

Helen Joyce and the Totalitarian World

An Analysis of Ideological Totalitarianism, Biological Reductionism, and the Politics of Denial

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The Rhetoric of a Crisis

In recent years, a distinctive genre of political literature has emerged that frames transgender equality as an existential threat to civilisation itself. Among its most prominent exponents is Helen Joyce, whose 2021 work *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* presents itself as a cool-headed reckoning with "gender ideology" but, on closer examination, reveals itself to be a sustained exercise in ideological condensation. The reduction of complex social phenomena to a single explanatory principle, the identification of a scapegoat class, and the assertion that this class poses an imminent danger requiring extraordinary countermeasures. These are, as the historian Robert O. Paxton observed in his foundational study of generic fascism, the structural fingerprints of authoritarian political movements.

This essay offers a philosophical and political analysis of Joyce's thesis and the intellectual tradition it represents. It does not seek to refute transgender identity. That would require denying the lived experience of millions of people, an act of epistemological hubris that serious scholarship cannot sustain. Rather, it examines the *structure* of Joyce's argument, the ideological mechanics it deploys, and the political destination toward which those mechanics inevitably point. **What emerges is a portrait not of a concerned feminist reckoning with difficult questions, but of a writer engaged in the construction of a totalitarian worldview. One that borrows its categories, its emotional register, and many of its analytical moves from the most disturbing political formations of the twentieth century.**

What Is Totalitarianism?

The concept of totalitarianism was developed in the mid-twentieth century, initially by scholars seeking to understand the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) remains its most influential theoretical statement. For Arendt, totalitarianism was distinguished not merely by its violence or its concentration of power, but by its ambition to **totalise**. To bring **every** dimension of human existence under the control of a single ideological framework, erasing the distinction between public and private life, between fact and fiction, between the individual and the regime.

Carlo Galli, in his masterful *Political Hermeneutics* (1999), describes the totalitarian impulse as the attempt to produce a "*complete world*" — a society in which every anomaly, every deviation, every form of human diversity has been either assimilated or eliminated. The totalitarian state does not merely govern; it *interprets*. It provides the single correct account of human nature, of history, of the

good life, and it demands the submission of all competing interpretations. What makes totalitarianism philosophically distinctive is not its crudeness but its ambition: it seeks to do what previous political forms never attempted: to reshape human nature itself according to the specifications of an ideology.

Totalitarian movements are characterised by several recurring features. First, they identify a single enemy responsible for all social evils; an enemy defined not by their actions but by their *being* (Jews in Nazism, the bourgeoisie in Stalinism, the Kulaks in forced collectivisation). Second, they operate through what Arendt called "*ideological thinking*" — a mode of thought that derives its energy not from experience but from logical deduction from a first principle. If all problems flow from a single source, then the solution is total: the elimination of that source. Third, they exhibit what the sociologist Erich Fromm analysed in *Escape from Freedom* (1941): an attraction to totalitarianism rooted precisely in what freedom demands: individual responsibility, uncertainty, and the burden of choice.

Crucially, totalitarianism is not merely a feature of right-wing or fascist movements. The Soviet Union demonstrated that regimes committed to the emancipation of the working class could nonetheless become totalitarian when their ideological framework was treated as infallible and their practice devolved into the suppression of all dissent. Totalitarianism is a structural possibility of any political movement that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of its own limits.

The Attractive Force: Escape from Freedom

Fromm's analysis in *Escape from Freedom* remains one of the most penetrating explanations of why otherwise ordinary people are attracted to authoritarian (and, developmentally, totalitarian) movements. Modern liberal democracy, Fromm argued, presents individuals with a specific existential burden: **the responsibility for their own lives**. Freedom, in the positive sense, means not merely freedom from external constraint but freedom *to*. Freedom to create, to choose, to become. This is exhilarating but also terrifying. The individual who must choose their own life must also bear the consequences of that choice. They must accept uncertainty, the possibility of error, the loneliness of the self that is not supported by tradition or doctrine or a recognised superior will.

Fromm identified a recurrent psychological mechanism by which people escape this burden: they surrender their freedom to an external authority that tells them who they are, what to believe, and how to live. The authoritarian leader or ideology does not merely constrain; it *liberates* from the anxiety of self-determination. This is why authoritarian movements are so often characterised by an almost religious devotion to the leader or the doctrine: the follower has transferred the burden of their own subjectivity onto the group, the party, and the ideology.

This dynamic helps explain the emotional intensity that characterises anti-transgender activism. For many who are drawn to this cause, transgender people represent something genuinely frightening. Not because of any material threat they pose, but because they embody a principle that threatens the ideological architecture upon which the anti-trans worldview depends. If gender is not binary, if it is not determined by biology alone, if it is (as the best available evidence suggests) a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors expressed through individual self-determination, then a vast edifice of political and moral claim collapses. The certainty provided by biological reductionism is, for many, a refuge from a more frightening reality: that the world is complex, that categories are contested, and that tolerance for ambiguity is the price of a sane human society.

What Is an Ideology?

The term 'ideology' is used in many senses, but for the purposes of this analysis, a specific definition is needed. Following the political theorist Michael Freeden, an ideology may be understood as a

structured set of political ideas that performs three functions simultaneously: it diagnoses political reality, prescribes a vision of the good society, and provides a program of political action. Crucially, ideologies are distinguished by their *morphology* — the relative priority they assign to different concepts, the conceptual relationships they establish between core ideas, and the boundary they draw between legitimate and illegitimate political thought.

What distinguishes ideological thinking from ordinary critical thought is what Freeden calls "thinness". This is the reduction of complex political phenomena to a simplified core. Where ordinary political analysis recognises multiple causal factors, competing values, and the legitimacy of reasonable disagreement, ideological thinking deduces everything from a single source. For Joyce and the gender-critical movement more broadly, that single source is "*gender ideology*" — a term that functions as a total explanation for everything from the decline of traditional gender roles to the alleged erosion of women's rights.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of concepts is determined by their use in language — by the 'language games' in which they figure. An ideology, on this account, is characterised by a kind of conceptual locking: the key terms of the ideology are insulated from revision by being defined in ways that make counter-evidence unintelligible. "*Gender ideology*" comes to mean not merely a specific set of claims about gender but *any* claim that challenges the ideological framework; including the empirical claims of biology and neuroscience that the ideology claims to defend. This is the structure of what Thomas Kuhn called a 'paradigm'. But without the self-awareness that Kuhn brought to his analysis and with the political stakes of an emotionalised moral crusade.

The Helen Joyce Thesis: *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*

Helen Joyce's *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* presents itself as a work of empirical investigation. Its central argument is that "gender ideology" (the claim that transgender identity is legitimate and that society should affirm it) is not merely mistaken but dangerous. Joyce argues that gender ideology is a form of ideological imposition that threatens women's rights, children's welfare, and the integrity of single-sex spaces. She contends that the "*affirmation model*" of transgender identity, which takes self-identification as the primary criterion for gender recognition, is based on a series of logical and empirical errors and that its political consequences are demonstrably harmful.

On close examination, however, Joyce's argument rests on several questionable assumptions. First, it treats the social category 'woman' as an unproblematic biological fact rather than as a contested political and philosophical category. Second, it conflates the legitimate question of single-sex spaces with the illegitimate claim that transgender women are not women. Third, it systematically discounts the evidence supporting the validity of transgender identity while amplifying anecdote and outlier cases. And fourth (most significantly for our purposes), it constructs a picture of transgender people and their allies as an organised ideological movement that threatens the foundations of liberal democracy.

It is this final move that reveals Joyce's work as ideological in the pejorative sense. Rather than engaging with the complexity of transgender experience, the evidence for the efficacy of gender-affirming care, or the lived realities of transgender people in society, Joyce presents a simplified, demonised picture of an ideological enemy. **This is not analysis; it is polemic — and polemics of this kind have a well-documented tendency to escalate.**

Why Joyce Is Wrong: The Irrationality of Biological Reductionism

The heart of the gender-critical case is biological reductionism: the claim that biological sex is a clear, binary, immutable fact that **determines** gender. This claim is false in its own terms, and its political consequences are dangerous.

Biological Complexity

The biological reality of sex is far more complex than the binary model allows. The work of geneticists, endocrinologists, and developmental biologists has established that biological sex is not reducible to a simple binary. Conditions such as Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS), Turner Syndrome (45,X), and Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) demonstrate that genetic, hormonal, and anatomical factors interact in complex ways that produce individuals who do not fit neatly into the categories 'male' and 'female'. The philosopher of biology Linda Finlay has argued extensively that even the standard chromosomal model (XX/XY) is a simplification that obscures the actual biological mechanisms of sex determination. There is no single sex chromosome that independently determines all aspects of sex development; rather, multiple genetic and hormonal pathways interact across the lifespan.

The biologist Julia Serano has argued persuasively that the assumption that gender is simply what biology dictates rests not on the evidence but on a prior ideological commitment to reductionism; to the idea that the most fundamental level of biological organisation must provide the definitive explanation for all higher-level phenomena. This is a philosophical position, not a scientific finding.

The Political Logic of Reductionism

Biological reductionism is not merely an empirical error; it is a **political position** with specific consequences. If biological sex determines gender absolutely, then any person whose gender identity does not align with their assigned sex is either mistaken (and can be corrected) or malevolent (and must be opposed). This logic underlies the political programme of gender-critical activism: conversion therapy, the denial of gender-affirming healthcare, the exclusion of transgender people from single-sex spaces, and ultimately the denial of legal gender recognition.

Each of these policies is a form of coercion. They are an attempt to force individual bodies and minds into shapes prescribed by an ideology. This is precisely the totalitarian impulse: not merely to govern behaviour but to determine the truth of one's being. When Joyce argues that transgender women should be excluded from women's spaces on the basis of their biological sex, she is not merely making a policy argument; she is asserting the right of the state or of social convention (or an elite group) to determine who a person is. This is the logic that, taken to its conclusion, produces forced detransition, criminalisation of transgender identity, and (as we have seen in multiple jurisdictions) imprisonment and violence.

The totalitarian attraction of biological reductionism is not accidental. Reductionism provides a foundation for authoritarian politics precisely because it offers certainty in a complex world, establishes clear in-group and out-group boundaries, and justifies the exercise of coercive power in the name of biological truth. This is why the most enthusiastic adopters of gender-critical rhetoric have consistently been on the political right — a point to which we will return.

Reductionist Ideology as Totalitarian Dictatorship

It is a striking irony that the gender-critical movement, which presents itself as defending liberal values

against ideological imposition, advocates precisely the form of ideological imposition it claims to oppose. When the gender-critical position is implemented as policy, it does not merely restrict the actions of transgender people; it determines the truth of their identity. It asserts that a person's self-understanding is null and void in the face of biological classification. It demands that individuals conform their internal life (their sense of who they are) to externally imposed categories from self-established groups.

This is the definition of totalitarian imposition. It is no different in structure from the ideological impositions of the Soviet Union, which denied the legitimacy of religious belief in the name of scientific materialism, or of Nazi Germany, which denied the humanity of Jewish people in the name of racial biology. **In each case, an ideological framework claims access to the truth of human nature and uses that claim to justify the suppression of all competing accounts.**

The gender-critical position is totalitarian not because it is violent (though as rhetoric it frequently is) but because it refuses to recognise the legitimacy of alternative accounts of human identity. It does not argue that transgender identity is mistaken and should be debated; it asserts that transgender identity is impossible and must be abolished. The distinction is crucial. A liberal society can tolerate the view that transgender identity is undesirable or even harmful, provided that those who hold this view do not use the state to impose it on others. What cannot be tolerated — what is definitionally incompatible with liberal democracy — is the claim that the state has the authority to determine the truth of individual identity.

Feminism's Loss Is the Right's Gain

One of the most troubling consequences of the gender-critical movement is its capture by right-wing and authoritarian political forces. This is not a coincidence; it is a structural consequence of the ideological framework.

Feminist theory has, since at least the work of Simone de Beauvoir, recognised that gender is a **social** construction. That the differences between men and women are not simply the natural consequences of biological sex but are produced and reproduced through social institutions, cultural practices, and hegemonic political power. This recognition led feminist theory to challenge not merely individual instances of gender discrimination but the entire apparatus of gender classification. The feminist slogan "*the personal is political*" meant that gender was not merely a matter of individual preference but a system of power that shaped every dimension of social life.

The gender-critical movement rejects this insight. In its insistence that gender is simply the expression of biological sex, it retreats from the constructed nature of gender and implicitly legitimates the existing gender order — provided that order is organised around biological rather than social categories. This retreat has political consequences. By abandoning the critique of gender as a system, the gender-critical movement aligns itself with forces that seek to reinforce biological essentialism for their own purposes: the restriction of women's reproductive rights, the enforcement of traditional gender roles, and the rejection of gender diversity as a threat to social order.

The far right has understood this alignment clearly. Anti-transgender rhetoric has become a central plank of right-wing populist politics across multiple jurisdictions (in the United Kingdom, the United States, Hungary, Poland, and beyond). This is not because the far right has suddenly become concerned with women's rights; it is because anti-transgender activism provides a culturally palatable vehicle for a broader politics of reaction, essentialism, and exclusion. The language of 'protecting women and children' legitimates a politics that has nothing to do with women's liberation and everything to do with the restoration of a hierarchical social order.

For liberal and progressive feminism, this alliance represents a catastrophic miscalculation. By

accepting the framing of gender-critical ideology (by treating biological reductionism as a legitimate starting point), progressive feminists have handed the authoritarian right a powerful weapon. The cost of this miscalculation is being paid by transgender people, whose lives have been made considerably more dangerous by the political environment that gender-critical rhetoric has helped create.

The Impact on Transgender People

The human cost of the gender-critical worldview is not abstract. It is measured in the lives of transgender people — and in the lives of gender-nonconforming people more broadly, whose existence challenges the binary framework that gender-critical ideology seeks to enforce.

Transgender people experience disproportionately high rates of depression, anxiety, social isolation, and suicide. These outcomes are not the direct effects of gender identity itself; they are the effects of social stigma, discrimination, and both physical and psychological violence. The single most effective intervention for improving mental health outcomes among transgender people is *social acceptance* — the **affirmation** of their gender identity by family, friends, and the broader community. This is the consistent finding of the clinical literature, including the landmark Williams Institute studies, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights surveys, and the peer-reviewed research published in journals including the *Lancet* and the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Gender-affirming healthcare (including hormone therapy, surgical intervention, and psychological support) has been shown to **significantly** improve mental health outcomes when it is accessible and affirmative. The claim, promoted by gender-critical activists, that transition is harmful or that the "affirmation model" is clinically reckless is not supported by the evidence. What the evidence consistently shows is that denial of gender-affirming care, forced detransition, and social ostracism are associated with dramatically elevated rates of self-harm and mortality.

But the impact of gender-critical ideology extends beyond transgender people themselves. Gender-nonconforming children (those whose behaviour or self-expression does not conform to the expectations associated with their assigned sex) are increasingly the targets of concern, surveillance, and intervention. The gender-critical framework, which insists that gender nonconformity is evidence of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" or ideological corruption, creates a hostile environment for all children who do not conform to rigid gender expectations. This includes gay and lesbian children, whose existence also threatens the binary framework, and who are disproportionately subjected to the forms of 'corrective' intervention that gender-critical ideology legitimates.

Fighting Back: Why Talking Sense Won't Work

It is tempting to respond to the gender-critical position with evidence and argument. To present the biological data, the clinical outcomes, and the lived experience of transgender people. To expect that rational engagement will prevail. This is a reasonable instinct, but it misunderstands the nature of the opposition.

Ideological thinking, as Arendt and Freeden both observed, is **not primarily concerned with evidence**. It is concerned with consistency — the logical deduction of conclusions from premises. The gender-critical ideology does not reject evidence because it has failed to engage with it; it rejects evidence because the evidence is defined, by the logic of the ideology, as the product of corrupted institutions or ideological capture. This is a hermetically sealed system: evidence in favour of transgender identity is dismissed as the product of "gender ideology," while the absence of evidence against it is taken as proof of ideological suppression.

This is why conventional liberal strategies of engagement (debate, education, evidence-based policy)

are of limited efficacy against movements of this kind. The ideological framework immunises itself against falsification by defining all countervailing evidence as evidence of the enemy's power. The appropriate response is not to attempt to convert the ideology's adherents through argument but to work to change the conditions that give the ideology its purchase.

This means political action: the strengthening of legal protections for transgender people, the expansion of gender-affirming healthcare, the reform of institutions to be genuinely inclusive, and the building of political alliances that can resist the authoritarian turn. It also means intellectual resistance: the production and dissemination of accurate information, the critique of ideological frameworks in scholarship and public discourse, and the refusal to allow gender-critical activists to define the terms of debate.

A Better Future

The alternative to the gender-critical worldview is not a naive affirmation of all claims about identity without scrutiny, nor an uncritical embrace of whatever the current political fashion demands. It is a commitment to the principles that liberal democracy was always supposed to embody: **the recognition that individual human beings have the right to determine their own lives, that the state exists to protect the equal dignity of all persons, and that the good society is one that accommodates human diversity rather than suppressing it.**

In other words, the concept of 'flourishing' as Aristotle once conceived it.

This does not mean that all questions about gender are settled or that there are no legitimate debates to be had about the boundaries of single-sex spaces, the appropriate age for medical intervention, or the rights and responsibilities of different social groups. These are complex questions on which reasonable people can and do disagree. But it does mean that the framework within which these debates are conducted must be one that starts from the equal humanity and the legitimate self-determination of transgender people. Not one that treats their existence as an ideological aberration requiring correction.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas argued that the legitimacy of democratic institutions depends on their capacity to include all affected parties in processes of deliberation. A political discourse that excludes transgender people (that denies their perspective, dismisses their experience, and treats their equality as negotiable) is not merely unjust; it is **undemocratic**. The struggle for transgender equality is thus not a special interest campaign but a struggle for the soul of democratic society itself.

A better future is possible. One in which the complexity of human identity is accepted rather than denied, in which the equal protection of the law extends to all regardless of gender identity, and in which the totalitarian temptation to reduce human beings to a single biological truth is recognised for what it is: a threat to human freedom itself.

Building that future requires not merely arguments but action — political, institutional, and personal. It requires the courage to stand with transgender people against the ideological machinery that would deny their humanity. And it requires the intellectual clarity to recognise that biological reductionism, in whatever form it presents itself, is not science but ideology. And that totalitarian concepts, when they become the basis for political power, are always dangerous.

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