusive liberalism. Like most liberalism, pro-trans liberalism hopes to defend a more democratic and equitable version of existing capitalist society and its institutions from the insurgent right.

We need to avoid the liberal tendency to defend the institutions of official society from right-wing attack, whether in the streets or the legislature. We need to build capacity to engage in direct action to protect trans kids from being removed from their families. But we need to do so in ways that don't act as if child protective services is an otherwise wholesome institution that is being corrupted or misused by the gender fascists. Rather we need to oppose these attacks in ways that expose the longtime white supremacy of these institutions and (particularly for those of us who are white) to use this opportunity to build solidarity with Black and Indigenous folks who have always been under the gun of these agencies.

At this moment, the right is attacking the standards and agreements for medical best practice. This does not mean, however, that the medical system and establishment in the U.S. has been historically, or always will be, somehow "on the side of trans people." Certainly there are real victories that trans people have won in the realm of healthcare, but those are a result of struggle against stigmatization and gatekeeping, not of the fundamentally enlightened nature of these institutions.

Finally, the transphobic right has been really good at framing this as a "debate" as a grounds for dialogue and discussion. As someone who spent a lot of time in leftist political organizations I can appreciate the necessity of developing a comradely culture where we think through differences together to seek understanding and clarity, rather than vilification of our opponents.

But this is a fundamentally idealist misunderstanding of what's happening. Fundamentally we're not struggling over abstract questions of "What is a woman" and whether I should be considered one. We're struggling for access to medical care, public space, and the right to care for our kids.

This is not a debate. Fundamentally our task is not to convince people to change their minds and recognize trans people's humanity. We are fighting a war for the survival of our people. This isn't to say that we shouldn't have hard conversations with our friends, family, and comrades about trans life and liberation and seek to transform their perspectives. But we should never confuse that with a strategy of debating bigots and fascists instead of defeating them.

3WF: The relationship between pro-trans politics and feminism has gotten really complicated. On one hand, there's an organic connection between trans liberation and women's liberation, as different dimensions of a struggle against gender-based oppression, and in the ways that right-wing anti-trans campaigns are closely intertwined with attacks on reproductive rights. On the other hand, there's a section of the feminist movement, many of whom refer to themselves as "gender critical feminists" and opponents often label as "trans-exclusionary radical feminists" or TERFs, who argue that a lot of trans-affirming measures actually bolster gender oppression and represent an attack on the women's movement. Many (but not all) TERFs have even collaborated with right-wing forces around campaigns to demonize trans people and limit their rights. Without going into all the dimensions of this conflict, what are some guideposts you use to navigate this messy situation?

Rowan: I do really feel that feminist politics are so precious and necessary. If our movements are not centering women's liberation and targeting male supremacy, then we are engaged in patriarchal reformism, not radical struggle. The rich, diverse, and often contentious theory and history of radical, socialist, and revolutionary feminisms is an essential toolset for us, and one that trans people today are at the forefront of developing and pushing forward.

I appreciate you linking the right's attacks on trans people with their attacks on other forms of bodily and reproductive autonomy, particularly the right to abortion. These efforts feel very much connected, as attempts to mandate a very narrow vision of white patriarchal heterosexuality and to punish and try to exterminate any deviations from it. This is gender fascism.

The reality is that liberatory feminism today must be a struggle for trans liberation, and in this moment must center the struggle for trans survival, as we fight for the end of patriarchy and for the liberation of all women, trans and cis. It's my sense that in the U.S. (and Canadian) context this is pretty clear to most people, even if our feminisms must always be pushed in more revolutionary directions as we resist cooptation.

And yes, there is the reality that some feminists are viciously anti-trans, in particular, the so-called "gender critical movement" (often referred to by their opponents as TERFs). I'm not going to go deep here, doing a holistic or deep analysis of gender critical politics. Instead, I'll just mention a few ways that the three way fight framework is helpful in understanding our struggles against them.

In our previous interview I talked about how three way fight politics demands we tell the truth, to ourselves and to each other, even when it's inconvenient or uncomfortable. I think that in the struggle for trans rights and against gender fascism, we must also heed and uphold Amilcar Cabral's call to "Tell no lies, claim no easy victories. Hide nothing from the masses of our people."

I think that too often, trans people and our allies suggest that TERFs are not real feminists. That by virtue of their bigotry, and their participation in gender fascism, that their claims to care about women are lies. Gender critical feminists are feminists. They often have deep and organic roots within the radical wings of the women's liberation movements of the 1970s, particularly within lesbian feminism. This means coming to terms with the fact that feminism is not, in fact, simply a synonym for "good politics." Instead the women's liberation movements were in themselves ideological battlefields, where millions of women (including some trans women) came together to figure out how to dismantle patriarchy and get free. Debates raged around sexuality, race, militancy, and capitalism, as well as biological essentialism and the participation of transsexual women. Feminism has always included the most vicious forms of white supremacy and middle class careerism as well as the most precious tools for total liberation. We cannot simply dismiss bigots like Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, Redstockings, and Adrienne Rich from the ranks of feminism. Rather, we need to understand building political unity and clarity as an always ongoing process. Our movements always face the danger of growing reactionary politics within them, and the only way to resist this danger is constant vigilance, self-reflection, and political education, not simply self-righteous denunciations of our enemies.

The reality is that some TERFs are building alliances with the right in order to attack trans people. It does often seem to be the case that the more these feminists center opposition to "transgender ideology" in their politics, the further they go from their left origins. This seems to be another example of leftists switching sides, or perhaps more accurately demonstrating that the line between friend and enemy is not eternal, but is a historical process, always in a state of transformation. The three way fight helps us understand the need to oppose anti-fascist researchers who become counter-extremism experts for CIA backed think tanks. It gives us a framework to understand and oppose anti-imperialist activists who become agents of Russian imperialism. In the same way it can help us understand (as our enemies) feminists who move toward a kind of emerging gender fascism, out of their commitment to "protecting" (cis) women.

As with any other right wing forces, we ought to regard hardcore gender criticals as our enemies, while recognizing that their arguments and assumptions are far more widespread. Challenging transphobia and transmisogyny within our movements and social milieus is a part of fighting it in the society, though different kinds of contradictions require different methods of struggle.

I'm honestly not sure what the best ways are to struggle against the GC movement. I think we need political clarity that the forces trying to exterminate us are our enemies, even if they claim allegiance to feminism. At the same time, it is true that gender politics are shifting rapidly in this period in ways that can feel confusing and disorienting for many who must be won over to gender liberation and a feminism that fights for all of our freedom. Striking a skillful balance between fierce clarity and nuance and care is always an important task for anti-fascists and other revolutionaries, particularly in a moment where political alliances and political categories themselves are in such a state of flux and instability.

The gender critical TERF movement are often the anti-trans bigots that we have the most proximity with. They are often the folks we're most likely to encounter online or in LGBTQ community. But, at least in the United States, they are hardly the driving force behind anti-trans legislation and violence. They are at most junior partners, or perhaps a token radfem ladies auxiliary to the real power on the right, which is driven by Christian nationalism and male supremacy. This isn't to say that we shouldn't oppose and defeat them, but in doing so we should not confuse proximity with power.

In a lot of ways the most important rebuttal to gender critical bigotry was developed long before "the Transgender Tipping Point." The work of radical Black feminists like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Pat Parker, and so many others was a fierce critique of white feminists' delusions of universal sisterhood and the natural solidarity of shared girlhood. Instead, Black feminists (and other feminists of color) understood that women were divided in many ways, some of which made meaningful political solidarity impossible. Feminist solidarity comes not from a given unity of experience, certainly not a biologically essentialist one, but instead comes from the difficult but necessary work of building coalitions and new subjectivities, where we can struggle together across differences for the liberation of all of us.

3WF: Who are some trans radicals—writers or organizers—who are making particularly valuable contributions to revolutionary left trans politics? Are there particular books, articles, or websites that are helpful in this regard?

Rowan: There are so many amazing trans radicals out there, doing amazing work organizing their workplaces, doing mutual aid, street-fighting with the police, teaching each other to shoot, and simply helping each other survive. It's really my sense that so many movements and struggles in this period are led by trans people in ways that weren't necessarily true when I was first getting radicalized. I am so deeply inspired by young trans rebels and radicals, and folks should recognize that the attacks on trans people are not simply attacks on trans people but also attacks on the possibility of a future radical politics.

There are also a lot of amazing trans radicals thinking and writing right now, whose work has shaped my own thinking. Honestly, I'll probably only be able to mention a few here.

M.E. O'Brien is a communist trans woman who writes a lot about gender politics, family abolition, and "communizing care." She's also the co-author of an amazing communist speculative fiction novel, and is an editor of *Pinko* magazine. Her work is probably one of the biggest influences on my own politics around gender and trans liberation.

Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's anthology *Transgender Marxism* is a really valuable attempt to think through the relationship between gender liberation and anti-capitalist politics in this moment, and Gleeson has written a number of great essays exploring these connections.

Jules Gil-Peterson's thinking about trans identity and state violence is a really precious resource in trying to think through a liberatory path that can challenge both gender fascism and "pro-LGBTQ" liberalism. She's written a book on the history of trans children and is a host on the Death Panel podcast where she consistently says smart and radical things.

Vicky Osterweil, author of *In Defense of Looting*, is very smart, and whenever I've read articles by her or heard her on podcasts I've been inspired by her politics.

Miss Major is a Black radical trans woman who has participated in organizing trans women sex workers and prisoners for survival and liberation since her involvement in the Stonewall rebellion.

Val Travesti is a trans woman who is coming out of Maoist politics, who uses some of the thinking developed by J. Sakai and Butch Lee to try to develop a revolutionary anti-imperialist and radically feminist politics of trans liberation [for example [here](#) and [here](#)].

Dean Spade is a radical trans writer and lawyer whose work is helpful in understanding the limitations of reformism and the necessity of militant community organizing.

Margaret Killjoy works mostly as a cultural worker, writing science fiction and making heavy metal music. She's also a brilliant thinker who ties anarchism, anti-fascism, and trans liberation together in compelling ways.

Kai Cheng Thom is a writer, poet and activist in Canada who writes a lot about interpersonal violence and community care and healing from a radical perspective.

Finally, Leslie Feinberg was and remains a huge influence on me. They were one of the folks who was really foundational in developing trans politics in the 1990s, and always did so in a way that was rooted in building solidarity against all oppression (even if I don't entirely share their particular brand of Marxist-Leninist politics).

3WF: Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered already?

Rowan: To cis leftists: Now is the time to step up and defend trans people from right-wing attacks. This is absolutely an ethical and moral obligation in this moment of history. We will all be remembered for how we either stood aside or fought in this moment. The way to transform this struggle from being a "culture war" issue between gender fascists and LGBTQ liberalism is to put resources and energy into supporting the development of revolutionary trans politics. Also, so many of the most active and fiercest rebels and leaders in movements against capitalism and the state are trans people. From fast food workers organizing to rebellions against policing, transgender fighters are in the lead. To abandon them to those seeking their extermination can only weaken us all.

To trans people and our allies: We have no choice but to fight for our survival in this frightening moment. We do have a choice of how to fight. We can fight for a liberal politics of assimilating into this dying empire, throwing the most marginalized and vulnerable among us under the bus as we do so. Or we can fight for trans liberation in ways that prioritize trans people of color, trans workers, incarcerated trans people, trans sex workers, and that are guided by a vision of solidarity with all oppressed and exploited people and the total transformation of the world.

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