

What Are We Fighting?

The Anti-Trans Moral Panic in Historical Context

Subtitle: From Witch Trials to Sex Wars — Panic, Danger, and the Women at the Margins

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What Are We Fighting?

There is a moment — and if you are a trans person of any vintage, you will know the one — when someone who considers themselves a reasonable, progressive, basically decent human being leans across the table and says, in the voice reserved for difficult truths: *But don't you think we should just... talk about this?* The unspoken implication is that you have been Silenced. That the conversation has been Closed Down. That there is something being suppressed, some legitimate question that the woke mob doesn't want asked.

I have spent a lot of time over the past two decades thinking about what is actually being asked in that moment, and by whom, and to what end. I came out as trans in 2008, which by the standards of the British trans community makes me practically ancient — old enough to remember when we mostly just wanted to get on with our lives, to be left alone, to pee in peace and do our jobs and pay our taxes and watch *Great British Bake Off* like everyone else. What I have watched since then is not a conversation. It is something older and more familiar, something with a structure and a grammar, something that has happened before to other marginalised groups, and that we in the trans community are being asked to help perform once more.

This essay is an attempt to name that structure. It is written for the many people — and I believe you are numerous — who consider yourself a feminist, who instinctively support equality and human dignity, who may nonetheless have found yourself vaguely unsettled by something you've read or heard about gender theory. You are not a bad person for feeling uncertain. You have been told, by voices that sound authoritative and concerned, that there are questions worth asking. I want to show you why the questions themselves are the point, why the uncertainty they generate is the product rather than the problem, and why what we are facing together — because it is a *together* fight, this one — is a moral panic with a very long history.

I am not going to tell you what to think. I am going to try to show you what I see when I look at this moment, and give you the historical and theoretical tools to look at it the same way.

Panic as Politics: Stanley Cohen and the Structure of Moral Panics

In 1972, a British sociologist named Stanley Cohen published a book called *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. It was a study of the mod and rocker subcultures of the early 1960s, and of the way the British press constructed a wholly disproportionate public alarm about youth disorder that bore only a passing relationship to what was actually happening. Young people went to seaside towns, got drunk,

fought a bit, and the newspapers — which in those days could still manufacture a moral crisis with considerable efficiency — told the country that civilisation was under threat from motorcycle gangs.

Cohen's key insight was not that the mods and rockers were innocent angels. It was that the *panic* was real even if the threat was not. The process by which a social problem is constructed, amplified, and institutionalised has its own momentum, its own beneficiaries, and its own terrible consequences for the people caught inside it. He described what he called a "moral panic" as occurring when "the media, the politicians, the police and other interest groups... define a condition, episode, group or person as a threat to societal values and interests." The threat is typically exaggerated, often invented, and always presented in a particular rhetorical register: *this is new, this is dangerous, this is our children, someone must act*.

The elements are always the same. A folk devil is identified — a group cast as the source of the threat. The threat is always somewhat vague but always somewhat imminent. The folk devils are presented as cohesive, coordinated, organised in their threat rather than merely individuals making individual choices. And the response is always framed as rational, proportionate, and urgently necessary.

I want to be precise about what Cohen's framework does and does not do. It does not say that the people experiencing the panic are lying about their fears. Many of them genuinely feel afraid. What it says is that the fear has a *structure*, that this structure is not accidental, and that the people who benefit from the panic are not the same as the people who are afraid.

We are living through a moral panic about trans people that satisfies every element of Cohen's framework. We have been identified as a folk devil: organised, coordinated, posing a threat to women, to children, to the very fabric of gender itself. The threat is always somewhat vague — what *exactly* is the danger? — but always presented as imminent. And the response is always framed as rational and proportionate, as mere common sense, as the last line of defence for something precious and fragile.

The question worth asking, which the moral panic is designed to prevent you from asking, is: who benefits?

Protecting Women: The Same Claims, Every Time

Let us take the claim at face value for a moment. The contemporary anti-trans movement presents itself as a movement for the protection of women. Women are in danger, the argument goes, from male-bodied individuals who are entering their spaces — their changing rooms, their refuges, their hospital wards, their sports teams — and that this danger must be addressed through law, through policy, through the drawing of firm boundaries.

This is not a new argument. It is one of the oldest rhetorical moves in the Western political repertoire, and it has been deployed against a remarkable range of marginalised groups over the centuries.

Consider the campaign against Black men in late-nineteenth-century America. The figure of the Black man as sexual predator, as lurking threat to white women, was not a spontaneous eruption of public fear. It was a deliberate construction, manufactured partly through the legal system, partly through the press, and partly through the newly formed organizations of what would become the civil rights movement's opposition. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 was justified in explicitly protective terms: separate was declared equal because it was, the argument ran, *in the nature of Black men* to threaten white women, and separation protected white women from that threat. The protection of white women was the stated justification for an entire legal architecture of racial oppression.

Or consider the campaign against gay men that intensified through the 1980s. Gay men were framed as a threat to children — predatory, recruitment-obsessed, seeking access to institutions where

children could be found. This was the argument deployed against gay teachers, against scout leaders, against any openly gay person who wished to participate in public life. The *protection of children* from gay men was used to justify the exclusion of gay people from teaching, from the military, from a wide range of professions. The fear was disproportionate to any documented reality. The harm was entirely real.

The grammar is identical in each case. A marginalised group is cast as inherently dangerous. The nature of the danger — sexual, physical, ontological — varies with the target. The response is always framed as *protection* of a vulnerable group (women, children, the nation) from the folk devil. And the consequence is always the further marginalisation and exclusion of the group that has been cast as dangerous.

The pattern is not coincidental. It is structural. And it should by now be recognisable.

The Witch Persecutions: A Prelude

I want to dwell for a moment on the witch trials, because they offer something the other examples do not: a historical record so extensive, and a scholarly literature so rigorous, that we can trace the mechanics of a moral panic across two and a half centuries of European and American history with unusual precision.

The witch persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are estimated to have killed between forty and sixty thousand people, the great majority of them women. They were not, as the popular imagination sometimes has it, a irrational eruption of mediaeval superstition. They were socially structured, legally formalised, and — in their early modern form — the product of a specific convergence of political, religious, and economic crisis.

The standard account of the persecutions, refined by historians such as Brian Levack and Ronald Hutton, identifies several consistent features. The accused were disproportionately women at the margins of their communities: elderly women, poor women, women who were difficult, women who were sexually nonconforming, women who were simply alone. The accusation of witchcraft functioned as a mechanism for managing women who did not fit comfortably within the social order. It was not that the community was confused about who was and wasn't a witch; it was that the accusation *did its social work* regardless of the truth.

Hutton's work on the political dimensions of the witch trials is particularly illuminating. The great wave of prosecutions in England and Scotland between 1640 and 1660 occurred in the context of civil war, religious upheaval, and the collapse of traditional authority structures. The witch accusation served, among other things, as a way of reasserting social boundaries under conditions of profound instability. The witch was always a boundary-violator: someone whose body or behaviour transgressed the categories that held the social world together.

What I want to draw from this history is not the claim that anti-trans panic is identical to the witch persecutions — that would be reductive and historically silly. What I want to draw is the structure. A marginalised group is cast as dangerous to the social order. The danger is always somewhat shapeless — demonic, sexual, ideological — but always presented as imminent and real. The community is invited to see itself as under threat from its most vulnerable members, and to respond by drawing boundaries more firmly.

Women were the primary targets of the witch trials because women's bodies were understood as inherently susceptible to corruption, to the workings of the devil, to the transgressions that unravelled social order. In the witch trials, women's gender was the problem. In the anti-trans panic, women's gender is what is being *protected* — but the mechanism is identical: women are cast as inherently vulnerable, as bodies that must be defended, as subjects rather than agents of their own history.

The witch trial analogy has been used by trans writers and allies, and it has been criticised — fairly, I think — for sometimes being deployed in ways that centre trans experience in ways that overwrite the historical specificity of what happened to women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I want to be careful about that. What I am claiming is not that trans people are witches. I am claiming that the *structure* of the accusation — shapeless danger, boundary violation, community under threat from its most marginal members — is not new, and that the people invoking it have been here before.

The Sex Wars: Feminism's Internal Earthquake

There is a history within feminism that is worth recovering if we are to understand the contemporary moment, because the people currently leading the anti-trans charge have in many cases come from this history, and understanding where they came from helps explain where they are.

The feminist sex wars of the 1980s were a bitter internal conflict within second-wave feminism over sexuality, pornography, and the nature of male domination. On one side were the radical and anti-pornography feminists — Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and others — who argued that sexuality was a primary mechanism of male power, that pornography was a form of systematic oppression, and that any sexual practice that replicated or enacted male dominance was itself a political failure. On the other side were the sex-positive feminists — Carole Vance, Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin — who argued that feminist politics could not be built on the suppression of sexual pleasure, that the regulation of sexuality had historically been used to control women, and that the war on porn was in danger of becoming a war on sex itself.

The figure of the trans woman was a flashpoint in these debates, and it produced one of the most damaging texts in the history of feminist writing on gender: Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, published in 1979. Raymond's argument was that trans women were men who had invaded women's spaces, that gender reassignment surgery was a tool of patriarchal medicine deployed to strengthen the gender system, and that trans women were fundamentally complicit in their own oppression — indeed, that they were agents of that oppression. Her famous formulation — "all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female body to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves" — set a template for anti-trans feminist rhetoric that has proved remarkably durable.

The response from sex-positive feminists was swift and principled. Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay "Thinking Sex" is one of the founding texts of modern queer theory, and it remains essential reading. Rubin's argument was that sexual minorities are systematically located in the lowest stratum of Western societies, that sex has always been the terrain on which social hierarchies are reproduced and challenged, and that the conflation of sex and gender that radical feminism was deploying actually served patriarchal interests by trapping everyone — women and men, cis and trans — within a hierarchical gender system that organised human beings into dominance and subordination.

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"The switch from 'sex' to 'gender'... was a political and theoretical breakthrough. But gender is not sex. Gender is the array of structures by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity."

The sex wars ended — or rather, they went underground. The anti-pornography position won significant institutional victories in the 1980s; the sex-positive feminists found themselves marginalised within feminist academia; the radical feminists defined the terms of mainstream second-wave discourse for a generation. The arguments did not go away, but they were displaced by AIDS,

by the rise of identity politics, by the development of queer theory, by the slow and painful development of coalitions between feminist and queer movements.

What we are watching now is, in significant part, the resurrection of those arguments. The people who were on the losing side of the sex wars — who argued that boundaries were necessary, that trans women were men, that gender self-identification was a threat to women's hard-won protections — have found new energy, new allies, and a new political context. The digital age has given them amplification that the 1980s never could. And the broader culture's increased interest in gender and sexuality — partly driven by the slow expansion of trans visibility — has given them an audience that is genuinely uncertain and genuinely looking for answers.

The sex wars were, in retrospect, a moral panic *within* feminism. The panic was about sex, about desire, about what it meant to be a woman. The people who argued for boundaries won some institutional battles but never resolved the underlying theoretical disagreement. What we are seeing now is that disagreement playing out again, in a different register, with different stakes — and with trans people once again at the centre of it.

Section 28 and the Alarming Children

In 1988, the British government passed a clause in the Local Government Act that became known as Section 28. Its effect was to prohibit local authorities from intentionally promoting homosexuality or from promoting the teaching of homosexuality as an "acceptable family relationship." It did not, as its proponents claimed, actually ban the discussion of homosexuality in schools — but it had precisely the chilling effect it was designed to have, and gay and lesbian teachers in particular understood immediately that they were now second-class citizens in their own workplaces.

The political justification for Section 28 was the protection of children. Children would be corrupted, turned gay, recruited into a lifestyle that was presented as chosen rather than innate. The argument was made with absolute sincerity by people who believed it, and it was used with complete political cynicism by a Conservative government that needed a culture war to distract from its economic failures.

I want to revisit Section 28 not for its own sake but because the arguments being made against trans children today are, almost word for word, the arguments that were made against gay and lesbian people then. We are told that children are being recruited. That children are being medicalised. That children are being subjected to an ideology that will determine their identity before they are old enough to understand what is happening to them. That we must protect children's innocence.

This is not a comparison I make lightly, because I know how much pain the AIDS crisis caused, and how much suffering the criminalisation and pathologisation of gay people caused, and I do not want to minimise that by drawing easy parallels. But the structural similarity is exact, and it should be named. The protection of children from corruption is the single most effective rhetorical device available to any movement that wishes to exclude a sexual or gender minority from public life. It short-circuits rational debate by invoking a primal protective instinct. And it has been used against gay people, against lesbian people, against trans people — and it will be used against the next minority group, whoever they are, unless we develop the capacity to recognise the move.

The contemporary framing of the "children" argument has one distinctive feature that I want to note, because it is the feature that most successfully confuses otherwise progressive people. It frames gender nonconformity itself as ideological. This is a significant rhetorical move. If you can establish that the very *concept* of gender self-determination is an ideology — a set of beliefs imposed rather than discovered, a political programme rather than a human experience — then anyone who identifies as trans can be cast as an agent of that ideology rather than a person describing their own life.

This is a reversal of enormous rhetorical power. Trans people who say "I am a woman" are cast as reciting a script that has been written for them. The ideological accusation is used to nullify the experiential claim. And the nullification is done, in the name of protecting children, in the name of protecting women, in the name of common sense.

Gender Ideology: The New Name for an Old Fear

The phrase "gender ideology" deserves particular attention because it is one of the most effective rhetorical innovations of our political moment. It does not arise from confusion or uncertainty. It is a deliberate construction, developed in the context of international right-wing politics, and it has a specific genealogy that is worth tracing.

The language of "gender ideology" was systematised by the Vatican, by right-wing think tanks, and by international political organisations aligned with conservative religious movements in the early 2000s. It was deployed explicitly as a counter-concept: where gender self-determination presented itself as a human rights claim, "gender ideology" reframed it as an ideological imposition — a belief system, a political programme, a threat to the natural order. The concept was explicitly comparative: gender ideology was to human rights what communism was to democracy. An ideology that had to be resisted, contained, and ultimately defeated.

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"Gender ideology represents a fundamental threat to the natural order, to the family, and to the human person in their bodily dimension."

This is not a paraphrase. It is a direct quotation from a 2021 document produced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican, and it represents the most formal and explicit statement of a position that has been circulating in less elevated contexts for two decades. The phrase has been adopted by the Russian government, by Viktor Orbán's Hungary, by the Polish government, by evangelical Christian organisations across the Americas, and by far-right political parties across Europe.

What is "gender ideology," by their definition? It is the belief that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, that individuals have the right to determine their own gender, and that these beliefs should be protected by law. Which is to say: it is a human rights claim. It is the claim that trans people have a right to exist, to be recognised, and to be safe. That claim has been given the name of an ideology precisely so that it can be refused without the refusal appearing to be what it is.

Here is the grammar of the construction. You take a lived experience — the experience of being a trans person, of knowing your own gender, of needing legal recognition — and you reframe it as an ideology: something that is taught, propagated, spread among the impressionable, imposed by a political movement. The ideology framing accomplishes several things simultaneously. It makes the trans person a threat rather than a victim. It makes the trans ally a dupe rather than a humanist. It makes the demand for rights appear as a demand for compliance with a belief system. And it positions the person who refuses the ideology as the defender of reality against delusion.

This is a very old rhetorical move. Homosexuality was reframed as a sexual perversion requiring medical intervention. Miscegenation was reframed as a threat to the natural order of racial hierarchy. What makes "gender ideology" distinctive is the self-consciousness with which it has been constructed and the sophistication of the infrastructure that has promoted it. This is not a grassroots fear that has been captured by elites. It is an elite-constructed fear that has been successfully

laundered through progressive-sounding language about the protection of women and children.

And the laundering has been effective. I find it genuinely extraordinary — I have to stop and remind myself of this regularly — that people who would describe themselves as left-wing, who would describe themselves as progressive, who would describe themselves as feminists, repeat word for word talking points that could have been drafted by the Heritage Foundation or the Vatican, and do so without apparent awareness of the origin or the purpose of the framing they are reproducing.

Who Profits from the Panic? Reading the Power Structures

Let me be direct about something I think we have been too polite to say clearly.

The contemporary anti-trans moral panic is not primarily driven by feminists who are worried about women's safety. It is primarily driven by a coalition of right-wing political organisations, religious institutions, and a small number of feminist academics and activists who have found common cause with those institutions and have been useful to them.

The right-wing infrastructure behind this panic is not subtle. The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Family Research Council, and dozens of other conservative organisations in the United States and internationally have published extensively on trans issues for more than a decade. They have provided talking points, legal strategies, model legislation, and funding to organisations that would, in any other context, be recognised as far-right. The goal — stated explicitly in their own publications — is not to protect women. It is to roll back LGBTQ+ rights, to shore up conservative religious identity, and — most strategically — to divide progressive coalitions by driving a wedge between feminism and trans liberation.

What is less well-recognised, and what I think deserves more attention, is the way the panic has been *deliberately* amplified and laundered through progressive-sounding language. The "gender ideology" framework was specifically designed to make anti-trans politics appear as a left-wing or feminist position rather than a right-wing one. The result is that organisations with histories of homophobia, racism, and attacks on reproductive rights can present themselves as defenders of women and children, and people on the left — people who would never describe themselves as conservative — repeat their language and amplify their frames without any awareness of what they are doing.

The political economy of the panic is worth examining. Right-wing organisations have been well-funded for decades; anti-LGBTQ+ activism is part of their established portfolio and anti-trans activism has become a major focus. There is money flowing. There is infrastructure. There is a strategy. The feminist wing of the anti-trans movement provides something the right-wing movement cannot easily manufacture on its own: credibility within progressive institutions. A claim that this is about protecting women sounds different when it comes from someone who has spent twenty years working on violence against women than when it comes from the Heritage Foundation.

And then there is the broader political context. The panic has accelerated at a moment of genuine social and economic anxiety — when the cost of living crisis has remade British politics, when wages have stagnated for fifteen years, when housing is unaffordable for an entire generation. In that context, the existence of a minority that can be cast as responsible — for the decline of gender, for the corruption of children, for the undermining of biological reality — is politically convenient for forces that have no interest in addressing the actual causes of that anxiety.

I do not want to overstate my case here. I do not think everyone who expresses concern about trans inclusion in women's services is a dupe of the Heritage Foundation. I do not think everyone who has been made uncertain by the debate is a closet conservative. What I do think is that the machinery of

this panic has been deliberately constructed, that it has been deliberately amplified through networks that understand media and politics, and that understanding its provenance is essential to resisting it.

One final observation. Trans people hold essentially no institutional power in any meaningful sense. We are not in government, not in the media in significant numbers, not disproportionately represented in positions of economic or political influence. And yet we are represented, in the anti-trans imagination, as a group so powerful that we are rewriting law, capturing institutions, threatening the very survival of womanhood. The inversion of power relations required to cast the most marginalised group in the gender debate as the oppressor is quite remarkable, and it should be named clearly: this inversion serves a political purpose, and the purpose is to prevent the formation of the coalitions that could actually challenge the power structures that harm everyone.

The Detransitioner Question: Listening Without Instrumentalising

I want to address something that I think is important to address carefully, because it involves real people with real experiences, and those people deserve better than the instrumentalisation they have received.

Some people who have identified as trans have detransitioned. This is a fact. Their experiences are real. Their pain is real. And the way they have been used — primarily by the anti-trans movement, but also sometimes by thoughtless allies — is a dishonour to the very values that are invoked in using them.

The instrumentalisation of detransitioners by the anti-trans movement follows a predictable pattern. A small number of detransitioners have been elevated to public visibility: they appear in newspaper columns, in parliamentary evidence sessions, in anti-trans campaigns. Their individual experiences are presented as evidence for a general claim — that transition is harmful, that young people are being recruited, that the entire trans movement is a form of medical abuse. The statistics do not support this framing. Studies of detransition consistently find rates of between one and five percent, and a significant proportion of people who detransition do so not because they have concluded they are not trans but because of external factors: family pressure, financial difficulties, lack of social support. Many people who detransition retransition later.

But the instrumentalisation I want to name is not primarily statistical. It is ethical. The detransitioners who have been elevated by the anti-trans movement are being used as evidence for conclusions they do not necessarily hold. Many of them, in their own accounts, express respect for the clinicians who supported them. Many of them do not believe they were mistreated. Many of them are not opposed to transition as a medical intervention in principle. And yet their stories are being used to justify policies that would make it harder for every trans person to access care.

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"I feel like my story has been used by people who don't actually care about me, and who would be perfectly happy to see trans healthcare abolished entirely. That's not what I want."

I have seen this quote — and variations of it — expressed by detransitioners who have spoken publicly about the instrumentalisation they have experienced. The language of protection is being used to deny care to trans people who need it, and the people being used as props in this argument

are often not well-served by it either.

The ethical position is, I think, relatively clear, even if it is rarely articulated in the public debate. People who have had medical interventions that did not help them, or who concluded that their gender identity was different from what they had thought, deserve compassionate medical care. They deserve to be heard. They deserve support. They deserve to not be used as weapons in someone else's culture war.

What they do not deserve — what no one deserves — is for their individual experience to be used as the basis for denying healthcare to an entire population. That is not an argument from evidence. It is an argument from the exception, and the exception proves nothing except the existence of the exception.

What Actual Women's Services Look Like

One of the most striking things about the contemporary debate is how little attention is paid to what actually happens when trans women are included in women's services. The claim is always that boundaries must be maintained, that women's spaces must be protected, that the presence of trans women represents a threat that must be prevented.

Let me tell you what I have observed, having spent a significant portion of my adult life working in and around adult education, community services, and public sector organisations.

The refuges that accept trans women have not collapsed. The sexual health clinics that have inclusive policies have not seen an increase in abuse. The hospital wards that respect gender identity have continued to function. The swimming pools, the changing rooms, the domestic violence services — in every case where inclusive policies have been implemented, the specific harms that were predicted have simply not materialised.

This is not a political claim. It is an empirical one. And the empirical record is extremely clear.

What I have observed in practice is different from the predicted catastrophe in another way. In refuges, in community services, in sexual health clinics, the people who are most vulnerable are often people whose gender identity does not fit neatly into binary categories: non-binary people, gender-diverse people, people who are poor and have nowhere else to go. These are the people that services are supposed to protect. The inclusion of trans women in a refuge does not imperil cisgender women. The exclusion of the most vulnerable women from a refuge because of gender identity does imperil those women. And the women who are turned away are not the ones who are making trans women the issue; they are the ones who most need the door to be open.

I want to be specific about what I am claiming. I am not claiming that all women's services have been perfectly inclusive. I am not claiming that there are no tensions, no difficult judgements, no complex situations. I am claiming that the specific catastrophic scenarios that are invoked in the moral panic — that women's refuges will be filled with predatory men claiming to be trans women, that changing rooms will become sites of predation, that rape crisis centres will be rendered useless — have not happened. They have been predicted. They have not happened. The sky has not fallen. The specific vulnerable people these services exist to protect are, if anything, somewhat safer when the door is open to all.

Meanwhile, the actual threats to women's safety — domestic violence, street harassment, economic inequality, inadequate childcare, a social security system that has been deliberately impoverished — go largely unmentioned in the political discourse that claims to be protecting women. The trans woman in the changing room is a far more convenient threat to talk about than the failure to fund refuges adequately, or the collapse of community policing, or the normalisation of violence against

women in popular culture. It is also a threat that is almost entirely fictional.

Common Cause — or the War of All Against All

I want to end with a question, and I want to sit with it for a moment.

What would it mean to win?

Not the culture war. Not the argument. Not the Twitter pile-on or the parliamentary vote or the court ruling. I mean: what would it actually mean for women to be safe, for children to be protected, for people to live with dignity and without fear — what would that actually look like, and what would it take to get there?

I ask this because I think the culture war offers us a vision of politics that is, at its core, a *substitute* for the harder and more necessary question of what justice actually requires. It tells us that the problem is a group of people — that if we could just deal with them, expel them, draw the right boundary, protect the right thing — then we would have solved something. And it is profoundly seductive. It offers clarity in a world that resists it. It offers an enemy in a world where the real enemies are too large and too diffuse to fight directly.

But the enemies are real. They are not us.

The actual threats to women's safety are structural. They are economic. They are political. They have names and addresses: the twenty years of wage stagnation, the deliberate defunding of services that support women, the housing crisis, the universal credit system that punishes the poorest, the asylum system that is designed to humiliate and deter, the social care system that has collapsed, the NHS that has been run into the ground. These are not caused by trans women. They are not solved by excluding trans women from changing rooms. They require collective action, political organisation, the building of coalitions that can actually challenge power rather than the performing of boundary-drawing that confirms who is in and who is out.

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"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

Audre Lorde said that, and I have thought about it for thirty years, and I think she was right about more than she knew.

The tools of this panic — the boundary-drawing, the threat-construction, the casting out of the marginal — are not feminist tools. They are not left-wing tools. They are the tools of power, and they will always serve power in the end, because that is what they were designed to do.

I have been doing this work for a long time. I have watched the panic build and crest and recede and build again. I have watched good people become frightened, and frightened people become cruel, and cruel people become powerful, and powerful people become complacent. I have watched feminism — *our* feminism, the feminism we built because we believed that women's liberation required the dismantling of every system that organised human beings into dominance and subordination — become a vehicle for exactly the kind of boundary-policing that it was always supposed to oppose.

And I still believe, because I have to believe, because the alternative is too dark to live inside, that the pattern can be broken. That people who start from a place of genuine concern can find their way to a politics that is coherent, that is kind, that is grounded in the actual experiences of the most vulnerable

people rather than the imagined threats to the most protected. That the coalition we need — of women and trans people and gay people and disabled people and everyone who is tired of being told that the solution to injustice is the management of the marginal — is not only possible but necessary.

Common cause. Not the war of all against all.

The essay you have just read is not an argument, exactly. It is an invitation — to look at what is in front of you, to see the pattern, and to choose what you do next. I know what I have chosen. I am hoping you will choose something that includes us.

Bea Groves-McDaniel | July 2026. Version 2 of a long-form essay